

## In search of the “Humanager”: reading management from the inside out

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**Abstract:** Within management studies, attention remains largely focused on the role and function of management, rather than the individual embodied self who occupies a manager role. This paper argues that by failing to attend to the self, or the human in management, we not only limit our understanding of management, but limit ourselves to a narrow view of management altogether. Adopting theoretical lenses of authenticity, agential realism and autoethnography, I present an evocative account of my own experience of becoming a manager. By reading management through a single self, examining the ways in which I incorporated, and excluded, personal qualities, traits and histories, and the ways in which I performed the role of manager, I demonstrate how the normative boundaries of management may be redrawn to reveal diverse ways of being and doing management, what produces management and what is excluded, and the potential costs of such exclusions.<sup>1</sup>

**Key words:** Managers, authenticity, agential realism, autoethnography, identity, management discourses

**Track:** Gender in Management

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## Introduction

Why undertake a search for the human within management? Management is not predicated on the individual. Instead it has normatively been constructed as instrumental, and as the rational and objective organisation of resources, underpinned by notions of best practice and generalisable theory, characterised by progress, success, knowledge and control (Corlett et al., 2019; Hay, 2014; Mantere, 2008). Studies of management have therefore commonly addressed the role, or function, of management, prescribing what managers should do, identifying what they actually do, or with characterising the nature of a manager role (Gatenby et al., 2015; Harding et al., 2014). Studies into the identity work of managers largely focus on how managers develop a manager identity, such as the processes of becoming a manager and becoming competent and confident to undertake a (pre-defined) manager role, or the ways in which individuals struggle with the demands and effects of that role (Rostron, 2018). Diversity studies provide essential critiques of normative versions of management, but these remain focused on particular categories such as gender, race, sexuality or disability, rather than the complex intersectionality (in the broadest sense) of individual lives.

By coining the portmanteau “humanager” I wish to deliberately provoke conversations about managers and management, by uncovering an aspect that remains understudied: namely the individual, uniquely embodied person, the bearer of a history, of desires and of fears, who occupies a manager role. Specifically I pose the question: Who can become a manager? By attending to the *particular* self I consider not only how individuals experience a manager role, but how they experience and construct *themselves* in a manager role. What qualities, traits and histories are being drawn on and expressed while enacting a manager role? And what parts of the self are being suppressed, as incongruent or inappropriate? What kind of people, and selves, can be managers, and who are managers allowed to be?

The search for the “humanager” is important for two reasons. First, by attending to the individual occupying a manager role we gain fresh insight into how a manager role and identity is constructed, by examining how it acts upon an individual self, and how a self interprets and (re)constructs a manager role for themselves. That is, we can add to our *academic* understanding of the nature of management. But there is a very practical need to re-imagine management as a social and moral practice (Watson, 2000). Outside of Business Schools and MBA programmes, management has a bad name. I typed “managers are” into Google on 14 February 2020 and three of the four top suggested searches were “useless”, “bullies” and “psychopaths”. The fifth, “stepping away from”, related to stepping down from management. Managers are associated with place-holding and obstructing at best, and the perpetrators of injustice at worst. Yet I was once a manager; many of my friends and family are managers; and I have experienced some wonderful managers (as well as a few poor ones). If we are to rescue managers and management from their public reputation, we need to return to the individual manager. Managers and management are not “things” or roles or functions but the ongoing achievements of human interaction (Watson, 2001). Managers act on, and with others, and are acted on. They are powerful and vulnerable, knowledgeable and ignorant. They have capacity both to care, and to do violence to others; they also have the capacity to be cared for and to be violated.

I therefore present an autoethnographic account of my own experience of becoming a manager. Through an evocative and rich portrait of a single self – white, female, Oxbridge, queer, poet – I examine which of my own qualities, traits, histories and desires became productive of being and doing management, and which were suppressed or excluded. By reading management from the inside out I demonstrate how the boundaries of management may be variously drawn and redrawn to reveal different ways of being and doing management.

## **Theoretical foundations**

In order to examine the question “who can become a manager” I draw on three theoretical perspectives. These perspectives all represent both ways of seeing and ways of doing. They are both methodology and interpretation: what I look for, how I look, and how I seek to make sense of what I find. By using multiple perspectives I am not attempting to triangulate findings so much as deliberately “complicate” myself and the problem (Weick, 1979). In seeking to read management from the inside out I wish to acknowledge and sustain some of the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions of the lived experience of becoming a manager.

### ***Authenticity***

Authenticity has become a dominant discourse in contemporary western society (Edwards, 2010; Guignon, 2004). Within organisational life and studies, “authentic leadership” is an increasingly influential model of leadership (Ford and Harding, 2011; Shaw, 2010), and managers are common targets of leadership discourses (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). However, authenticity has implications for all organisational actors. To be authentic is to discover and be able to express and enact our “true selves”, reflected in our core values, passions and strengths (Guignon, 2004; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013). Crucially it requires the individual to be autonomous and self-directed: rather than being influenced by external expectations or contingencies, the authentic person is able to reach deep inside themselves to access and be guided by their own values (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005; Shamir and Eilam, 2005). To be authentic is to be a good person, and to be a good person means being one’s true, original and unique self (Shamir and Eilam, 2005) in every aspect of one’s social and organisational life.

Despite its current prevalence and resonance, authenticity is problematic as a concept. Its assumption of the autonomous, knowable and stable self is challenged by contemporary understanding of the self as an ongoing and “unfinished project” (McInnes and Corlett, 2012) which is formed through social relationships (Gergen, 2000; Weick, 1995; Ybema et al., 2009). The assumption that one’s “true self” is good because it is authentic is tautologous (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2013) and does not allow any room for a dark side (Daddams and Chang, 2012; Ford and Harding, 2011). Most critically, authenticity relies on an internal-external binary (Ford and Harding, 2011): one’s inner self is true and thus good, and the authentic person outwardly expresses their inner self, while the bad person conceals their true self for political gain. But this ignores the fact that authenticity is also socially ascribed (Edwards, 2010): for one’s “true self” to be counted by others as authentic it must be recognisable as such, and this commonly means conforming to social expectations of what is

“true” in any particular context, which might include the right gender (Sinclair, 2013; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018), race (Ngunjiri and Hernandez, 2017) or expertise (Goffee and Jones, 2013; Tomkins and Nicholds, 2017). At the heart of authenticity lies an inherent tension between the personally constructed “truth” of one’s own lived experience, and socially constructed determinations of what counts as “true”. “Authenticity is not an unalterable characteristic but a condition that has to be maintained” (Fairchild, 2005, p.305).

Many authors offer alternative versions of authenticity, which aim to recalibrate the balance between internal and external attention through reflective dialogue with others (e.g. Daddams and Chang, 2012; Ford and Harding, 2011; Guignon, 2004). However, in this paper I deliberately work with the tension of two unreconciled poles between one’s own constructed self and lived experience, and social recognition. In posing the question “who can become a manager” and in examining my own experience of management, I discern both a desire to be recognised as an authentic manager, and to be authentically true to my unique and original (and sometimes non-conforming) self. Whilst my experience, as I present below, confirms the critique that achieving both is impossible, it is my struggles to do so that reveals important light on my attempts to “become” a manager.

### *Agential realism*

The second perspective I draw on is Karen Barad’s (2007) onto-epistemology of agential realism. Barad builds on the insights into the nature of reality from quantum physics, and especially the work of Nils Bohr, which (to simplify greatly) reveal that matter such as electrons and light can exhibit properties of both waves and particles which, according to classical physics, are mutually exclusive (because particles occupy a point in space and time, and waves are a “disturbance” in a material or oscillating field, which cannot be localised to a particular point). However, the problem lies with the *measurement* of such properties rather than their co-existence: it is possible to design apparatus to measure one, or the other, but not both simultaneously (because you would need to measure position using something fixed and momentum with something moving). From this, Barad argues that we need to think not of “things” but of phenomena which *include* the apparatus we are using to measure and determine the properties of so-called “objects”.

Agential realism understands the world in terms of phenomena which are dynamic reconfigurations, entanglements and relationalities of the world. It is not possible to speak of boundaries of objects, except insofar as we produce and articulate such boundaries (as measuring light in one particular way constitutes it as a particle and not as a wave). Such boundaries, Barad argues, are constituted through material-discursive practices. Discourse is not what is said but that which constrains and enables what is said, and what can be seen and recognised. Discourse and matter are not separate entities but are mutually implicated. “Phenomena are sedimented out of the process of the world’s ongoing articulation through which part of the world makes itself intelligible to some other part” (Barad, 2007, p. 207).

What has all this to do with management? If we understand management as a phenomenon and a specific material configuration of the world, then we are also invited to consider how and why management has been materially configured in its present ways. How has it been bounded, what has been excluded and why? What material-discursive practices have constituted and materialised what we recognise as “management”? And how might such boundaries be contested or re-worked? Moreover, we are ourselves all implicated as intra-

active beings in the world, and Barad argues that with agency comes accountability. What is made to matter, through our material-discursive practices – or apparatus – and what is excluded from mattering?

### ***Autoethnography***

I deliberately use autoethnography as a way of both seeing and doing in my examination of management and becoming a manager. Firstly, autoethnography pays attention to the particular self, and seeks to connect it to wider cultural, political and structural practices and discourses, and to illuminate the relationships between each (Boyle and Parry, 2007). Thus, as a response to my critique of management as an objective and generalisable practice, I deliberately attend to the subjective experience of one individual. Furthermore, in the context of management discourses which privilege stability, knowledge, control and power, I use my own experience to surface what is hidden or little spoken about (Grant and Zeeman, 2012; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012).

Secondly, I am deliberately drawing on a lived experience of management with which I am deeply familiar (Winkler, 2014). Rather than attempting to establish sufficient distance from the phenomenon being studied, and to keep one's own experience separate from the interpretation of others', as an autoethnographer I aim to get as close as possible to the phenomenon of management. Rather than asserting boundaries between subject and researcher, I purposively engage in boundary crossing (Hansson and Dybbroe, 2012; Winkler, 2013): as subject, manager, researcher, teacher of management, and as one who is managed. Allied with agential realism, such conscious boundary-crossing affords one way of examining the phenomenon of management from different perspectives, of seeking different possible ways of bounding the phenomenon, and maintaining awareness of entanglements and relationalities. This includes being prepared to challenge my own self-perception as I examine my own life from multiple perspectives (Shim, 2018): autoethnography should be as much about critical examination and discovery as mere self-revelation (Boje and Tyler, 2009; Ford and Harding, 2008; Herrmann et al., 2013; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012).

Thirdly, autoethnography allows the possibility of developing a process view of how individuals make sense of themselves and their experiences (Winkler, 2013). As qualitative researchers we recognise that accounts of lived experience may be cued and informed by different social contexts (Alvesson, 2003; van Manen, 1997). The adoption of multiple roles (as subject, manager, researcher, teacher of management, managed) offers the possibility of catching and observing myself in the process of making sense of and accounting for my experiences. Allied with the lens of authenticity, I seek to catch myself in moments of making sense of and negotiating tensions between who I understand myself to be, who I desire to be and how I am seen, and between being recognised as an authentic manager and recognised as an authentic, unique self.

### **An autoethnographical portrait of a manager**

In this section I seek to create an evocative text (Ellis, 2004) of becoming a manager. My account is drawn from memory (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012) as I made no records or journals at the time. The autoethnographer's use of memory is sometimes criticised as untrustworthy, but is no different to relying on interviewees' recall of their experiences

(Winkler, 2014); conversely, conscious journaling carries its own risks and can lead to everything becoming potential “ethnographical fodder” (Herrmann et al., 2013). I have selected certain episodes which still resonate emotionally for me, and which I recall as significant for how I interpret my life-history; and I have endeavoured to convey some of the concrete actions, dialogues and emotions that remembering them evokes (Herrmann et al., 2013) in order to construct a text which captures something of that recalled experience (Ellis, 2004). I then sought to further explore each episode through creative dialogue with myself, in which I flexed between recalling my self-as-manager, reading my account as self-as-former-manager and as self-as-researcher. I journaled both my reflections on my account and other memories and incidents that were evoked. Thus I acknowledge that what I present is inevitably a blend of what I remember as significant for my experience of being a manager and what now seems significant as a researcher studying management. In the latter part of the paper I further reflect on the production of this account as a method of inquiry and a process of writing myself into the phenomenon of management (Boje and Tyler, 2009; Herrmann et al., 2013).

### ***Becoming a manager***

*I am twenty-seven years old and working in a community legal advice centre. Glancing at the notice board I see an internal advert for a service manager at another site. It is the first management job that I have seen, and I have not been thinking about promotions: I have only been in this post a few months and have been enjoying it. Nevertheless, I immediately decide to apply for it and start to imagine myself in the role. I look at the deadline and calculate when I might be interviewed and offered the job, and how much notice I would have to give. I would be here perhaps another three months. The office, the job, the cases, my colleagues are suddenly temporary. I will be moving on and upwards. It never occurs to me that I will not be successful. I am successful.*

In my career in community legal advice the managers I knew were all like me: middle class, white, university educated and from somewhere else, usually “down south”. Working in some of the most deprived wards in North West England, from where most volunteers and paid staff also came, we stood out. However, it was not simply the availability of recognisable role models that made me see myself as a manager (and which, doubtless, encouraged the organisation to see me as one too). Educationally I had been extremely successful and had studied at Oxford. I had learned to crave success and to meet the next challenge in front of me. In that moment, having spent several years exploring and discovering a line of work that I was interested in and good at, I was suddenly confronted with a “next challenge” and it seemed obvious that I should accept it. Becoming a manager was thus about demonstrating that I could do better. I was not motivated by the additional money, but the salary did serve as a marker of my new value.

When I compared myself to my peers from the local community, and indeed the middle class managers, I thought I should be doing at least as well, if not better than them. This sounds privileged and arrogant and I recognise those qualities in myself. However, they also sit alongside a deep fear of inadequacy and being found out when I finally over-reached myself. My desire to distinguish myself from my peers was not so much rooted in believing that I was better and different, but that I had already been marked out as better and different by my

Oxford selection. I felt obliged to fulfil the judgement that had been made about me, and to live up to the expectations it conferred. Moreover, my confidence was largely limited to my intellectual capabilities: I was socially awkward and found any form of responsibility terrifying. What is notable, then, is that when confronted with the job advert for a manager position, my desire to rise to the challenge of doing better over-rode my fears of actually being able to fulfil the role.

### ***Curating a manager self***

*I get up at 6am and spend an hour transcribing an interview for my MBA dissertation. By 8am I am in the office. I prepare for a supervision with a staff member, going through the suite of performance measures that I designed for this new team. I chat to the team about our social night later in the week, and about a running event I am entering. I head across town for the weekly managers' performance meeting; I brief the management team on how I am rolling out benefit checking software and training for Contact Centre staff. Back at my desk I see the Guardian is promoting its annual Public Service Awards, and I email my manager to propose we make a submission. I conduct the supervision: we discuss how the staff member has been improving in a particular performance area and go through a tricky case together. I work on the draft Benefit Take-up Strategy for the Council. When I get home, I check on a staff member who was doing a late home visit, and then go for a run. During the evening I answer emails from my manager on my Blackberry.*

After six years as a manager in community legal advice I became the manager of a new benefits take-up team at a local council. The role was a deliberate move sideways: the salary was the same, but I was attracted by working within a much larger organisation and being able to develop a new service. I also imagined that management would be more professional at the council: I wanted to be able to focus on managing my service within a stable infrastructure, rather than the hand-to-mouth existence of charitable funding and dependence on volunteers. In preparation for my new job I bought two suits.

The department in which I worked was highly performance driven. Everything was measured, and measures were then turned into service level agreements for which managers were accountable. Staff were set individual performance targets, and managers were expected to work as long as necessary to maintain service levels. I embraced this muscular form of management. I became the superhuman manager, working long hours, making myself available out of work, saying yes and delivering what I was asked to do. I took up the council's offer to study an MBA part time. I took up running. However, as well as becoming the department's ideal manager, I also cultivated a unique, personalised version. I was the manager of a new service and with expert knowledge that other managers lacked. I took opportunities to show how my service was different and required different performance measures, which I then designed and used to demonstrate improvements. I sought opportunities to be innovative and creative, such as developing a council take-up strategy. I was happy; I felt that I was being the best manager and that my management was using the best of me.

### ***The troublesome self***

*My department is holding a Managers' Away Day. It starts at 10:30 but I work from home first, before driving to the venue. As I walk from my car to the hotel, I check my Blackberry for emails. We were told to "dress down" so I am wearing walking trousers and trainers. The first activity is a Treasure Hunt in small teams, and I volunteer to run to where the furthest clues are located, across the extensive grounds. At lunch I check my emails again. One called "Complaint" sparks a surge of adrenaline, and I anxiously review what I might have done or overlooked as I open it. A customer is complaining she has been misadvised by one of my team, and I immediately reply to explain I am away from the office and will respond by tomorrow. After lunch we play Crown Green bowls and I am pleased to discover I am rather good at it. I also take part in an impromptu game of football. We spend the afternoon planning the department's annual strategy. I suggest a significant way in which my service could contribute, and senior managers look approving. At the back of my mind I am still worrying about the complaint.*

I had been carefully cultivating a managerial identity for organisational consumption. However, away days, dress down days and the like are predicated on the notion that workers are, temporarily, permitted to bring something of their non-work life into the workplace. They are spaces in which alternative selves and lives may briefly be revealed.

I deliberately curated a non-work life which aligned with my managerial identity. I was a keen fell walker and I liked to talk about being able to re-charge through physical activity, show pictures of beautiful views and occasionally boast about numbers of miles and peaks. I organised a weekend walk as a team social event. I enjoyed football and supported the local team, and I took opportunities to chat and joke with staff and other managers about their current fortunes. I played in a five-a-side departmental tournament. I compared training plans with a colleague as we prepared for our first 10k race.

Before taking up my council job I was actively and variously involved in the local arts scene. I wrote and performed poetry, organised poetry events and had been shortlisted for a national prize for "Next Generation" poets. I played the fiddle in a folk band. I visited art galleries, modelled for local artists and experimented with watercolour painting. These activities gradually petered out. I increasingly lacked the time as I worked longer hours; I also lacked the mental space for sustained creativity. I rationalised my decision to give up poetry, the creative art which I knew I was most talented at: I told myself that I was merely pausing it and that I would write during holidays; I had to make hard decisions about what I could commit time to; I was still expressing creativity in my management practice and MBA study. I never mentioned any of my arts-based life to people at work, either as a current or as a former interest.

I was also working hard to keep other aspects of myself hidden. I have always been extremely introverted and find prolonged interaction with other people exhausting. I strove to be the collegiate, supportive, available manager, but was constantly on the lookout for spaces into which I could temporarily retreat. At the Managers' Away Day, checking my emails at lunchtime was an ideal and legitimate way of avoiding conversation for five minutes. I have always been anxious and insecure about my own capabilities: I live in low-level but constant fear that I have made, or will make, a mistake and am about to be found out. I am a perfectionist and hate not being in complete control of anything. At the best of



times I exist in a state of anticipatory worry about what might happen and how I might manage it. I am also very good at completely internalising my fears: my manager colleagues frequently remarked on how I always appeared calm, in control and never over-reacting.

### ***The troublesome manager***

*I have been attending a meeting about data protection on the other side of town. I walk back to my office with a manager who works in another department: I only see him at cross-functional meetings, but we get on well and usually take the opportunity to chat when we meet. We are laughing about a director who, it turned out, had annoyed us both by trying to take over the meeting without any knowledge of the issues, and this leads to us making fun of him more widely. "It's like - by all means wear a Fred Flintstone tie..." "...but not with a polka dot shirt!" "And were those cufflinks really...?" "I know!" The other manager glances at me. "I love it that you can be trusted to wear a suit and tie properly." "Thanks," I reply, with mock gravitas. "I do my best. Someone has to."*

Some aspects of myself were more difficult to suppress. One of these, increasingly, was queerness. I had not been dressing as a woman for years and outside of work I had started dressing exclusively in overtly male clothes. At work I was androgynous, wearing suits and shirts that were not feminine but also not obviously cross-dressing. When I gained a significant promotion in the same council, which meant moving to a different department, I took the opportunity of this new post to start wearing a man's suit and – most transgressively – a tie.

My feelings about dress at work were complex. I did not desire to be a man: I had reached a personal equilibrium through male dress. Nor was dressing as a man such an overwhelming need that I was forced to do so; I was aware that I was making a deliberate choice to step across a particular boundary. The tie, the most overt form of male dress, was the key. I associated it with being professional, and with being a senior manager. I enjoyed the ritual of carefully choosing one to match my shirt, tying it in front of the mirror and becoming ready for work. The corporate male remains a clearer and more established tradition than the corporate woman. I felt under-dressed without one.

As my colleague noted, I took great pains to get my dress exactly right. I learned to tie a full Windsor knot, and made sure that the tip always precisely sat just above my belt. I spent more money on suits and got them discreetly tailored to fit my body. I wore silver cufflinks. I was deliberately defying anyone to suggest that my attire was not appropriate: I could not be more corporate. My constant low-level fear of being called out as peculiar or inappropriate was exceeded by the confidence I gained from dressing as the stereotypical senior manager.

In fact, my conversation with my colleague was memorable because it is the only time I can recall anyone ever mentioning my suit and tie. I hid in plain sight. I continued to be well regarded, I won an award for my MBA dissertation and I was invited by the deputy Chief Executive to talk about my career plans as a possible "future leader". People may have talked about me, but my competence and compliance seems to have been considered more important. After meeting with the deputy Chief Executive I bought three new ties.

## Discussion

The autoethnographical portrait I have presented is intended to provide a rich evocation (Ellis, 2004) of my experience of becoming a manager. Although it is a deliberate construction and an assemblage of selected episodes it has been written reflectively in order to try to capture some of my (recalled) thoughts, feelings, motivations, desires and fears. By presenting a candid account which reveals something of the secret, and perhaps unorthodox life of a manager (Grant and Zeeman, 2012; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012), as well as the social performance of management, I hope that this portrait has already started to provoke reflection about “who can become a manager”: that is, the individual, uniquely embodied person who occupies a manager role. However, the value of a single life story, however richly realised, is limited without a critical analysis of that story, and of the cultural context in which takes place: how culture is revealed in and impinges on a life (Boyle and Parry, 2007; Grant and Zeeman, 2012; Winkler, 2013), and the work such a retrospective account does (Boje and Tyler, 2009; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012; Riessman, 1993). I therefore now present an analysis of my autoethnographical portrait using the three lenses of authenticity, agential realism and my critical reflections on the act of writing such an autoethnographical account. In doing so I also aim to avoid the trap of reducing plurality by claiming to speak of management through just one life story (Shim, 2018).

### *Who can become a manager? (1): Desperately seeking authenticity*

A first way to read my autoethnographical portrait of becoming a manager is as my struggle to achieve authenticity: to both achieve recognition as an authentic manager, and to also fully express my authentic self. In other words, it may be read as the tension between a social ideal and my idealised self.

One way to resolve such a tension is to subjugate the self to the social ideal of management, where the individual is able to perform the role of the “perfect manager” and also convince themselves and others that their performance is a true expression of themselves. In my autoethnographical portrait I can be seen deliberately cultivating a performance of good management: being driven and ambitious, focused on delivery, supporting and taking care of staff, taking responsibility and being committed, being knowledgeable and in control. Furthermore I curated an impression of a life outside work which aligned with being a good manager, such as being athletic and competitive, and hiding any self-doubt or anxiety. I was also rationalising my performance as a manager as the authentic expression of myself. I was convinced that I was happy to work long hours and to remain “plugged in” via my Blackberry. I thought of activities such as MBA study and service improvements as the new expression of my creative self. I believed that I was learning to become less anxious and that as I became a better manager I would no longer make mistakes.

An alternative tactic is to construct a personal version of management, or the “unique manager”. For example, I drew on my background in community legal advice and sought to develop my service as an integrated but unique offer within the department; and I eventually found expression for my queer identity. A “unique manager” thus incorporates some elements of the idealised self which may not reflect the social ideal of management. Nevertheless, the extent of divergence from the social ideal is limited before it ceases to be recognised as a legitimate version (Edwards, 2010). My own divergences were carefully

positioned within the organisational and departmental norms in which I worked and tested to ensure I was still being seen as fulfilling the role of a good manager.

Other possible tactics were to separate my managerial self from my non-work self. I might have chosen to guard my own time more carefully and to continue to undertake activities such as poetry, music and art, whilst committing fully to my managerial role whilst I performed it. I might also have chosen to employ dis-identification (Costas and Fleming, 2009; Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001) or cynicism (Fleming and Spicer, 2003), and knowingly undertaken a performance of management whilst preserving my idealised self. Unlike the workers studied by Costas and Fleming (2009) I do not recall myself trying to resist colonisation by the organisation. Despite the personal cost to me (which I discuss later) I found the contemporary claim of authenticity compelling, and in order to fulfil the social ideal of management I therefore co-opted and corralled my idealised self to align with normative material-discursive practices of management.

### ***Who can become a manager? (2): Entanglements and boundaries of management***

Reading my autoethnographical portrait as agential realism highlights two particular ways of seeing myself as manager and the phenomenon of “management”. First, agential realism draws attention to the entanglements, reconfigurations and relationalities, or the intra-action of material-discursive practices (Barad, 2007). Reading my account of becoming a manager as entanglements of materialisations, my material body can be seen to enable certain forms of management. For example, my educational experience, upbringing and class enabled me to think of myself as a potential manager: despite having no prior experience of managing or supervising others I took it for granted that I would be able to do so. I assumed I was at least equal, and probably superior to colleagues around me from working class and lower educational backgrounds. My concept of management was infused with discourses of hierarchy, of rank, of upward progression, and of authority. I conceived of management as being in charge of others, and I believed not so much that I was capable of being in charge of others, as that I ought to aspire to such.

Being white, able-bodied and educated I also materially conformed to many normative images of “the manager”; similarly, I looked at other managers and saw reflections of shared materialities. At no point was my own self-conceptualisation of a manager challenged by others. On the other hand, it is also possible to read my own particular interpretation of management as the intra-action of material-discursive practices of management and gender. My interpretation of management was indiscriminate: I sought to be all kinds of “good manager”, focused on performance, success, direction and control, and also showing care and attention to my staff, saying yes, being collegiate. This echoes the double bind highlighted by many feminists: the woman must demonstrate both feminine qualities (as a proper woman) and masculine qualities (to demonstrate her right to exist in a male world) (Eveline, 2005).

Read as material entanglements, the phenomenon of management extends beyond the formal role and the workplace. My autoethnographical portrait reveals me materialising management at home, in study, and in my leisure time: management is entangled with other materialities such as mobile technology, electronic communication, qualifications and standards, and the physically able and healthy body. These all afforded me opportunities to perform management, either to an external audience or to myself. This leads to the second

insight from agential realism. Agential realism invites us to reflect on how we constitute boundaries of management: what matters, and what is excluded (Barad, 2007). The common apparatus used to investigate management is role: what managers do, or ought to do, and how they manage and make sense of their role (Harding et al., 2014). Role enables us to examine the function of management and the skills, competences and behaviours required. However, by bounding the phenomenon of management as role, the person occupying the role is excluded; moreover, the apparatus of role excludes the ways in which management occurs outside the workplace. By attending to my own management performance, management is materialised in presenteeism and availability, and as control. As a manager I needed to be in control of my body and my mind and for both to be capable of withstanding sustained pressure and demands. I needed to maintain awareness of being a manager at all moments, not only in the workplace (where I also maintained control of my appearance and conformity to appropriate dress codes): management was also a life performance.

### ***Who can become a manager? (3): Management and me***

A piece of writing does not represent a record of any objective reality. The act of writing creates a reality, and as such it is itself a method of inquiry (Grant and Zeeman, 2012; Riessman, 1993). Having produced an autobiographical portrait of my experience as a manager, I now reflect on that act of writing: what I recalled, what I chose to reveal and how I chose to represent it, and the process of writing myself into the phenomenon of management (Boje and Tyler, 2009; Herrmann et al., 2013).

Reading my self-portrait as an account of management, I am firstly struck by the extent to which I bought into normative discourses of management. As an episode in my life story, I have always thought of myself as a manager who was different and who did things differently. Creativity is a quality that I have always valued in myself, and this self-concept of myself as a manager helps to sustain a narrative of continuing creativity, merely expressed in different ways, from poetry, music and art, to innovative management, to (latterly) new thinking about management as an academic. Through deliberately and reflexively attending to my recalled experiences, I now find few traces of a creative or a “unique manager”. Instead I find a manager determinedly conforming to corporate ideals and subjugating everything, including a non-work life to fulfilling those ideals. I deliberately sought the corporate: I moved from community work into local government because I perceived it to be more professional. Most strikingly, I see how my queer dressing, which I had always thought of as clear proof of my originality, is entangled with normative discourses. Cross-dressing remains transgressive and a vivid, often painful expression of “one’s true self” (Muhr and Sullivan, 2013; Muhr et al., 2016; O’Shea, 2018). For me, however, dressing in overtly traditional – and male – corporate uniform provided more security than vulnerability. Rather than being original I was ensuring I replicated corporate dress as accurately as possible. I not only felt more comfortable as an expression of myself; I felt a better, and more convincing manager.

I am also struck by the cost to myself of becoming a manager. In addition to the physical and mental cost of performing the omnipotent, omniscient manager who is always in control, (Corlett et al., 2019; Hay, 2014) – and I ended my career as a manager following a physical and then mental breakdown – there were other personal costs. Stopping writing poetry, performing music and visiting art galleries was not simply the ending of pleasurable,

restorative and generative activities. They also represent a loss of particular ways of being and doing, and especially the quality of stillness, and of waiting. They are ways of seeking, and deeply engaging with complexity, and then not simplifying but being able to meaningfully capture and express such complexity. Their purpose is not to measure, but to resonate human experience. Eight years after leaving management I am still struggling to recover such ways of being and doing, and I have not written a poem.

## Conclusions

In this paper I set out to answer the question “Who can become a manager” by attending to the individual, embodied self who occupies a manager role. Rather than focusing on what managers do, the function of management, or how a person constructs a manager role, I have instead paid attention to how a person constructs *themselves* as a manager. By asking “Who can become a manager” I thus ask: What kind of people, and selves, can be managers, and who are managers allowed to be?

My own experience of becoming a manager cannot represent all possible experiences. Nevertheless, my case it has revealed one significant finding, namely the dominance of normative management discourses. Any part of myself can be brought into a manager self, *providing it can be made to conform to normative discourses of management*; and my willingness and capacity to make myself conform has surprised me. Reading my account through the lens of authenticity reveals the dominance of the social ideal of management and the extent to which I both deliberately and unconsciously corralled and co-opted my self-concept – my ideal self – to align with that social ideal. It was not enough merely to fulfil the role of an ideal manager; I sought to show how my ideal self was also the ideal manager. By taking the perspective of agential realism, I have revealed the entanglements and relationalities of management, as a materialisation of the embodied manager intra-acting with material-discursive practices. The phenomenon of “being a manager” is not a cognitive exercise, nor is it confined to the workplace, or to the temporal occupation of a manager role. Finally, through reflecting on my autoethnographical account and the process of producing such an account, I reveal some of my experiences, qualities, traits and histories which became excluded from my construction of myself as a manager: self-doubt and anxiety; slow thinking, silence and waiting. Conversely, my queerness, which I have continued to see as a source of vulnerability, appears to have both been socially acceptable and a personal source of security, through expressing a performance of the archetypal manager, the corporate male. In this case at least, what has traditionally been a source of exclusion – because it challenges social ideals – can apparently be overcome if the individual is sufficiently compliant with a dominant social ideal.

At one level, the findings from this investigation merely confirm the hegemonic dominance of discourses of management as control, power, knowledge and masculinity (Corlett et al., 2019; Hay, 2014; Mantere, 2008). However, they also go further in highlighting three particular implications of such hegemony, and suggest alternative ways of thinking about, studying and doing management. First, such discourses draw our attention to action and to *doing* management: they call us to focus on management as a function, or as a *doing to others*, rather than as the ongoing achievements of social relationships (Watson, 2001). They thus draw our attention away from managers themselves, or rather the individuals occupying

manager roles, and from other entanglements and materialisations of management. Secondly, the hegemony of such discourses means we fail to recognise their impact on managers. Here, my findings complement those of Hay (2014) who explored how managers were able or encouraged, through management education, to recognise the dissonance between such discourses and their own experiences, and thus begin to challenge them. In my case I did not recognise any dissonance, and instead both deliberately excluded or repressed traits and experiences which did not conform, and sought to construct a whole self which aligned with being an ideal manager. The cost was the loss of many activities and ways of being which I loved and, eventually, my mental and physical health. Thirdly, we fail to look for, or recognise, radical alternative ways of doing management. Rather than encouraging and teaching managers to be confident, for example, might not more self-doubt and occasional anxiety be beneficial? Management actions and decisions have consequences for others, directly and indirectly. Might managers who experience anxiety actually be appropriately recognising and responding to the level of responsibility they hold? And by way of another example, I wish to end by posing a question which has started to trouble me. Why does poetry (or other art forms) have nothing to do with management? How might poetry invite new ways of thinking, and new ways of doing management? What would management-as-poetry look like?

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