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Heroes and Helpers, Victims and Villains: A syntagmatic analysis of manager stories

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Abstract: This paper builds on the growing body of work using narrative as a means of both conceptualising and researching identity. Drawing on the work of Propp, it presents a method of syntagmatic analysis which attends to the narrative plots underpinning stories, and the narrative roles adopted by the narrator and roles ascribed to others. The paper presents research into manager workplace identities at a UK Social Landlord. It demonstrates how a syntagmatic analysis of manager stories reveals rich insights into the workplace identities of managers, and the identity work they undertake in order to construct and sustain such identities. It further reveals how managers personally position themselves in relation to the range of possible organisational functions of a manager, and in relation to the organisation and other organisational actors. By attending to individual stories, such analysis also draws attention to the plurality of manager experience.

Introduction – the identity work of stories

The role of narrative and stories is becoming increasingly recognised within organisational studies as a means of understanding a range of phenomena (Brown et al., 2009; Hawkins and Saleem, 2012). In particular, narrative is informing both conceptualisations of identity, and methods of researching it. A narrative conceptualisation of identity proposes that identity *is* storytelling (McAdams, 2008): identity is the self as reflexively understood by a person in terms of their biography (Giddens, 1991) and the ability to sustain, develop and adapt a narrative over time to provide a sense of unity and purpose (Mallett and Wapshott, 2012; Watson, 1997; Watson, 2009). A narrative theory of identity also emphasises the role of narrative as an essential form of socialisation. Individuals learn how to speak and act in social situations by learning to tell stories in forms which are recognisable to others (Czarniawska, 2004; Riessman, 2008), including common narrative trajectories such as a ‘beginning’, a ‘low point’, a ‘climax’ and an ‘ending’ (Ashforth et al., 2008; Gergen, 2001) and locally prescribed forms (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001).

Stories have provided a rich source of data for investigating identity within organisational contexts. Organisational actors tell stories in order to make sense of their organisational roles and careers (Korica and Molloy, 2010; Mallett and Wapshott, 2012), their organisational work (Brown et al., 2008), transitions to new roles (Down and Reveley, 2009; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010), as responses to organisational discourse (Currie and Brown, 2003; McKenna, 2010) including authoring alternative stories (Gleeson and Knights, 2008; Humphreys and Brown, 2002) and to make sense of the organisation to others (Sims, 2003). Stories can also be used to act upon others: by incorporating others in their stories, organisational actors position others in different roles – such as Villains – (Sims, 2003; Whittle et al., 2009) or ventriloquise other actors (Clifton, 2014) to support their own self-construction. Analysis of organisational stories is proving a powerful means of revealing multiple, competing and contested discourses and the sense-making and identity work that organisational actors undertake: not only in seeking to author their own stories but in response to those of others (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012).

This paper presents a narrative method of investigating manager identity which adds to and complements existing research and methods in two ways. First, it uses story elicitation as a method of gathering organisational stories, by inviting managers to tell a story about themselves which they feel is representative of themselves and their organisational role. That is, rather than gathering stories *in situ* (Hitchin and Maksymiu, 2012) it gathers stories as forms of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 2003). Second, it draws on the socially recognisable nature of stories and particularly the work of the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp. Propp analysed one hundred Russian folk tales and concluded that they could be broken down into a limited number of specific narrative functions carried out by specific *dramatis personae* or roles (Propp, 1968): the folk tales all followed a small and easily recognisable number of plots, which nevertheless could be re-told in many different ways featuring different characters and events (Table 1). Propp draws attention to the ‘two-fold quality of a tale: its amazing multiformity, picturesqueness, and colour, and on the other hand, its no less striking uniformity, its repetition’ (Propp, 1968: 21): tales may be superficially very different but they draw on common and familiar structures. The method applies syntagmatic analysis to the stories told by managers using the narrative functions and roles developed by Propp to identify the plot structure of each story, the narrative role(s) adopted by the manager, other narrative roles which feature in the story and the organisational and other actors who populate these roles. The paper demonstrates how such a

syntagmatic narrative analysis reveals rich insights into the workplace identities of managers, and the identity work they undertake in order to construct and sustain such identities, by examining how managers personally position themselves in relation to the range of possible organisational functions of a manager, and in relation to the organisation and other actors.

No.	Narrative Function	Narrative Turn	Description	
0	Initial Situation	Initial Situation	The initial situation e.g. family members are enumerated, future heroic status is indicated	
1	Absentation	Preparatory <i>Setting up the First Move of either Lack or Villainy</i>	One of the family members leaves home	
2	Interdiction		An interdiction is addressed to the hero	
3	Violation		The interdiction is violated	
4	Reconnaissance		The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance	
5	Delivery		The villain finds information about his victim	
6	Trickery		The villain attempts to deceive the victim	
7	Complicity		The victim submits to the deception and unwittingly helps the villain	
8	Villainy	Complication <i>The first move – Villainy or Lack which must be resolved.</i>	The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family	
8a	Lack		One member of a family lacks something or desires something	
9	Mediation or Connective Incident		The misfortune or lack is made known; the hero is approached with a request or command; he is allowed to go or is dispatched	
10	Beginning Counteraction		The hero agrees to or decides on counteraction	
11	Departure		The hero leaves home	
12	The Donor	Donors	The hero is tested, interrogated or attacked which prepares the way for receiving a magical agent or helper	
13	The Hero's Reaction		The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor	
14	Acquisition of a Magical Agent	From the entry of the Helper to the end of the First Move <i>This may constitute the end of the story, or the story may end with a Wedding.</i>	The hero acquires the use of a magical agent	
15	Spatial Transference		The hero is transferred, delivered or led to the object of a search	
16	Struggle		The hero and the villain join in direct combat	
17	Branding		The hero is branded or marked	
18	Victory		The villain is defeated	
19	Liquidation		The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated	
20	Return		The hero returns	
21	Pursuit		The hero is pursued	
22	Rescue		The hero is rescued from pursuit	
23	Unrecognised Arrival		The second move <i>The hero has to prove themselves to a sceptical audience</i>	The hero, unrecognised, arrives home or in another country
24	Unfounded Claims			A false hero presents unfounded claims
25	Difficult Task	A difficult task is proposed to the hero		
26	Solution	The task is resolved		
27	Recognition	The hero is recognised		
28	Exposure	The false hero or villain is exposed		
29	Transfiguration	The hero is given a new appearance		
30	Punishment	The villain is punished		
31	Wedding	The hero marries and ascends the throne – there is a happy ending		

Table 1

Although the value of an early twentieth century analysis of Russian folk tales may be not be immediately obvious, I suggest that this method actually has a number of benefits. First, it is not a large conceptual leap to see the manager's organisational experience as analogous to a folk tale. Managers are expected to act decisively to overcome problems – indeed the word 'heroic' is often employed to describe ideal leaders and managers within organisations – and organisational activities are often conceived of and experienced as struggle with or against opposing forces or between good and bad (e.g. Brown and Humphreys, 2006; McKenna, 2010; Sims, 2005). Second, Propp's structural framework is open to refinement and development to accommodate different cultural contexts (Dundes, 1968). I have therefore developed Propp's analysis where appropriate to reflect the cultural context of contemporary organisations. Thirdly, the method of story elicitation combined with structural narrative

analysis offers a two-fold means of attending to the plurality of manager experience, rather than treating managers, or categories of managers, as a homogenous group (Harding et al., 2014; Musson and Duberley, 2007; Thomas and Linstead, 2002). Inviting managers to tell a story of their choice in itself recognises and respects the individual manager and the personal meaning of their role (Flick, 2009). However, analysing such stories using a limited set of narrative functions does not mean that the stories should be reduced to a limited set of types. On the contrary, a simple organising structure may also be used as a backdrop to reveal differences, outliers and nuances between stories.

Methodology

The data presented and discussed here comes from an in-depth case study of managers at Panorama Housing¹, a Registered Provider of Social Housing (commonly known as a Social Landlord) operating in the North West of England and managing over 11,500 properties. It was formed in 2006 as a result of a stock transfer of local authority housing. The overall aim of the research project was to investigate the ways in which managers constructed workplace identities in the context of their organisational position 'in-between' those they managed and were responsible for, and the organisation they were responsible to. The method of analysis discussed here formed the first part of the investigation by identifying and interpreting the presented selves of managers and their organisational role.

Twenty two staff at Panorama were defined as managers for the purpose of the case study in that they directly line-managed others and were also directly line-managed themselves. Twenty one managers agreed to take part. They ranged across three hierarchical levels from Team Leaders or supervisors, through Service Managers (a traditional middle manager role) to Operations Directors. Data gathering took place over a six month period and included a wide range of observational data, organisational documents and artefacts; however the primary source of data was interviews with each of the managers.

The focal point of the interview invited the participating manager to narrate a workplace occasion or event which they felt captured their own understanding of their organisational role. Participants were given this question, namely 'Please tell me a story about you in your organisational role, which you feel represents what your role means to you' and some broad guidelines ahead of the interview. These guidelines were carefully worded in order to give participants maximum scope to choose anything they wanted without providing any undue prompting. Interviews followed three stages. Firstly participants were asked a small number of background questions such as how long they had worked for the organisation and how they were appointed to their current role. In the second stage I invited the participant to narrate their story, during which I listened carefully, offering only minimal prompts to encourage the storytelling (Wengraf, 2001). In the third stage I explored the story and its meanings with the manager. I used a prompt sheet to facilitate further exploration, for example the presence or absence of key organisational actors in the story, but the use of any particular follow-up questions and their order was determined by the manager's story itself.

¹ Panorama Housing is a pseudonym.

Interviews averaged just over one hour in length. Syntagmatic analysis of the interview texts proceeded as follows. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, reflecting the text as an interaction between the manager and the researcher (Riessman, 2008) and uploaded to NVivo. Initially I read through each interview text several times to gain an overall familiarity with its content, adding comments with NVivo annotations to capture early thoughts and impressions (King and Horrocks, 2010). This process included developing an initial reading of the narrative structure by applying Propp's definition of a tale as any development proceeding from villainy or a lack, through intermediary functions to a denouement (Propp, 1968); this enabled me to initially determine the nature of the chosen story(s) and whether it functioned as a complete story or as an element of a wider story. From this initial reading I then proceeded to code the interview text according to Propp's narrative functions, and according to the actors adopting the narrative roles (Propp, 1968). This process was highly iterative and involved regularly reviewing the emerging narrative structure according to Propp's narrative functions and roles against my reading of the interview text as a whole, and clarifying and refining my reading of narrative functions within it.

Having established a detailed narrative coding I proceeded to analyse the interview texts as an instance of self-presentation. This involved firstly categorising the types of stories told, initially using Propp's distinction between tales based on Villainy or a Lack, and developing further categorisations to reflect the particular context of contemporary organisations (Dundes, 1968). Secondly I re-read and analysed the interview texts in terms of narrative boundaries (Riessman, 2008) in order to determine whether discrete stories or story elements might be read as constructing or contributing to an underlying meta-story (Riessman, 2008) or overarching theme (King and Horrocks, 2010). That is, the focus of analysis shifted from the content of the story to the purpose and work of the story in its contextual telling (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009; Czarniawska, 2004). In doing so I acknowledge my own role in constituting both the narrative which I analyse (Riessman, 2008) and the presented analysis as 'artfully created text' (Watson, 1995: 302) which is both the author's construction of her subjects and a construction of herself (van Manen, 1997).

Findings – Narrating the self

What subjects do managers choose to tell stories about themselves?

Managers chose to tell a wide and diverse range of stories to express the nature and personal meaning of their organisational role. A summary of the stories is set out in Table 2. The stories range in scope and scale. They include major strategic and external projects such as leading a change management programme in response to government-driven change (E) or a programme to deliver building works (B); long term internal projects such as reforming or developing a service area (C, F, H, J, T); fulfilling organisational tasks such as organising a community event (N, R), a marketing presentation (O), system configuration (K) or obtaining a quality mark (L); daily work such as managing the rota (W) or assisting customers (D); extraordinary events such as an emergency flood (I) or stock transfer (H); managing relationships with staff and managing staff needs and expectations (A, O, M, S, V); and stories of personal progress such as promotion (G, H, P) and struggle for recognition (F, I, M).

Although the span of responsibility of organisational level determines the possible scope of stories available to managers, organisational level does not in fact determine the choice of stories which managers felt expressed the nature and meaning of their organisational role.

Both E and S, the Operations Directors, talked about their roles involving a balance between strategic oversight and occasions of getting involved in operational issues. However, E's chosen story of managing welfare reform privileges the role of strategic oversight, while S's two stories both focus on specific operational issues and managing individual relationships.

Manager	Story(s)	Plot	Manager narrative role	Narrative roles of
A – Service Manager	Integrating a 'lost' team into the service area	Quest – Dispatched	Hero	Father – the organis Helper – Team Lea (Villain – former m
B – Service Manager	Managing a programme to deliver building improvements for customers	Quest – Initiated	Hero	Victim – tenants Hero – staff
C – Service Manager	Reforming the service area	Quest – Initiated	Hero Helper	Hero – staff
D – Team Leader	Assisting customers to help them resolve problems	Battle	Donor Helper Hero	Hero – staff Victim – tenants
E – Operations Director	Managing the organisation's strategic response to welfare reform	Battle	Hero Donor Helper Father	Victim – tenants Hero – staff
F – Service Manager	Reforming the service area Meta-story – Becoming a successful manager	Battle Meta-story – Existential Struggle	Hero	Villain – former ma Father – the organis Donor – senior mar
G – Team Leader	Becoming a team leader – 'the rise from the shop floor'	Quest – Personal	Hero	Helper – line mana
H – Service Manager	1. Growing and developing the service area 1a. Becoming a manager 1b. The stock transfer	1. Quest – Initiated 2. Quest – Personal 3. Battle	1. Hero 2. Hero 3. Helper	1. Father – the orga agencies 2. Father – the orga 3. Hero – tenants; V
I – Team Leader	The emergency flood Meta-story – Struggle for recognition	Battle Meta-story – Existential Struggle	Hero	Hero – staff Victim – tenants Villain – a tenant Father – the organis
J – Service Manager	Growing and developing the service area	Quest – Initiated	Hero	Father – the organis Hero – staff
K – Team Leader	Developing a new internal system	Quest – Dispatched	Hero	Father – the organis

Table 2

Manager	Story(s)	Plot	Manager narrative role	Narrative roles of
L – Team Leader	Achieving accreditation for the service area	Quest – Dispatched	Hero	Hero – staff, service Father – the organisation Donor – auditors
M – Team Leader	1. Struggle for organisational recognition 1a. Defending team against unreasonable expectations	Existential Struggle Battle	Hero	Villain – senior manager Villain – anti-social
N – Team Leader	Organising a community event	Quest – Initiated	Helper Donor	Hero – staff Victim – tenants
O – Team Leader	1. Involving staff in service marketing 2. Supporting staff through organisational change Meta-story – Struggle for self-recognition	1. Quest – Dispatched 2. Battle Meta-story – Existential Struggle	Hero	1. Father – the organisation 2. Victim – staff Meta-story – Donor
P – Team Leader	Becoming a team leader – leading the team on a journey of change	Quest – Personal	Hero	Donor – staff
R – Service Manager	Organising a community event Meta-story – becoming a manager	Difficult Task Meta-story - Existential Struggle	Hero Helper	Donor – line manager Hero – staff
S – Operations Director	1. Helping two managers to work together 2. Defending a team to executive directors	1. Existential Struggle 2. Battle	Donor Helper Father Hero	1. Hero – the two managers 2. Villain – former
T – Service manager	Reforming the service area	Battle	Hero	Villain – the organisation
V – Team Leader	1. Being on a recruitment panel 2. Helping a sick staff member	1. Quest – Personal 2. Battle	1. Donor 2. Hero	1. Hero – staff member 2. Victim – staff member
W – Team Leader	Managing the staff rota Meta-story – Becoming a team leader	Difficult Task Meta-story - Existential Struggle	Hero	Donor – line manager Helper – other team

Table 2/cont.

At the Service Manager level, all eight managers were appointed after the formation of Panorama Housing. However, while C, F, J, H and T all tell stories of reforming and developing their service areas – with a particular focus on driving up performance – A focuses on developing relationships with a particular team within their service area, and B and R choose stories with an external focus of delivering service improvements to customers and community events. Finally, some Team Leaders tell stories which privilege their relationships with the staff that they manage, such as negotiating new relationships following a promotion (G, P) or responding to staff needs and expectations (M, V) while other stories privilege delivering services and fulfilling organisational tasks (D, I, K, L, O, N, W). The purpose of this observation is not so much to highlight the unsurprising diversity of managerial roles and the functions that they are required to fulfil, but that, given the choice, managers choose to focus on different roles when describing themselves. I now explore further how syntagmatic analysis of their stories can reveal individual manager constructions, positionings and responses to their organisational roles.

What plots do managers adopt to tell their stories?

In this section I present analysis of the chosen stories through a typology of plot lines. Propp develops a basic plot categorisation based on two types of narrative ‘complication’: of Villainy against the hero or another, or a Lack in which something is missing or desired (Propp, 1968). Either of these is necessary to initiate the hero’s response and lead to some form of resolution. These basic plots can be expanded to develop a more detailed typology of plot as summarised in Table 3.

Story type	Description	Narrative functions (Propp, 1968) (Essential functions are in bold, possible functions in italics)
1. Quest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Response to a Lack (Propp, 1968) • Literal or metaphoric ‘going out’ in search of what is lacking 	<i>0 – The initial situation</i> <i>1 – Absentation</i> <i>2 – Interdiction</i> <i>3 – Violation</i> 8a – Lack <i>9 – Mediation or Connective incident</i> <i>10 – Beginning counteraction</i> 11 – Departure <i>12 – The Donor</i> <i>13 – The hero’s reaction</i> <i>14 – Acquisition of a Magical Agent</i> <i>15 – Spatial Transference</i> 19 Liquidation of the Lack
1.1 Personal Quest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Response to a personal Lack • E.g. seeking betterment, promotion 	<i>0 – The initial situation</i> <i>1 – Absentation</i> <i>2 – Interdiction</i> <i>3 – Violation</i> 8a – Lack <i>9 – Mediation or Connective incident</i> <i>10 – Beginning counteraction</i> 11 – Departure <i>12 – The Donor</i> <i>13 – The hero’s reaction</i> <i>14 – Acquisition of a Magical Agent</i> <i>15 – Spatial Transference</i> 19 Liquidation of the Lack
1.2 Dispatched Quest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Response to a Lack in others • The hero is dispatched by another 	<i>0 – The initial situation</i> <i>1 – Absentation</i> <i>2 – Interdiction</i> <i>3 – Violation</i> 8a – Lack 9 – Mediation or Connective incident 10 – Beginning counteraction 11 – Departure <i>12 – The Donor</i> <i>13 – The hero’s reaction</i> <i>14 – Acquisition of a Magical Agent</i> <i>15 – Spatial Transference</i> 19 Liquidation of the Lack
1.3 Initiated Quest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Response to a Lack in others • The hero initiates the quest themselves 	As for Dispatched Quest – the key difference is the motivation of the Hero in 10 – Beginning Counteraction, and whether they initiate action themselves or agree to another’s request.
2. Battle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Response to Villainy • The victim suffers harm or misfortune – a loss from previous state 	0 – The Initial Situation <i>1 – Absentation</i> <i>2 – Interdiction</i> <i>3 – Violation</i> 4 – Reconnaissance

		5 – <i>Delivery</i> 6 – <i>Trickery</i> 7 – <i>Complicity</i> 8 – Villainy 9 – <i>Mediation or Connective incident</i> 10 – <i>Beginning counteraction</i> 11 – <i>Departure</i> 12 – <i>The Donor</i> 13 – <i>The hero's reaction</i> 14 – <i>Acquisition of a Magical Agent</i> 15 – <i>Spatial Transference</i> 16 – Struggle 17 – <i>Branding</i> 18 – Victory 20 – <i>Return</i> 21 – <i>Pursuit</i> 22 – <i>Rescue</i>
3. Existential Struggle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Propp's Second Move • The hero is initially unrecognised and has to prove their true identity or their qualities 	23 – Unrecognised arrival 24 – <i>Unfounded claims</i> 25 – <i>Difficult task</i> 26 – <i>Solution</i> 27 – <i>Recognition</i> 28 – <i>Exposure</i> 29 – <i>Transfiguration</i> 30 – <i>Punishment</i> 31 – <i>Wedding</i>

Table 3

A Quest is based on the narrative complication of Lack and features a literal or metaphorical Departure in search of what is lacking, and is resolved through Liquidation of the initial Lack. Based on the stories told by managers I categorise a range of different types of quest. Personal Quests are a response to a personal Lack. G, H and P all tell stories of seeking promotion and of the journey of departing from their old role to fulfil a new one. G describes their 'rise from the shop floor' as aligned with the organisation's growth:

'I developed from the bottom upwards so, you know, I haven't come into the role that I'm doing now not knowing (pause) about how the everyday (pause) erm (pause) tasks are dealt with of being [an officer] ...So really I've seen it from the beginning, it's grown, you know, as - and I've been a part of that change, erm, both in the [service area] and like the whole organisation's developed a lot which, you know, I think to be made to feel part of that change, erm, is important and that.'

Another form of quest describes a response to the lack of another. In Dispatched Quests the manager is 'dispatched' by another which is identified by Propp's narrative functions of the Mediation/Connective Incident and Consent to Counteraction. A, K, L and O all tell stories in which they were set tasks to complete by the organisation, such as integrating ('rescuing') a particular team (A) or gaining an accreditation (L). In Initiated Quests the manager recognises and responds to the Lack themselves. This is not to say that the manager acts unilaterally, but both B and N tell stories of seeking, identifying and responding to particular tenant needs without reference to any organisational direction. Similarly, when C tells the story of reforming their service area they strongly present themselves as acting to implement their own vision and to persuade the organisation of that vision – 'the more I've sold it, the more I've said it, the better it makes sense really...they just jumped on board' – and H and J construct their under-developed service areas as an organisational Lack which the organisation is not yet fully aware of. J recalled:

‘I think (p) I think coming in, and seeing that nobody got it and had an understanding, I thought [goodness] there’s a lot of work to do here. Erm. And because everyone’s background is different I wouldn’t say anyone’s come from the same sort of background as [me]...it’s not on people’s radar.’

A Battle is based on the narrative complication of Villainy. Villainy can be read in a number of ways: as the villainous actions of someone such as a former manager (S, F), campaigners (H) or tenants (I); indirectly, such as the effects of welfare reform (D, E) or loss of funding (O); or metaphorically, such as sickness (V). Villainy is distinguished from Lack because the victim has suffered harm or misfortune from a previous state, whereas Lack indicates a desire to gain or improve something. Although F and T superficially tell similar stories to C, H and J, the latter stories are based on the manager’s vision of better ways. F and T’s stories of service improvement are based upon responding to the actions of former and senior managers and their effects on staff. F is ‘horrified’ at some of the practices they hear about, which left staff ‘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.’

A final type of plot is Existential Struggle, or the struggle for recognition. This is based on what Propp (1968) categorises as a ‘Second Move’ which follows the initial complication and resolution of Lack or Villainy, and in which the hero finds themselves unrecognised and having to prove either their identity or their worth. H and M both tell stories of a struggle for full financial recognition of their managerial status and experience; while the texts of I and O may be read as being underpinned by meta-stories of such struggle. I’s chosen story of co-ordinating the organisational response to an emergency highlights their wider struggle to be recognised as a manager: ‘that’s what I can’t understand, why we’re still called [] Team Leaders - we’re managers, we manage a service’. O’s struggle is for self-recognition: following an organisational change they now manage a team whose work they have little prior experience of, leading O to seek to construct a new managerial identity in which experience is supplemented by wider managerial skills, and which skills are demonstrated by their chosen stories. Finally R and W told stories which are categorised as Difficult Tasks which the hero is set as a test in order to prove their true qualities. For example, R describes organising a community event and uses it both as a verification of their management capabilities in being given the responsibility, and as a demonstration of how they fulfil organisational values as a manager:

‘We get a budget of £20,000 which is a lot of money to be held respo – to be like responsible for so (p) you know, I want to make sure that (p) it is spent wisely and spent correctly and we’re getting the right things in and the right people there and, you know, none of it’s getting wasted, and, you know, value for money and things like that which is one of the key things within this organisation that, you know, we always aim to, to work towards.’

Difficult Tasks may therefore be read as contributing towards a wider Existential Struggle for recognition.

Reading manager stories in terms of plot enables us to attend to the particular meanings and functions that managers choose to privilege when presenting themselves. Manager stories of their own Personal Quests or Existential Struggle construct management as a state of ‘being’ or ‘becoming’ rather than ‘doing’: managers seeking meaning of organisational roles and what it means to fulfil them. In particular these stories draw attention to the role of the

organisation in recognising the manager and their capabilities. However, whereas Personal Quests construct the manager's current role as the successful fulfilment of a Lack, and privilege the process of 'becoming' a manager, Existential Struggles reveal the potential tensions between organisational actors' understanding of managerial roles and the sometime struggle to 'be': that is, the struggle to reconcile personal understanding and role meaning with those of others. Dispatched and Initiated Quests both privilege the manager role as 'doing' or acting on others to achieve goals, but also suggest differences in manager self-construction. Dispatched Quests position the manager as loyal and capable servants of the organisation who is able to fulfil its demands, whereas Initiated Quests position the manager as experienced and capable agents who act in response to need. Finally stories of Battles construct managers as defenders and protectors of others and suggest a moral dimension of management as 'doing the right thing' in response to an injustice. This is nicely illustrated by V who explicitly constructs their story of taking a sick staff member to hospital as doing the right thing despite being criticised for not letting anyone know where they had gone:

'You turn up to somebody's door and (p) their eyes are yellow and (p) everything's going mad, what do you do, walk away and there's nobody else to help (p)... And, you know (p) - I've never made a fanfare about it, I've never really said anything to anybody about it...I just got the flack (laughs). Rather than a medal.'

Which narrative roles are used in manager stories?

The next stage of narrative structural analysis involves identifying the different roles, or *dramatis personae*, within the story (Table 4). Analysis of the narrative roles adopted by the manager themselves, and ascribed to others, enables further insight into the manager's workplace identity and their perceived relations with others.

Dramatis Persona	Narrative function	Notes on interpretation and development from Propp
Hero	The subject of the story – the one who takes action to resolve the Complication, undertakes Difficult Tasks and achieves a happy ending (Wedding).	The Hero may be a victim of Villainy or Lack but then acts to resolve it themselves, unlike the Victim.
Villain	One who causes harm or material loss – carries out Villainy and engages in Struggle with the Hero and Pursuit.	
Victim	The subject of villainy or lack – but who does not carry out other Hero functions.	Propp characterises the victim as the Princess or sought-after person.
Father	One who Dispatches the Hero to seek or rescue the victim One who sets the Hero Difficult Tasks One who Recognises the Hero and Exposes a False Hero	Propp also argues that the Father and the Princess cannot be easily distinguished in terms of fairy tale narrative functions. However, Propp only categorises according to dramatis personae who actually carry out narrative functions, rather than those who are subject to them. I argue that stories offer further insight by paying attention to characters who are both agents and subjects in a narrative.
Donor	One who tests the Hero One who provides the Hero with a Magical Agent	The Helper is distinct from the Donor who tests the Hero and only provides an agent for the Hero to use. The Helper may help the hero to pass the test or directly help themselves.
Helper	One who directly helps the Hero e.g.	

	through Spatial Transference – helping them to find the Victim, Villain or sought-after object	
False Hero	One who makes false claims	

Table 4

Roles adopted by managers

It is not surprising that the majority of managers adopt the role of the Hero, who undertakes a quest to resolve Lack or struggle with Villainy, in their chosen stories. However, both D and L share Hero roles with their staff. L initially casts themselves in the role of a Hero on a quest to achieve Quality Mark accreditation, but their story is told almost exclusively in a plural voice, and it is not always clear whether ‘we’ refers to their team, their service area or the organisation. D’s story casts their team as Heroes who assist tenants in their struggle to manage problems, but their language also claims staff achievements as their own: ‘if you can help, if you want to change their lives and make it a better life (p) then (p) what more can you ask?’ A number of managers also adopt other narrative roles. The Father refers to the one who dispatches the Hero, and who also provides recognition and verification that the Hero has fulfilled their task or should be recognised, and is adopted by E who dispatches staff to assist tenants, and S as one who recognises the qualities of managers and potential managers in their service area. The Helper is one who provides direct assistance to the Hero in their quest or struggle: S describes providing support and guidance to two managers who are struggling to work together, while N and D provide expert knowledge to their staff who are working with tenants. The Donor is one who interrogates or tests the Hero and whom the Hero must satisfy in order to gain a Magical Agent to assist them. For example, V’s role on an interview panel involves testing the staff member who is seeking promotion; while N questions their team and their reflective understanding of their role in relation to the organisational values.

Adopting roles such as Helper or Donor is not simply a reflection of the manager’s role in supporting and developing staff. Read as narrative plot, managers who adopt roles other than the Hero are telling stories in which other actors undertake the Hero role and they themselves are supporting characters. Narrative analysis therefore offers some insight into how managers construct their organisational roles and their organisational purpose: do they see themselves as primarily taking action themselves, or as facilitators of the work and actions of others? The value of this may be illustrated by considering the issue of managers as former practitioners, who have been promoted from team members directly delivering services to managerial positions. N, telling a story in which their primary roles are those of Helper and Donor, constructs a role in which they draw on their experience as a practitioner to offer critical insight and guidance to staff in their own practice:

‘if you think (p) what the principle means, you think well how can I put that into practice, that’s the bit that I like and enjoy because that’s requiring a bit more creativity, it’s requiring, erm, not just doing it myself, it’s about selling that vision to, to other staff you want to try and give them an understanding of the true value of what they do’.

D also describes such a facilitative role, but their text also seeks to underplay distinctions between themselves and their team, suggesting that they still seek to construct themselves primarily as a (senior) practitioner rather than a manager:

‘Yeah so it’s – so how did you get on and it’s that (p) way of how we work, you know, how did that go, well yeah I won that one and all that. So, it’s that we know each other...so we’re all like that, enthusiastic to know. So that’s how we do it, we’re always communicating and work with each other.’

B illustrates another response to the role of managers as former practitioners. In their chosen story they adopt a Hero role in which they lead a programme of work to improve outside facilities for vulnerable tenants. Although they are no longer a practitioner they maintain a central role in their story of delivering the programme, as one who agrees on the work, leads and co-ordinates it, manages the budget and plans future works: ‘it’s my baby’. Their managerial role enables them to continue to fulfil their commitment to vulnerable tenants:

‘[It’s] slightly different (p) to your normal run of the mill housing...I know the people who I work with and the team that I manage work with people who are (p) struggling...cos for me there has to be, there has to be meaning behind what I do.’

Narrative roles ascribed to others

Further insight can be gained by analysing the organisational and other actors whom managers include in their stories. A number of manager stories include the organisation in a Father role. I have already noted the role of the organisation as a dispatcher of the manager on a quest in the service of the organisation; the other dimension of the Father role is that of providing recognition and verification of the Hero, their qualities and their success. For some managers organisational recognition forms an important aspect of their story. For example, J’s story is a struggle for organisational recognition of the importance of their service area and achieving this represents the completion of their story:

‘[It] kind of really encouraged me that actually the tables had really turned from – just go and sit in a corner and we’re not really sure what you do and we’re not really bothered, to actually we believe in [your service area] and here’s two new posts...So it’s - I feel like it’s just a real shift in people’s perceptions of, erm, [the service area] and also that I guess their trust in me as a manager.’

Donor and Helper roles fulfil a similar function in many manager stories. F’s reform of their service area is achieved in part through a series of literal, often difficult, interrogations by senior managers, through which they come to realise what they needs to do to be successful: have a thorough understanding of their service themselves, and act with integrity towards their team. They interpret them as a test which they eventually pass:

‘A lot of the stuff that was said was hurtful, it was (p) really I suppose, sort of (pause) I suppose a slap in the face (pause) but (pause) it’s what you do from that point so it’s either, you know, it’s like, er, being hysterical and someone slaps you (p) do you then break down or do you pick yourself up and shake yourself off and move forward.’

R and W similarly describe being questioned by their line managers as important factors in their becoming managers. Other managers describe testing from different sources. P deliberately subjects themselves to testing by their team, casting them into the role of Donor by asking them what they want from them as a team leader, ‘because I see my role as being (p) empowering them (p) to perform as best they can (p) so giving them the things that they

need to do the job'; while H and L both emphasise the value of external testing through assessors.

Victims may be the subjects of Villainy or the subjects of a Quest. In the manager stories the role of Victim is filled by tenants or by staff members. What is perhaps more interesting is the role filled by Villains. Externally, Villains affecting tenants include other tenants and local gang members (I and M), campaigners against council stock transfers (H) and the generalised effects of government policy. Internally there is very limited criticism of the organisation by managers, with only one manager, M, criticising existing senior managers for the way they blame staff without checking the facts first. However, A, F and S refer to the effects of behaviours of former managers on their staff, which may be a useful way to characterise bad management whilst demonstrating loyalty. T's story illustrates the tensions of initiating changes whilst remaining loyal to the organisation. Their story involves acting as the team's defender, 'to put an arm round them, erm, and to sort of bat for them at my level with my peers'. They suggest that the team feelings of being badly treated by the organisation are merely perception rather than fact: 'the team had a bad reputation, or, the perception of the team was that it had a bad reputation and, erm, that they were – you know, they felt they were the fall guys for anything that was sort of, you know, could not be designated as somebody's job role.' However, the actions they take to improve the team's morale include bringing them into the central offices where they can enjoy the new facilities other staff share, getting them invited to award nights with other teams, and promoting the value of their work to other managers; in doing so T subtly describes a battle and defeat of (unintentional) organisational villainy.

As well as studying individual roles within manager stories, analysis can also consider the relative importance of different roles within the story. Managers such as C, G, N and T tell stories in which their own role as Hero (or Donor) is unambiguous and which does not rely on other roles. Other managers tell stories in which other roles play a significant part in their own story and its meaning, such as Father or Donor, or the tenant as Victim; or blend their stories with those of others; or who adopt multiple roles within their stories. This may be illustrated by contrasting the stories of C and F. Both are stories of coming into the organisation and seeking to transform the culture and performance of their respective service areas. However, as noted above, F's story is also one of personal struggle to overcome the effects of former Villains and to fulfil current organisational expectations of a manager, through eventually passing the numerous tests posed by senior managers (Donors). They achieve the transformation of their service by becoming the manager the organisation requires them to be. In contrast, C'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. It seems like a long time ago now (p) and I suppose it's developed over time really, and, [coming from my background], it was in my vision, you know, of how are we going to do things.'

Despite telling superficially similar stories about similar managerial roles, a narrative role analysis reveals significant differences in F and C's managerial experience and identity work.

Discussion

This paper has presented a new narrative method for researching identity. It has presented data from stories elicited from managers at a Social Landlord and demonstrated some of the specific ways in which insight into manager identity can be gained through a syntagmatic narrative analysis: of the chosen story, of the story plot, and of the narrative roles adopted and ascribed to others. Having set out some specific examples of such narrative analysis I outline some particular ways in which such methods can further develop understanding of manager identity.

First, the method offers a rich way of gaining insight into personal manager workplace identities, the different ways in which similar manager roles are conceptualised and experienced, and the different responses to similar manager functions. Narratives enable us to understand and contextualise people's beliefs regarding what they believe to be most significant about themselves (Humphreys and Brown, 2002). I have illustrated how the choice of stories themselves may give insight into how individual managers privilege different manager functions, such as delivering tasks, managing staff relationships or responding to tenant need. Analysing manager stories in terms of plot structure and narrative characters offers more granular detail, by attending to the specific ways in which managers choose to author themselves and others: as Heroes on personal or organisational quests, as Donors and Helpers to other organisational Heroes, as loyal servants or as responsive agents; and the ways in which others are involved, influence and impinge on the manager: as Fathers recognising the manager's qualities, as Victims to be defended or Villains to be challenged, as Helpers and Donors to be assisted by. Syntagmatic narrative analysis helps to reveal not simply the range of different functions involved in management, but the range of possible meanings of management, and the range of ways in which managers fulfilling similar organisational roles can choose to define themselves: for example, as experienced practitioners (B, D and N); as embodying their service area and its mission and values (H and J); as embodying transformational change (C, T) as a loyal servant of the organisation (K, L); as one who is responsible for supporting and managing staff (P, O); as one who has learned to become the right kind of manager (F, R, W). In other words, such analysis reveals both the potential ambiguities of a manager position and the ways in which managers make sense of such ambiguities through narrative (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010).

Second, syntagmatic narrative analysis offers further insight into some of the processes of identity work through which managers construct workplace identities. For example, plot and role analysis reveal some of the discursive resources which managers draw on to construct and sustain their managerial identities. In particular, such analysis offers insight into the ways in which managers respond to, and position themselves within or against organisational narratives (Beech and Johnson, 2005; Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012). Some managers draw on the organisation (or senior managers) to construct and sustain identity, but in different ways: as a narrative reflection of their own development (G); as a model of a good manager (F, O); as a setter of tasks to fulfil (K, L); as a verifier of the manager and their qualities (F, H, J, R, W and I (unsuccessfully)). Others draw on personal meanings which are not constructed as dependent on organisational verification: C and T bring their own vision to their service areas; B and N draw on their practitioner experience to construct particular – but distinct – manager identities; M and V claim to know better than their own managers what their managerial role and responsibilities, and organisational values should be.

Third, the method offers further insight into the nature of management. Manager stories can highlight the nature of the relationships between organisational actors, for example through ascription of particular narrative roles to other actors (Sims, 2005; Whittle et al., 2009). A, F

and S illustrate a particular dimension of this: by characterising former managers as Villains, they position themselves against ‘bad management’ whilst demonstrating organisational loyalty. It was also notable that almost all managers referenced, at some point, an organisational discourse that the organisation works as one for the benefit of its customers; however, A, H, J and T all told (current) stories involving services or teams that were not perceived to be fully included or recognised, while M and V’s stories involved criticism of manager decisions and values. Manager stories may therefore reveal organisational tensions which managers may not explicitly state, or even be aware of. Another issue particularly highlighted by several Panorama manager stories is the issue of ‘becoming a manager’. Story analysis reveals both a wide range of responses to this experience and uncovers a range of factors at play in ‘becoming a manager’. Constructing and sustaining a managerial identity requires verification from others (Beech, 2008; Down and Reveley, 2009; McDonald et al., 2008; Watson, 2008) but Panorama managers demonstrate a range of means of self-verification. Managers sought direct verification from different sources: from their team (P), from their line manager (R, W) or from the organisation (H, I and M who sought different salaries of job titles). Managers also sought verification more indirectly. G constructs a managerial identity based on their willingness to grow and develop along with the organisation, positioning themselves in contrast to their team who continue to work ‘how we’ve always done it’ and their manager who lacks operational experience. H and J interpret organisational recognition of their service areas as verification of their own managerial roles. O’s text suggests a more personal form of self-verification: in response to their inability to fulfil team expectations of the manager as expert, O constructs an alternative managerial identity which draws on organisational discourses of management and their willingness to take up opportunities for management qualifications in order to construct a managerial identity: ‘Having the qualifications does help. I know (p) experience is, is important as well but I think if you’ve got the balance it does help.’ Finally, a related issue is the transition from practitioner to manager (Bolton, 2005; Currie and Brown, 2003; Warhurst, 2011), and how managers seek to incorporate their practitioner experience into their new role. Panorama managers reflect a range of responses: by continuing to position themselves as practitioners within the team (D), by constructing a facilitative role for other practitioners (N) or by constructing a leading and co-ordinating role (B).

Conclusions

This paper has set out to demonstrate the benefits of adopting a syntagmatic narrative analysis approach to identity studies, based on the work of Propp. Using story elicitation, managers are invited to tell stories about themselves, and analysis of the plot structures and narrative characters of their stories reveal how managers draw on recognisable narrative forms to construct and position themselves in relation to common management functions and in relation to other organisational actors; and reveals the range of differences in both manager identities and identity work undertaken.

The method has notable limitations, not least that it focuses on identity as a narrative accomplishment and not as a social accomplishment through interactions with others (Down and Reveley, 2009; Harding et al., 2014; McInnes and Corlett, 2012). Nor does it attend to the polyphonic and contested nature of stories across different moments and contexts (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; Cunliffe et al., 2004; Reedy, 2009). However, the method does offer a number of worthwhile benefits for both organisations and researchers. First, the

method is a particularly effective way of researching the plurality of manager experience: by inviting managers to tell any story of their choice the method reduces the likelihood of premature framing by the researcher (Flick, 2009; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), and also enables investigation and analysis as to the choice of story and its meaning for the manager. Second, the method offers a powerful and colourful illustration of the extent of the plurality of both organisational stories (Boje, 2001) and manager experience. Given the freedom to represent themselves as they wished, Panorama managers chose a wide variety of stories reflecting a range of different personal experiences, and narrative analysis revealed a further diversity of meanings for individual managers. Within the ‘uniformity [and] repetition’ (Propp, 1968: 21) of the archetypal ‘manager as hero’ the managers described a wide range of ‘multiformity, picturesqueness and colour’ (Propp, 1968: 21): as the hero on a personal quest; as loyal subject; as super-hero; as vulnerable and unrecognised hero; as the Donor or Helper to other heroes. Such plurality draws attention to the need to attend to the particulars of individual cases (Siggelkow, 2007) as well as seeking commonalities and integration through theory and practice. It especially draws attention to the ambiguities and complexities inherent in organisational life and the manager role, and to the role of individual manager and the identity work they undertake in order to make sense of their roles. Rather than seeking to define and conceptualise such complexities of the manager role, we may need to further attend to the individual experiences, sensemaking and identity work of those occupying such roles (Harding et al., 2014). Finally, the method offers a means of achieving what Sanger calls the ‘creative rupturing’ (Sanger, 1996: 94) of participant discourse by the researcher, which is necessary to achieve new understandings. By reading – and re-creating – manager stories as classic folk tales this research offers a new way of seeing, interpreting and experiencing organisational life for both managers and researchers, which may in turn lead to further creative insight into the nature of the manager role.

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