'Should I stay or should I go?' Exploring leadership as practice in the middle management role

Abstract

This article explores dilemmas in middle manager work through the perspective of leadership-as-practice. An autoethnographic account is outlined of how a dilemma is addressed by a middle manager. The account shows how a dilemma faced by a middle manager needs to be understood as situated within the flow of activity that is itself nested in a context of roles and relationships as well as the strategic context. The authors show how the outcome of the dilemma became accommodated within the emergent practice in the organisation with no sense of recognition of the dilemma's impact. The notion of middle manager agency within leadership-as-practice is explored through aspects of moral disengagement. The article problematizes two aspects: firstly, that normative ethical theorizing that has been unable to cater for the complexity of middle manager work seen through the practice lens; second, that traditional notions of leadership as 'leader' appears absent from the narrative, yet seen through the lens of leadership-as-practice, with attention to context, agency, activity and outcomes, a very different perspective can be seen. Finally, the article gives insight and structure to researching leadership-as-practice.

'[Almost] paying for prostitutes … '

> 'This was the occasion when I found myself at the point of being pressurised to hand over cash to entertain some of our customers in a [European city] nightclub…Suddenly what seemed like a very straightforward way of getting to know ones customers got out of hand and almost ended up with me paying for prostitutes in a bar in [European city]. My Sales Director said "you should pay for the champagne, it will only be a

couple of hundred quid." I was concerned that sooner or later someone was going to ask for money for a girl'

This extract is taken from the reflections of a middle manager, Samuel, recalling a dilemma where he found himself in a nightclub and under pressure from his colleagues and his customers to enable the entertainment to continue. We could have examined this as a follower responding to leader instructions and the pressure on him to do as instructed. Alternatively we could look at him as a leader making ethical decisions and examine his authenticity and morality. Building on Western's (2008: 15) encouragement to look 'awry' from this predominant leader-follower orientation to leadership studies this article explores middle manager work through the perspective of leadership-as-practice (LAP) (Carroll, Levy and Richmond, 2008; Realin, 2011). The focus on practice shifts attention away from the essentialist individual as 'leader' to that of agent undertaking a role within a flow of activity oriented to achieve an outcome. The dilemma, as an extraordinary event, is used to help explore the interrelationship of middle manager agency, context, activity and outcome. It is this interrelationship that is the focus of this article.

Middle managers are a most interesting group to examine in the context of LAP due to the nature of their role in organisations. The excerpt of Samuel above illustrates the pressure he was under to keep his customers happy for the greater good of the organisation, and arguably for his career. The agency scope of the middle manager in the context of the organizational structure is most important. A prevalent role expectation of middle managers reflects a vertical relationship with senior managers 'supplying information upwards and consuming decisions passed downwards' (Balogun, 2003: 70). This anticipated relationship exists in expectations of responding and serving. Middle managers have been shown to be vulnerable, ambiguous and insecure, seeking to protect their role, protect their identity, emerging as a block to change, with a concurrent desire to maintain and advance their careers

(Huy, 2002). Rather than seeing middle managers as a blockage in the system that 'need to be co-opted side-lined or disposed of' (2002: 32), they have also been shown to be a significant asset (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994; Floyd and Lane, 2000; Huy, 2002; Balogun, 2003; Mantere, 2008; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). Balogun and Johnson (2004, 2005) and Mantere (2008) have shown that middle managers are undertaking complex processes of sense-making, both formally within vertical relationships with senior managers, and concomitant with horizontal informal relationships with peers engaging in the operational activity (Balogun and Johnson, 2005) this being in light of, and sometimes in spite of, the ambiguity and insecurity of their situation. Connected with processes of sense-making informed by the structural situation in which they find themselves, middle managers are also affected by structural processes of moral disengagement (Anand, Ashforth and Joshi, 2004) and consequential impact on moral identity (Detert, Trevino and Swetzer, 2008). Anand et al have highlighted a complementary set of socialisation and rationalisation dynamics where managers (and employees) engage in activities that have become socialised as normal, and rationalised as not affecting personal morality through denial of responsibility, denial of harm and denial of victims (2004: 41). Further the notion of moral awareness also becomes learnt through time, gradually leading to an amoral norm as a consequence of becoming socialized into organizational practices (Anand et al, 2004). In the context of the middle manager role Dean, Beggs and Keane (2010) showed that pressure was applied to middle manager roles to bend the rules from their line managers, clients and more broadly the organisation. The notion of 'pressure' alludes to aspects of context such as relationships, desired outcomes, power, conflicts, morality, hierarchy, espoused and unstated assumptions. Kan and Parry (2004), in an examination of the work of nurses and hybrid middle managers, suggest these aspects can be seen as a continual emergent and complex process of reconciling paradox. In essence the antecedent influences embedded in the everyday practices that shape the agency of middle

manager work. This is the focus of our article. We seek to examine the narrative of a middle manager situated in a flow of activity (a study tour of European organizations) to achieve a particular outcome (establish strong relationships with customers) that contains a dilemma (being drawn in to purchasing prostitutes). We shall look at the organisational context, the roles and relationships affecting the activity. We also look at the outcome of the resolved dilemma, and the way this outcome impacts on the context and successive emergent practice. In this way we offer forward an examination of middle manager work through the lens of LAP.

The article first outlines the terrain of LAP. We provide a focus on the ontology of practice and distinguish LAP from strategy as practice through its orientation of relational activity to achieve outcomes. After summarising the dearth of empirical research on LAP we establish the necessity of an ideographic approach. The research method of co-constructed autoethnography is detailed. We show how the method gives an emphasis to crafting an aesthetic narrative that seeks verisimilitude and insight to middle manager work. The narrative is constructed around a dilemma. However we do not simply examine the dilemma. Rather we situate this within the flow of activity of the study tour; which is itself situated within the organisational context. We conclude by suggesting that middle manager work seen through the lens of LAP needs to be understood as a context-activity-outcome relationship. So rather than simply seeing the dilemma as a discrete case study exploring, for example, ethical leadership and moral disengagement in the context of middle manager work (see for example Holden, 2000; Seidman, 2004; Trevino and Nelson, 2014) we problematize the simplicity of such examination. We suggest research needs to view middle manager agency within this relationship from which theory building can be constructed to understand middle manager work.

Leadership-as-Practice

The notion of leadership-as-practice (LAP) has recently emerged as a fruitful area for research (Denis, Langley and Rouleau, 2005; Carroll, Levy and Richmond, 2008; Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2010; Raelin, 2011; Endrissat and Von Arx, 2013). It represents a movement away from an essentialist perspective of the leader with a set of acquired competences and traits; and towards a relational notion of on-going becoming within the situated practice of leadership relationships. Heidegger's metaphor of *building* and *dwelling* (explored in Carroll et al, 2008) gives a rich sense of this distinction. The *building* is seen as the applied outcome of competencies and reflects how an 'intentional actor act[s] on the world they stand separate from to achieve preconceived ends and objectives' (2008: 367). In contrast the *dwelling* is a focus on 'being in the world'; a sense of an 'intimate familiarity that one has inhabiting a home' (Chia and McKay, 2007: 230). The dwelling perspective of leadership as practice emphasises meaning and activity informed through participative engagement between individuals – 'the incorporated products of historical practice' (2007: 231). Dwelling also offers up to us the expectation of an ongoing and emergent dynamic that has an eye on the future in the present (Dall'Alba, 2009); a sense of an outcome orientation. In this way we interpret *dwelling* as a context of history, roles and relationships, a continual flow of activity, future outcome oriented, that is recursively produced yet has an emergent quality.

Practice can be seen as non-deliberative collective action emerging from mutual, discursive, recurring patterns in the moment and over time among those engaged in the practice (Raelin, 2015).   It draws on a history of relational enagements that repeat and develop over time. However it is more than relationships – as with relational leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006). The practices are within a community and have been suggested (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina & von Savigny, 2001) to be tacit and historically developed and encompass processes of managing, problem-solving, 'non-deliberate practical coping' (Chia and Holt, 2006: 643) focused on technical and relational aspects of the work of the community. Raelin (2015: 4)

suggests that the activity of the practice is: orderly, yet at times irregular and provisional; mastering the accomplishment of 'daily mundane work but in surmounting unexpected challenges and disruptions'; a sense of coping with uncertainty and emergence (Chia and Holt, 2006). Drawing on the work of Hatch (1999) Raelin utilizes the metaphor of Jazz improvisation to capture the essence of practice: 'The directions [the tune] will take are only decided in the moment of playing and will be redetermined each time the tune is played' (1999: 85). The Jazz metaphor also allows us to consider the socio-historic influences that shape meanings and activities that precede each session together, the structure of music, the materiality of the instruments and the relationship between the musicians and their instruments, aspects of power and agency, and identities that are sustained and emerge as a consequence of the activity and being part of the activity.

It is the focus on action and interaction that is the ontology of practice. Woods gives voice to a shift in leadership theory away from the essentialist ontology 'of things' (2005: 1103) to a process ontology where 'leadership is always enmeshed in social practice rather than in a clear-cut, definite figure' (2005: 1116). Similarly Cravani et al. suggest that adopting a view of leadership (and organizations) as constructed by processes rather than as entities would enable theorizing on 'problematic' aspects of leadership manifestation in a much more nuanced way than does mainstream leadership literature' (2010: 84). However, we suggest that the theoretical work on LAP with suggestions toward process theorizing to date has not been clear on the distinction of LAP from, for example, strategy as practice, or even practice studies. LAP cannot be simply cultural situated relational activity and interaction. How does this become leadership? Or is there no distinction between leadership and interaction? This line of questioning led to Alvesson and Sveningsson's (2005) notion of the disappearing act of leadership.

We suggest that the ontology of LAP must be future oriented – towards a direction. We

draw here on the useful work of Drath, McCauley, Palus, Van Velsor, Oconnor and McGuire (2008) who challenged the orthodoxy of the leadership tripod 'leader or leaders, followers, and a common goal they want to achieve' (Bennis, 2007: 3, cited in Drath et al, 2008). Instead they argue persuasively for an outcome orientation and suggest the focus should be to answering the question 'how [do] people who share work in [a community] produce direction, alignment and commitment' (2008: 636). Drath et al (2008) echo the perspective of LAP's commitment to collective enactments and place emphasis on the pattern of collective behaviour rather than to the behaviour of certain individuals. Here they are seeking to move attention away from the leader(s) and followers and the essentialist orientation of the tripod. Cravani et al. support the future outcome orientation but caution against viewing outcomes as an end or result, or 'happy endings'; rather for it to be seen as 'continuously evolving modes of interaction [...] never ending stories' (2010: 81). Larsson and Lundholm assert a similar perspective through their empirical practice based research, viewing leadership as future oriented influence processes constructed in interaction with organising processes (2013: 1102). Their work though is 'tripod' based. Nevertheless the interaction aspect whether leader-follower or various actors in relational interaction gives emphasis to agency which for this article we need to give prominence.

The argument by Archer (1995, 2000) for a malleable interaction between structures and agency speaks strongly as an interpretive frame for understanding LAP. Nicolini (2013), in a similar way to Wenger (1998), asserts that identity and agency are generated from a particular practice – a sense of socio historic structures that precede agency (Archer, 1995). Yet at the same time certain individuals have disproportional agency within the structure; a consequence of role and sources of power emanating from the structure, but also from the 'human agency' of the individual (Archer, 2000). Archer (1995) argues that the malleable interplay allows for both morphostasis – recursivity, and morphogenesis – emergence. In this way the Jazz

metaphor can be seen to speak to patterns and flow of activity yet also allow novelty drawn from individuality contained within the broader structure. The music and the musicians develop a collective sense of knowing, being and doing of coordinated activity that produces an outcome; an outcome that is similar but not identical. New musicians may join the ensemble for just one playing or become permanent. In both instances they can bring something new, or unexpected that the pattern absorbs. If permanent their 'legitimate role' allows them to observe and engage thereby becoming central members of the community through their participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), sharing a common sense of knowing, being and doing that is the practice of the jazz band. Yet the Jazz band's knowing, being and doing heralds from a broader jazz community; a community where technical skills and relational skills have been developed along with a sense of the socio historic and cultural shared background of jazz.

Crevani and Endrissat (2015) make salient the importance of the unit of analysis in researching LAP. It focuses on the micro, relational activity set within a distinct context. It could be an examination of recurrent activity (Nicolini, 2009). It could be examination of patterns that are disturbed by exceptional events. It could be an examination of power sustaining recurrent activity or power causing emergence, and where power lies, how it is used and by whom. It could also be an examination of the interaction of materiality with structures and agency – such as through activity theory (Engeström, 2001; Blackler, 2009). With LAP research at a very early stage it is valuable to illustrate both a substantive insight to a unit of analysis but also to point to methodological development. It is anticipated that approaches to researching LAP will not be nomothetic, seeking generalizations and regularity, but be ideographic placing emphasis to ethnographic forms of research. To build theory there would be an expectation to look to compare contextual examinations of units of analysis and 'once recognized, these situational patterns can become useful in understanding other contexts and

even in constructing new theory' (Raelin, 2011: 203). The unit of analysis we focus on here is middle manager work. Not singularly the activity (such as with Larsson and Lundholm, 2013, or Cravani et al, 2010), but to understand the activity of middle manager work set within the interrelationship of middle manager agency with context, activity and outcome. In this way we draw on Nicolini's notion of zooming in and out and repositioning the analysis 'so that certain aspects of the practice are foregrounded while others are bracketed' (2009: 1392). We shall examine the dilemma from the perspective of a middle manager, Samuel. This unit of analysis not only is the focus of the research but it also structures the co-constructed autoethnographic approach.

Co-constructedAutoethnography

It is not just that there is a dearth of empirical research of LAP as activity, but there is limited examination of the micro detail in middle manager work (such as a dilemma) (example of notable exceptions are: Dennis et al, 2006; Ford 2006; Cravani et al, 2010; Ford and Harding, 2011; Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2014; Larsson and Lundholm, 2010, 2013). In part this reflects limited attention to activity and the notion of LAP. However it is also related to the difficulties of accessing data to give insight to a topic that may be difficult to recall – a middle manager able to take a hyper reflexive (Tracy, 2013) engagement with the tacit, everyday ordinariness in which the dilemma is situated. Additionally in part it reflects the nature of the topic – speaking about dilemmas in terms of aspects of ethical considerations and confidentiality. Randall and Gibson (1990) highlighted the problematic nature of engaging managers in exploring ethical dilemmas.

We have used co-constructed autoethnography as outlined by Boyle and Parry (2007, and Parry and Boyle 2008). '[A]utoethnographies can provide first-hand accounts of taboo topics such as moral dilemmas and highly-charged emotional situations in the workplace [and] can open the door to these fascinating and hugely important organizational phenomena'

(2008: 186). Kempster and Stewart (2010) have applied co-constructed autoethnography to an understanding of leader becoming. We apply their approach here; an approach that seeks a partnership between respondent and researcher as a form of co-researching. The respondent, Samuel, does 'more than a process of recounting and reflecting' (2010: 210). He becomes inquirer and gains a 'social and relational sense of himself' – seeking to achieve a hyper-reflexive outcome with regard to the dilemma. Kempster and Stewart emphasise the importance of respondent triangulation (Janesick, 1998). For Samuel he obtains an integrated and coherent understanding of the dilemma, thereby providing personal validity – 'life and narrative [being] inextricably connected' (Kempster and Stewart, 2010, p. 210).

The personal validity is also of much significance to the research. The insights drawn from the co-constructed autoethnographic narrative need to be reliable as a trustworthy account; but it also needs to be plausible. Does the narrative provide a sense of versimilitude? Does it 'pull [you the reader] in' (Watson, 2000: 497)? Does it resonate to our own sense of similar experiences? Can we imagine being in the shoes of Samuel and connecting with the issues of the dilemma? The plausibility then evokes in 'readers [a] feeling that the experience described is life-like, believable, and possible' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 751). The approach to autoethnography used in this research is evocative or emotional ethnography (Anderson, 2006). Evocative autoethnographic research seeks to '[move] the reader to feel the feelings of the other' (Denzin, 1997, p. 228). We see much value in enabling a reader to stand in the shoes of the author to get a deep insight into the experience, a sense of verisimilitude. Drawing on Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont, 'the ethnographic imperative [is] seeking to understand and make sense of complex social worlds' (2003: 57). If the account seems plausible then the autoethnographic approach has been able to illuminate insights and patterns that may help the development of process theorising (Carroll et al, 2008). In the context of

this research, we are seeking to offer up a plausible account of the interrelationship of middle manager agency with context, the flow of activity and outcome(s).

Ethical considerations are most relevant to this research. The narrative is a reflective acount. Working with Samuel we have taken a most keen eye to anonymity. We have changed or omitted names, removed locations, made generic the industry, and have sought to create ambiguity with regard to dates of events. However Samuel's recall of the feelings, reactions and ethical considerations have been pursued overtly. We have been aware through this process not to push too far, being cognisant of the potential risks when revealing highly personal aspects that might generate vunerability (Ellis and Bochner, 2006; Doloriert and Sambrook, 2009).

What we seek to present is a middle-manager's narrative. It is retrospective and therefore not an examination of practice as it occurs. For example there is limited attention to the detail examination, for example, of the interaction of individual activity with materiality and how each is infomed by a preunderstanding drawn from the social-historic context. The narrative emergent from the research process seeks to reveal broadly LAP in order to see the dilemma and middle manager work from a very different persective: namely to explore context, roles, flow of activity and outcomes. We now turn to the research process that structured the narrative around these elements.

The Research Process

The dilemma we focus on here was explored initially in research undertaken by [co-author] as part of a larger data set examining critical incidents in ethical decisions of middle managers. Samuel described a number of incidents of which this dilemma was one. A second interview occurred with Samuel to explore his interest in participating in a deep exploration of the di-

lemma. In this discussion [co-author] outlined the nature of LAP and how the dilemma had the potential to provide insight. From this, the five thematic areas we wanted to explore in the subsequent conversations were developed: first, the context of the organisation including its history, purpose, structure, processes and activities, values; second the roles and relationships with colleagues; third, how the dilemma was situated in the flow of activity – the story of the study tour, describing what occurred prior to the dilemma; fourth, the detail of the dilemma in terms of what happened, who participated, where did it occur, what was said, what actions occurred and who instigated these, what emotions were present, and what was the dilemma, decision and subsequent actions; fifth, the outcome in terms of what happened subsequently, the learning from the dilemma and any changes to activities related or unrelated to the dilemma. The third conversation between [co-author] and Samuel occurred three weeks later and followed the above five areas. It lasted for 70 minutes. The conversation was recorded and subsequently transcribed and sent to Samuel. A fourth conversation then followed, exploring the transcript to primarily explore emerging themes and check on aspects of concern to Samuel in the transcript – these aspects were subsequently redacted. [Co-author] created the first narrative using the 5 thematic areas that structured the transcript; but also he identified a set of frameworks to be used to interrogate the narrative (Ellis, 2004). This was sent to Samuel. About a week later the fifth conversation explored this narrative and [co-author] applied ideas from relevant theories (covertly) to help extend Samuel's reflection on the narrative – seeking to develop a hyper-reflexive disposition with Samuel. Samuel subsequently revised and edited the narrative and sent it back to us. From this narrative a set of themes related to middle manager agency were developed. This was sent to Samuel from which a sixth and final conversation took place to check out whether thematic areas resonated to his sense of the experience. There was a final refinement of these themes.

'[Almost] paying for prostitutes …' – continued

The analysis of Samuel's experience has provided insight into the interrelationship of middle manager agency, context, flow of activity and outcome(s). These are divided into 5 aspects. The first two aspects are: #1: Strategic Context – the situation of the organisation; #2: Structural Context – roles and relationships. The next two are the activity and this is divided into: #3: The Episode – the study tour; and #4: The dilemma. The final aspect is #5: The Outcome. From the LAP perspective the dilemma as activity is not Samuel's alone. It is 'nested' in the flow of activity as part of the study tour. The study tour activity is informed by roles and relationships of the structural context, and the strategic organisational context setting the rationale for the activity. The outcome of the dilemma has an emergent and ongoing impact on the context and practice. The middle manager is an actor within this process. The autoethnographic account has been examined through the lenses of a number of frameworks from which we suggest agency activity manifest within Samuel's narrative. We outline this process in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

We draw here on Nicolini who enocurages 'an eclectic set of sensitizing concepts that allow different features of practices and their associations to come to the fore' (2009: 1396). This table is used to frame the structure of examining each of the 5 LAP process themes. The narrative content is described through Samuel's autoethnogrphic voice. Following which we briefly develop the agency activity through discussion of extant theory for context, roles and relationships, and episode. Scope in this article limits depth of review for these areas and there exists research attention to these areas already which we draw on. We give particular attention to the dilemma and the outcome as the two key apsects in order to help explore micro acitivty and its impact on the outcome. Of importance is to note that the dilemma and the outcome are necessarily impacted by the three previous LAP process themes. Our use of many concepts

and theories reflects Nicolini's enocuragement to use 'an eclectic set of sensitizing concepts that allow different features of practices and their associations to come to the fore' (2009: 1396).

Process Theme # 1: Organisational strategic context

>'Thinking back on that crazy moment in the night club, it all started many months earlier when I was appointed as a fairly junior marketing manager. My boss brought me in to support the movement of the business away from the high street that had been the business model for [15 plus years], to working with the out of town big guys. We were at that point the largest distributor of this product in Europe. So this was a major change for us, and our industry, with the market going through some fundamental changes and acknowledging that the power in the market place was changing quite dramatically. The buying decisions were now done by fairly powerful centrally based people in buying groups. This enormous shift in power is the key issue shaping this incident. The pressure was on to establish relationships with these organisations. We had to learn how to work with centralised large buying groups placing some huge orders. They were managed by professional buyers, people with enormous power and a lot of money to spend. From where we sat looking at our market data we were heading for A&E if we didn't develop these new relationships and fast. These buyers gathered at our invitation in [European city].'

The context shapes Samuel's expectations and direction of his agency. It speaks to a perceived strategic necessity to fundamentally change structures, systems and practices of the organisation. Away from serving high street shops with multiple buyers of limited power, to serving a few corporations through buyers embedded in buying centres. Samuel, along with his colleagues is thus situated in a moment of discontinuous change that is generating ambiguity and uncertainty. Much has been written of such middle manager contexts, which we have pointed to earlier in this article (for example: Floyd and Lane, 2000; Huy, 2002; Balogun and Johnson, 2004, 2005)

Process Theme # 2: Organisational structural context – Roles and responsibilities

>So, there I am as a new junior marketing manager and I knew I had to make these relationships happen. My boss, the managing director [MD], who had previously been the marketing director, appointed me. He'd

come from a big corporate retail background and was very experienced in dealing with these large buying groups. I remember he and I talking at the time and he said 'we have to get to know these people in a very different way, these are powerful buyers' and I think he even used the expression 'got to be prepared to wine and dine these people'. There was always a sense that we lived in a world where bribery was almost the done thing. You had to find some way to bring these people on board. It wasn't just about a straight financial transaction, but rather a relationship based on this transaction.

Now I must say although it was high pressure from [name of boss], it was also high support, he was an extremely supportive guy. He believed in me. He'd recruited me from another organisation to come in and do what I had to do there. So I felt like the chosen one. So I guess I felt that I needed to repay the belief in me. He set the bar very, very high but he did it in a way that was highly motivational. He didn't manage by fear. His general view was that we're in this together, this is what we've got to achieve, this is an exciting place to be, the world is changing, we've got to grab our part of this and we've got to get out there and change our business model.

He was under pressure of course. In turnover terms if we could crack it with these buyers it would take us into the stratosphere. The business was owned by a big venture capital group – they could see where the future lay. My boss sat on the Board and I reported directly to the MD. I did not sit on the Executive Board. I sat on the Senior Management Team so the day to day management was a SM Team focusing on marketing, sales, and a very big presence in distribution with regional distribution managers, the finance director, sales director and company secretary.

There were several hundred people below me in the organisation. We had a fairly small centralised marketing division, but that's another thing, we were new to the business. I was brought in to beef up the marketing side as opposed to work with sales. We were fairly new so my reporting line, which was very unusual, was direct to the MD. I was the only non-Board member as such that reported directly to the MD. He recognised what we needed to do and how important this was going to be in the future to the business.

This structure was not without its tensions. The business had grown up as a regional structure serviced by a major distribution centre. There were regional directors who controlled their regions like little fiefdoms. Small van deliveries would scuttle around to all the mom and pop shops. There was a palpable tension in the business. If we succeeded in [European city] the shift to centralised distribution to the distribution centres of the large corporates would end these fiefdoms. The business model was on the cusp of changing

quite dramatically. So there was tension but also great excitement as we checked in to our hotel in [European city], suited and booted.

I was not use to this sort of hospitality and entertainment. My boss was the one used to this sort of thing. I came from a background of being formal, a fairly regimented way of working. The relational building, the getting pally with someone beyond the transactions was alien to me in my business life. I had kept these two worlds very separate; but not on this occasion. I went into it fairly eyes wide open but it very rapidly started to go somewhere I didn't want to be.

Samuel's role is one of enabling the strategic change (described in #1) to occur. His newness to the role provides a different context to his agency. His colleagues in the regional 'fiefdoms' have invested much of themselves, their careers and identities to the status quo – they are part of the socio-historic practice. While for Samuel he has much to gain through enabling this strategy to occur; he has been appointed to make this happen. He has a sense of being 'the chosen one', appointed directly by the MD and reporting directly to the MD. The work of Balogon and Johnson (2004, 2005) along with Mantere (2008) is useful here. They speak of the middle manager role of sense-making: interpreting communications from senior managers and converting this into activity. Sonenshein (2009) develops this further through the notion of framing. Interpreting his work for our purposes, if a middle manager is unable to construct meaning congruence with the senior management view as a result of socio historic practice they will frame interpretation in a different direction. For Samuel he frames his role and sense-mkaing of his activity in congruence with senior management.

Process Theme # 3: The Episode

So everyone is together for 5 days. The buyers had limited knowledge of the product and its placement in major retail warehouses so it was a 'study tour'. With a base in [European City] we flew into [City] we then got on a coach that took us around various parts of [country], through [another country] and back into [host country] ending up in [host city]. I seem to remember that there was about 10 of them all together and about half a dozen or so of us including the MD, sales director, some of the regional managers, and the regional distribution guys.

We were travelling on a coach mixing with everyone. Conversations flowed easily and very naturally. We spoke about all sort of things we had seen on the tour; but also about our families, about unexpected incidents and comments, it was a great success – really interesting and great fun. Certainly the fairly lavish evening meals that were laid on in some really nice places as we toured around helped, as did the 4 and 5 star hotels.

So to the day of the incident. We had a full day in [European city] looking at hypermarkets with a final briefing in the hotel by our team. My boss presented me with an envelope with several hundreds of pounds in it and said 'look after this money (was about a £1000). It's to make sure that no one is without a drink'. He said 'this is just to make sure that people are well looked after'. As everything had been paid for I kept thinking what do we need cash for?

We had booked a meal and a show at a well-known bar and all had gone well. I think it was actually one of the buyers who said 'I know a place where we can go and get a drink'. That was fine and with enthusiasm we all piled into a series of taxis and went off to some suburb in [European city] and ended up at [Name of Club]. It was fairly obvious when we turned up what sort of place it was.

The episode is a flow of activity. Samuel is but one actor in this episode made up of numerous moments of exchanges, silences, reflections, laughter, observations and so forth. It follows learned prompts and cues, signals to explore aspects further as well as signals to go no further. The fine-grained detail of interation is beyond this autoethnographic account. The salient point for us interpreting this episode is how Samuel frames this as aligned activity to which he (and perhaps his colleagues) are committed to building relationships – this being the common direction of the activity. In this way the argument of LAP as future oriented activity is of significance (Drath et al, 2008; Cravani, et al. 2010). We draw on the earlier discussion in the article of Drath et al (2008). We assert here that without this ontologcial anchor of the activity related to future orientation it is difficult to make sense of this flow of activity as leadership. For example, by seeking to link activity to intended and emergent outcomes it distinguishes LAP from strategy as practice, or even simply emergent muddling through (Lindblom 1959; Cravani et al., 2010). By this link with future oriented outcomes we can begin to analyse how

context, socio historic practices, relationships and roles, along with materiality and agency, connect with with the flow of activity.

Samuel's narrative of the episode of future oriented activity to achieve strong relationships with the buyers leads to the manifestation of the dilemma.

Process Theme # 4: Dilemma: 'Should I stay or should I go …'

'I remember well saying to myself 'this isn't what this money in my pocket is for'.

So, we go in and we sit down and it is fairly obvious the way this place works. There's 10 of us I think and we are sitting in two groups and suddenly there's a women between each one of us. I remember the buyers seemed au fait with what was happening. One of them with a great grin across his face shouted loudly over the music: 'these girls want a drink Samuel'. My Sales Director said 'you should pay for the champagne, it will only be a couple of hundred quid.' So cheap champagne flowed, and it just kept disappearing – a bottle would appear then disappear and we were just being charged and charged and charged. I'm not sure at what moment it became more than blatant that things were progressing out of hand and that these women were prostitutes. It was so dreadful. Another buyer leant over and said 'you've got the money, you need to look after us now' or some expression like that. That triggered action. Feeling very desperate I thought to myself, no this isn't what this money is for. I wasn't taking a moral judgement on them. I was just saying to myself if that's what they wanted to do, fine they are adults; but I'm not spending the companies money doing this. My moral judgement was that I don't want to be here. A colleague to my left tugged my arm and pointed to the door with bouncers grouped inside seemingly to keep us in! There was panic in us. I cannot recall which of us jumped first but we all just made a rush for the door. Four or five of us literally barged our way through the door and we left a handful of the buyers there. Certainly we didn't leave with everybody.

As we hit the outside I have a vague memory of heavy rain and lots of childish giggling – a mix of drunks and idiots. As we ran out into the street the great good fortune was that 2 taxis arrived. We leapt into these taxis and just scarpered back to the hotel. I'm feeling relieved that I got out of there without getting my head kicked in. There were conversations going on in the taxi saying 'Jesus Christ, what was all that about?' 'This girl had a hand on my knee'. We were comparing notes on what had happened and what

about our guests. There was a view that 'well, they got themselves into this, they can get themselves out, and we'll see them at breakfast tomorrow morning'.

I went straight to bed. Despite excessive drink I could not sleep. I was mulling it all through: worried that I had left these people high and dry; pleased to be out of there with everything intact; at least I've saved some of the cash; and then how the hell am I going to account for that which I've spent; what am I going to say in the morning and what will I say to those left there across the breakfast table?

So what happens when I get to breakfast? Absolutely nothing. No one even mentioned it. Not a thing. All were there, yep everyone. There were a lot of very bad hangovers; but no one ever, even to this day, has mentioned it.

The pressures on Samuel are palpable. We view Samuel's narrative through the work of Anand et al (2004). They describe three rationalisation processes that lead an individual toward unethical behaviour: co-optation, incrementalism and compromise. Samuel's narrative speaks of all three aspects occurring concurrently – in a sense each reinforcing the other. The prior expensive meals and expensive hotels may have implied inducements. His boss ambiguously gives him cash to keep everyone happy. He jumped in the taxi with everyone else and was with everyone in the club. He laughed and chatted with everyone as events there unfolded – co-optation. He comments on things becoming 'out of hand' in the club with him paying for more and more expensive champagne – incrementalism – through which there was an increasing level of compromise. The collective pressure towards unethical conduct is described by Anand et al. as a social cocoon, where in the work context, roles and [preceding activity] make an individual act in a manner that is different once out of the pressurised situation (2004: 46).

The dilemma then is to stay or go. As clearly put by The Clash (1982) 'Stay and their [might] be trouble; or go and it may [well] be double'. The dilemma of course does not stand alone. It is nested in the preceding discussion and the process themes. It is not simply a moral tale, as the Anand et al (2004) analysis might suggest. Samuel is an actor in this plot. He

recognises the dilemma; and recognises that he is becoming more and more drawn in and almost unable to extricate himself. He is not moralising about the people and their desires. He has a strong sense of this being wrong for him, being in this club. However he fears the consequences on himself and for the business of potentially damaging the relationship building – the leadership purpose. Yet this is not a heroic moment. It is not an ethical leader standing up for the morality of the moment. Rather the narrative has Samuel as one person amongst a group. It is the collective action that resolves the dilemma – pushing en-mass past the bouncers at the door and jumping in the taxis.

Lying in his bed, the outcome of the dilemma is examined. Samuel is weighing up various aspects. On the one hand a political rationalisation of a middle manager under significant pressure from colleagues, and from himself, seeking to not compromise the organisations goals or his promising career; wondering how he might account for the money he has spent. On the other hand there is a form of moral rationalisation. A sense of him becoming co-opted into the euphemistic language of 'entertainment' by his boss, by his colleagues and by the customers – language that enables 'individuals engaging in [unethical behaviour] to describe their acts in ways that make them appear inoffensive' (Anand et al, 2004: 47). Samuel is weighing up the nightclub incident as 'business as usual' – an amoral stance (Carroll, 1987; Buchholtz and Carroll, 2012). A form of collective socialised moral disengagement – 'normal people' behaving in an unethical way 'without apparent guilt or self-censure' (Detert, Trevino and Sweitzer, 2008: 374). Applying Anand et al's (2004) rationalisation for amoral conduct Samuel suggests a rationalisation as a denial of responsibility – what choice did I have? Such rationalisation reinforced by a denial of injury – the customers are encouraging the process, and in a sense become deserving by their actions – denial of victim. Finally, Samuel morally examines the issue of the money spent as a rationalisation of appealing to 'higher loyalties' (Anand et al, 2004: 43); there was the

necessity of buying expensive champagne and all that may come with this in order to keep the customers happy as it is in the company's interest.

It would be simplistic to assume the dilemma is singularly one of morality and moral culpability (Detert et al, 2008). As we have emphasised earlier, the dilemma is nested in an unfolding dynamic. Pressure is generated from without and from within Samuel to stay in the nightclub and continue with the 'entertainment'. It is the collective activity rather than his own agency that resolved the dilemma. In his taxi and bedtime reflections there is a greater sense of post-hoc rationalisation. This suggests the flexibility within the flow of future oriented activity in the social cocoon in which middle manager work is situated may be most restricted. Normative theories of ethical leadership do not usefully speak to the complexity of leadership-as-practice particularly in middle management work.

Process Theme # 5: Outcome – 'We just moved on'

Most immediately I had to explain all to my boss. He didn't make the evening meal and was not part of the 'entertainment'. I gave him what was left of the cash and explained what had happened. With a degree of understatement he was understandably concerned about the ongoing relationships, but he picked up at breakfast that all seemed fine. It was never mentioned between us and we never lost any business. Perhaps in fact it may have helped. We [us and the buyers] had a private moment and it was one of those unspoken situations where we don't mention it and they don't mention it. It cemented relationships but we moved on.

We invited them to the Grand National. I recall that my boss took the view that 'these people are usually better behaved and we can have a better opportunity to work with them where their partners are involved.' So we took a deliberate step, in fact I was given the brief to organise something where partners could be involved. We took away the salacious element to a more family, partner orientated event and that worked an absolute treat. We never ever went back from that, we continued to build relationships based on events that were laid on where it was buyers and purchasing directors and their partners. We changed things as it fitted better to the way we did business. We found another way of achieving something. In a sense we learnt the lesson without actually articulating it. We just moved on.

It's interesting that the classic model of leadership is that we have these moments where we are meant to stop and think there's a lot going on here and how do we take this learning point forward and re-embed it in the organisation and we'll all celebrate this learning. When really what we're actually saying is that we just bloody move on half the time in a way that we find it very difficult to articulate. We just sort of change what we do and it's implicit and not said, it's not discussed, there's no formal meeting about it, just next time we do something in this area we do it slightly differently. All have agreed without having one conversation about it.

It is weird as it reminds me of a conversation I had yesterday with a colleague in [UK city]. He said to me 'We're going about our current project very differently from the one we did in [Middle East country]'. He spoke of a different approach that a group of 7 of them were engaged in. I mentioned that the review we conducted after [Middle East country] did not bring out the need for changes. What he said struck a chord with the nightclub incident. He commented that 'we've not discussed things its rather that I keep picking up from the others that they think the same as I do, as they're now doing things a little bit differently.' So, there's a whole set of stuff going on. It's just changing.

So looking back at the nightclub thing, I hadn't made a connection myself between what happened after we got back and the very big shift in not doing that again. It was never said, it was never even implied, we just did not do that again; but we did something that was far more successful, that had a connection with the past but no one mentioned it. It was weird, we moved on but in a really interesting way, but it was never ever discussed.

The narrative perhaps has an unexpected outcome. There was no action – 'we just moved on'. This speaks most loud to aspects of practice as emergent and becoming. Through on-going participation the tacit learning is absorbed into everyday knowing, being and doing. Samuel comments that it is not discussed, not commented on, 'just that when we do it next time, we do it differently'. The dilemma within the episode has become a small part of the unstated history. He echoes a similar story of a recent incident when the same dynamic of emergent unstated change occurred – 'we moved on.'

The notion of becoming connects past, present and future. The past not only 'pushes along behind, but is also our way of being in the present, which anticipates and creates the

future' (Heidegger, 1962/1927, cited in Dall'Alba, 2009: 39). This historicity is ever present within becoming. The trajectory of becoming draws from the past. As Dall'Alba puts it: 'The past, present and future do not form a linear trajectory, then, but the past opens a range of possibilities that can be taken up in the present […] At the same time, the past becomes a resource in the present for the future' (2009: 39). Samuel's final reflections resonate with this assertion. However it is the tacit, unstated and unrecognized impact on everyday ordinary practice drawn from past events that was most striking for him. Crevani et al (2010) bring attention to the importance of seeing outcomes as 'never ending' rather than 'happy endings'. The dilemma that we have examined underscores this point. It had no happy ending or even sad ending. It was simply another moment in the flow of future oriented activity. Samuel speaks of the success of building the relationships that followed the nightclub incident. If we were to speculate on the story of success that may have been told in the organization it might speak to heroic and visionary leadership of the MD. Viewing the success through a process / practice lens, it is more of continual becoming as a consequence of a never ending flow of interactions and activity that contain endless mundane ordinary moments.

Discussion

The intent of our contribution is to seek to reframe an appreciation of middle manager work through the lens of LAP. We have outlined an approach using autoethnography that provides insight into the complexity of practice in which a middle manager is situated; notably with regard to ethics in such practice. Knowingly recognising the significant limitations of a sample of one we have sought to give a detailed appreciation of how practice is shaped and emerges through examining a dilemma.

So what does our autoethnographic narrative of a dilemma experienced by a middle manager reveal? On the one hand it asks the question: where is the leadership here? Viewed through the lens of functionalist traditional 'tripod' leadership there is arguably an absence of

a leader overtly providing directing action, making inspiring speeches, or aligning followers and engaging in supportive and encouraging acts. Quite the contrary, the narrative could be seen as 'muddling through' culminating in an incident that was spiralling out of control and instinctively fleeing from the situation. Even in the conversation afterwards between the boss and Samuel, leadership is absent – all are complicit in never mentioning it again. From a traditional lens this narrative could be a case to illustrate a lack of leadership, inviting the orthodox and rational instruction for middle managers on how to lead; there is plentiful source for this instruction from the leadership field. So perhaps there is an absence of desired and heroic leadership; and in part that is the point. The narrative illustrates the complexity of managing in the middle which is messy and reality reflects limited intentional daily leadership. Does this messiness, complexity and absence of guidance speak to the difficulty for middle managers of intentionally undertaking espoused notions of being authentic and transformational? Certainly for us it speaks to the difficulties and ambiguities of middle manager work from an ethical practice orientation when situated in the flux of events where overt and intentional senior management direction is absent.

On the other hand when the autoethnographic narrative case is viewed through the lens of LAP we can see a different interpretation. Not the absence of leadership, in the 'traditional' sense, but to look for leadership in how middle manager work is embedded in social historic context and relational activity that is being guided toward future oriented outcomes (Drath et al, 2008). The approach necessitates understanding the interrelationship of context-activity-outcomes. It links the micro detail of future oriented activity with meso organisational strategic and structural context. Samuel has a role as a middle manager in the middle of a flow of activity (a week's study tour with buyers and colleagues) seeking to achieve an outcome (namely strong relationships with buyers) that is informed by the context of the organisation (a need to shift to a new market and change internal structures) and the

context of roles and relationships. Vis-a-vis an examination of Samuel as a 'leader', being judged on his ethical conduct, in isolation from the practice and flow of activity in which he is situated. LAP would view the middle manager as agent set within this context rather than 'leader'. The muddling through, the lack of overt conscious leading in the dilemma illustrates the multiplicity of tensions, competing for attention embedded in the flow of activity – a potpourri mix of such aspects such as personal ambition, feelings of (in)security, allegiances and friendships, degree of commitment with organisational purpose, political interests and conflicts, relational tensions, moral identity and moral rationalisations. Yet the broad purpose, the future oriented sense of developing relationships with a new set of critical customers, is the Drath et al (2008) direction, alignment and commitment that weaves back and forth in to the above potpourri manifest in the dilemma. This then is at the heart of LAP as context-activity-outcomes.

In this way we suggest this narrative of a dilemma has illuminated a richer insight into both LAP and to the middle manager agency. It opens up research avenues to explore middle manager work from a very different orientation than has been previously examined.

The approach we have outlined of context-activity-outcomes offers up a frame to conduct LAP research in order to develop process theorisation. In looking at activity it differs for example from the empirical work of Crevani et al (2010) and Larsson and Lundholm (2010, 2013), because our frame overtly seeks to connect the micro flow of activity with the preceding organisational context and the emergent outcome that subsequently impacts on the emergent context and the on-going flow of activity. This frame could be applied to a range of contexts to compare process theorising to distil the commonalities of processes shaping practice manifestation. Related questions could explore: how do antecedent influences impact on the flow of future oriented activity? How is the flow of such activity recursive and becoming? How does the outcome orientation (perhaps as outlined by Drath et al 2008)

impact on activity? How is the influence of an outcome orientation connected to the context? The focus on *how* questions points to the nature of this research, that is toward process theorisation.

A gap in our approach has been that we have not drawn attention to aspects of materiality as part of our research. It is not that it was absent in the co-constructed autoethnography; the champagne was a significantly active element within the dilemma and certainly contributed to action! There is much scope here to explore the role of artefacts in LAP and it remains an area that has not been empirically developed (Sergi, in press).

Carroll et al (2008: 376) comment that LAP research 'will need to be methodologically sophisticated in order to gain access to leadership interactions' so as not to inadvertently focus on leader-centric behaviour and fall back on the tripod. We adopted the relatively unorthodox autoethnographic approach set within the context-activity-outcome orientation to view middle manager work. We hope this has resisted dropping back to such tripod tendencies. We also hope that our approach in itself provides a contribution and stimulation for similar alternative approaches to researching LAP and middle manager work. To obtain in-depth examination of the interrelationship of context, activity and outcomes to understand LAP necessitates overcoming aspects of access, confidentiality and ethical considerations. We have sought to give as much sense of Samuel's experience to generate verisimilitude and plausibility; yet Samuel has been anxious to make sure the narrative could not do harm. It illustrates significant difficulties of researching LAP. There is the need for researchers to move in and 'dwell' with the middle managers. Arguably this is unlikely for many practical reasons for both the researcher and the researched. The alternative is to engage the middle managers in creative ways to co-research (Kempster and Iszatt-White, 2013). Kempster and Iszatt-White (2013) argue for co-researching linked with leadership development. Their argument draws on the hyper reflexive nature of co-constructed autoethnography and they outline a process of engag-

ing managers in such a process of understanding the relational dynamics that shape their collective and recurring practice. There lies the strong potential to design leadership development within LAP research and as such connects with Raelin's notion that 'it makes little sense to teach leadership to individuals in a public setting detached from the very site where leadership is occurring' (2011: 204).

Conclusion

Through the co-construction process we have been partially able to address the conundrum outlined by Chia and MacKay: '[L]eadership-as-practice orients us to what is internalized, improvised and unselfconscious, then [researchers] must be prepared to work with what is unspoken, inarticulate and oftentimes unconscious' (2007: 237). Our endeavour here has been to use a dilemma to enable the unspoken and unconscious aspects in middle manager work to be articulated. We have gone further though to understand such work as situated within an interrelationship of strategic context, structural context, activity and outcomes.

A major value of LAP oriented research is that it should resonate with managers. A practice based orientation seeks to understand the activity they are engaged in every day – a focus on their realities of ordinary work. Such ordinariness is in contrast to the ideal normative models of leadership that seem extraordinary. LAP research therefore has the great opportunity of connecting with practitioners in their worlds and building insights that draw from rigorous research and are relevant to their practical endeavours.

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Table 1: LAP as Context, Activity and Outcomes

LAP process elements	Narrative content	Extant literature	Agency activity in middle manager work
#1 Organisational strategic context	Market change; emerging power of buyers	Huy, (2002); Floyd & Lane (2000);	Addressing uncertainty and ambiguity
#2 Organisational structural context: Roles and responsibilities	Structural conflict of past practice with desired change	Balogun and Johnson (2004, 2005); Mantere (2008); Sonenshein (2009)	Sense-making and framing
#3 Activity: Episode	Direction and commitment to organisational purpose	Drath et al (2008); Cravani et al, 2010:	Organising, problem solving, relationship building
#4 Activity: Dilemma	Responsibility for the whole group vs. personal integrity	Anand et al. (2004); Detert et al. (2008)	Political/ economic rationalising vs. moral rationalising
#5 Outcomes	Changing activity not recognised but emergent: 'we just moved on'	Chia (1995); Wood (2005); Kempster & Stewart (2010)	Practice becoming