# Trust and its Consequences:

A Regional Senior Manager's Experiences of Meaning Making in the Canadian Public Service

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This thesis is dedicated to my family.

I was blessed to grow up with the love and support of two parents who believed in me and challenged me to do my best.

My sisters Mary and Jane, and David, Mary's husband, have always had my back. Their love and friendship give me strength.

My niece Karen and my nephews Paul and Dave are a joy. I am so proud of how they—each in their own way—are trying to make the world a better place—and their aunt a better person.

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"You'll Never Walk Alone," from the 1945 musical, *Carousel,* inspires these acknowledgements. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to so many people, that to thank them all here would read like an interminable Academy Awards acceptance speech. This is simply an illustrative list.

So, thanks to:

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of *trust* in meaning making in the Canadian Federal Government from the perspective of a senior manager based in regional operations. I take a pragmatic approach to my research, using the methodology of reflexive narrative to inquire into my experiences in this role. This method includes reliance on a community of inquirers to validate the research.

In this thesis, I take a highly social view of trust, exploring it from a perspective that assumes that all human relating is complex and responsive. I propose an understanding of trust as a paradoxical and emergent patterning of human relating. Trust organises our experience of being together in the living present, and is simultaneously experienced individually and thus particularised, while being socially constructed and generalised, at the same time. It arises between interdependent people trying to get things done together.

Whereas an idealised understanding of trust would claim that it makes the work easier, in this thesis I argue for a more nuanced and complex position: that trust can both enable and constrain us in our work to make meaning. I point to the potentially destabilising nature of collective meaning making, as it often occurs because of a breakdown or disruption of expectations, which challenges our beliefs, values and identities and can be experienced as conflictual. Patterns of trust relationships may enable our work by supporting the collective exploration of difference and negotiation of meaning by allowing us to stay in relation with each other in a *good enough holding* of our anxiety. Strong patterns of trust relations can also be constraining where strong *we-identities* and cult values (a term pragmatist G.H. Mead used to refer to social patterns present in actions as generalisations and/or idealisations (Stacey and Mowles, 2016, p. 365)) lead individuals and groups to rely on and trust those colleagues whom they believe think like they do, to the exclusion of others.

I further argue that the use of quantitative methods in our meaning making is paradoxical in two ways. First, quantification is trusted as a source of objective information despite already being a product of our social relating to each other. Second, reliance on metrics can

be potentially destructive of trusting relationships in our work to make meaning together, as it discounts practical knowledge and judgement, which may in turn further strengthen our trust in and reliance on quantitative information.

I propose the concept of *buffering conversations* to refer to the often one-on-one conversations held outside of formal meetings, which are used to explain or soften interventions in such meetings and to negotiate, repair or maintain relationships and expectations as we continually negotiate our understanding of whether we can *trust* each other.

I contribute to an understanding of trust within a large, distributed, national public sector organisation where, because of distance and geography, face-to-face trusting relationships are difficult to build and maintain. I also identify changes to my practice, which have resulted from my inquiry into trust.

Key words:

Complex responsive processes of relating, conversation, emotions, *habitus*, meaning making, power, sensemaking, trust.

Key Authors:

Alvesson, Bourdieu, Brinkmann, Burkitt, Dewey, Elias, Foucault, Gadamer, Mead, Mowles, Scott, Stacey, Weick.

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## Introduction

I have lived a life full of books. They have been my refuge, my inspiration, my solace—and the impetus for some of the most pivotal decisions I have made. My doctoral thesis is a turning point and, naturally, started with a book. This introduction outlines my inquiry as it has evolved over my career, culminating in my thesis. I will tell you how it started and why it matters deeply to me. I aspire to contribute in some small way to how we think about the way we work together and hope that my research provides a helpful signpost on the journey.

### The Beginning of my Journey

In the 1990s, I was the new president of a not-for-profit organisation, leading a team of economists who researched and wrote about regional economic development issues. Not trained in economics, I was on a steep learning curve. In the course of visits with key stakeholders, I met with the president of a local university. At that point, I hardly knew where the pencils were in my new office, but I was full of enthusiasm and happily suggested that chaos theory (about which, of course, I had read) might be important in thinking about economic development. He gently responded that I was wrong, that it was *complexity*, not chaos that was important. I walked out of his office with a book title that would start the journey that has led me to this inquiry.

There were three books: Mitchell Wardrup's *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (1992) was his recommendation, but Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work* (1993) and Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2004) made up two other pieces of the puzzle. At that point, I was questioning why it was so difficult to *make change*, having had mixed success in my career trying to do just that. When I left the practice of law, I considered starting a PhD in change management. Despite following a different career path, this question continued to absorb me, and these three books prompted me to reflect on the challenges of working in a complex environment. My reading led me to wonder if there was a *right* balance between what I described as competitive and

collaborative behaviours, and I decided that one day that question would form my contribution to understanding the challenges of working in complexity.

I joined the public service halfway through my career, and quickly realised the overwhelming complexity of the work of government and civil servants. I described it as the cumulative interplay of the complexities inherent in the experience of citizens and other stakeholders, nationally and globally.[1] More than ever, I wanted to figure out what that might mean for how we do our work. This thesis is the result.

## Context for my Inquiry

I work in the Canadian federal public service as an assistant deputy minister, heading up the operations of one of four regions of a national department. The department is large—upwards of 25,000 employees, 2,600 in my region alone—and distributed geographically across the large expanse that is our country. We are responsible for a wide-ranging programme of work, including direct service and benefits delivery to Canadian citizens and residents and the administration of most of the government's social policies and programming. We rely extensively on virtual means of collaboration, meeting often by telephone and video conferencing. Most senior leadership is based in our Ottawa headquarters, where policy and programme development work take place. Management of service delivery operations occurs largely in the regions. This context and dynamic is the setting for my inquiry.

## University of Hertfordshire Doctor of Management Process

My research has been carried out through the Doctor of Management (DMan) Programme at the University of Hertfordshire, a three-year professional doctorate that aims to produce

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[1] In my synopsis and throughout my thesis, I refer to the work of process sociologist Norbert Elias (1991), who described the impossibility of separating the individual and society, as they are intertwined, which explained for me the complexity that I experienced in my work in the public service (p. 16).

scholar-practitioners in the field of managing in complexity. Over the course of the programme, students with varying academic experience develop their capacity to research and write at a scholarly level through the iterative processes of writing, reflexivity, reading and dialectic inquiry. The research process also draws on pragmatic ideas about the social process of learning and group analytic methods in ongoing engagement with a community of inquirers comprised of the programme's faculty and students (Mowles, 2017a, 2017b).

Students are encouraged to consider seriously their own experiences by inquiring *what is going on* for them at work from the perspective of the theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, 2005, 2010, 2012a, 2012b; Mowles, 2015a, 2015b, 2017a, 2017b; Stacey and Mowles, 2016; Stacey and Griffin, 2005; Griffin and Stacey, 2005). This theory is grounded in micro-sociology in its assumption that whatever "global patterns" we perceive in society and organisations arise solely because of what people are doing together. The approach is inspired by the complexity sciences and process sociology, notably German scholar Norbert Elias (1908/1978, 1983/1987, 1987/1991; also Elias and Scotson, 1965/1994), who suggested that micro-interactions are a helpful guide to our observation of global patterns, and drew on a theory of communication inspired by pragmatist G.H. Mead (1923, 1934/1967, 1938). The perspective we bring to bear is influenced by a theory of the social self, an idea stemming from Elias and other classical pragmatist scholars, including John Dewey (1891, 1916/1953, 1922/2017, 1929/1984, 1929/2015, 1934/2005, 1938, 1941), and a theory of power predominantly informed by Elias (1908/1978, pp. 15, 74; 1987/1991, p. 74). Elias held a relational view on power, suggesting that power is based on our interdependence with one another. Our consideration of power is also influenced by the works of the French philosopher Michel Foucault and sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu. Foucault wrote about systems of power relations in which discourses (or fields of knowledge) are constituted through disciplines or bodies of knowledge and disciplinary practices (forms of social control and possibility) (McHoul and Grace, 2007, p. 26; Foucault, 1975/1977, p. 27; 1980, p. 93). Bourdieu took a different approach, suggesting that power dynamics are culturally and

symbolically created primarily through *habitus*, which he described as socialised norms and tendencies that guide our behaviour and thinking (Thompson, ed. in Bourdieu, 1982/2003, pp. 12–14; Bourdieu, 1977/2015, pp. 78–87).

DMan researchers draw on scholars from pragmatic, hermeneutic and critical traditions who privilege power, meaning-making and social theories of the self. When this results in the problematic of complexity, such as being confronted by writers with conflicting approaches to their consideration of similar phenomena (such as Bourdieu and Foucault), we adopt what communications theorists François Lambotte and Dominique Meunier, drawing on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966), referred to as "intellectual bricolage" (2013, p. 87). As per Markham (2005), we argue for the use of disparate but related threads of information as essential to the process of analysis (pp. 814–85) with an intent to open up space for reflexivity for both author and reader, to question assumed patterns of sensemaking, and to assist in exploring different aspects of what may fundamentally be the same social phenomenon. While there is a risk that this approach could be viewed as unfocused, the multidisciplinary nature of the method works with the fine-grained similarities and differences that illuminate the research inquiry.

Finally, the work in the DMan is influenced by psychology and group analysis and a theory of emergence in which we are constantly invited to pay attention to how our identity and our practice are emerging and evolving over time (Mowles, 2017a, pp. 1-15; 2017b, pp. 217–36).

## Method of the DMan Programme

My research approach is pragmatic in the sense described by Danish psychologist Bent Flyvbjerg (2016, p. 134) and focuses on practical activities and knowledge in my work. I employ reflexive narrative inquiry, which I describe in detail in my section on methodology (see p. 145). My narrative accounts of workplace issues or events were chosen because they puzzled and/or disturbed me, prompting inquiry to better understand them. This research

method, described as "breakdown" (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 31) or "mystery" (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011), examines that which confuses or distracts the researcher in their practice.

DMan students begin to write their theses from their commencement in the programme. The thesis includes four projects and a synopsis. The first project is an experiential autobiography that provides a starting point for inquiry. Given our understanding of the self as unequivocally social, we explore how we have been formed and have come to understand the world. This first project also begins the process of identifying the research question in terms of what has been troubling in our practice. Projects Two through Four focus on workplace narratives; we trace the movement of our thought as we write and reflect on our experiences in an iterative way, incorporating discussion and challenges from our individual learning set and the larger community of DMan inquirers. The final building block of the thesis is the synopsis, in which we examine closely the research method and each project, noting the evolution of our thoughts and outlining the key arguments emerging from the work. The synopsis concludes with a discussion about our contributions to theory and practice and suggestions for future research.

Central to my work is that my research method is emergent. The programme's social perspective is illustrated by the rigorous processes of discussion, debate and challenge within the DMan community, which are fundamental to the way our research evolves and is held to account. Participation in the larger community of inquiry at residential community meetings impacts on our understanding of our workplace experience, while returning to work between meetings underlines the differences in work practices triggered by the intensive processes of thinking, discussing and writing about them.

The emergent nature of my research method is based largely on its reflexive approach to the work, expressed in the iterative processes of reading, writing and discussion. It was essential for me to pay attention to how my thinking evolved throughout the inquiry. By resisting the urge to revise my projects (other than editing them for readability), I demonstrate the reflexive turns that occurred in my thinking and practice over the development of my inquiry. Employing an emergent research method is contrary to many

doctoral theses. I did not start with a research question. It was only when I was immersed in Project 4 that I was able to articulate my animating question, which my supervisor informed me was relatively unusual, as most DMan students have identified their area of inquiry by the time they are writing their third project. However, as I trace the movement of my thinking throughout my four projects and into the synopsis, it is clear that the issue of *trust* emerged through the iterative processes of research, writing and reflection prompted by breakdowns in my understanding.

My scholarly readings also emerged from the doubts and questions triggered by my narratives, again contrasting with many academic theses, where an extensive literature review is undertaken to identify a gap in knowledge to serve as the focus for a research question. In the DMan programme, the exploration of secondary literature and discussion of theory develops through the progression of our projects, with an expectation that by the fourth project and synopsis, the student is writing at a doctoral level. As a consequence, consideration of scholarly literature and theory occurs largely towards the end of the thesis. Ultimately, I turned to many different thinkers to help me make sense of my experience, including, *inter alia*, Swedish management scholar Mats Alvesson et al. (2009, 2011, 2012, 2018), British sociologist Ian Burkitt (1999, 2012, 2014), German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/2013, 1976/1981), American political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott (1985, 1990, 1998), and American organisational theorist Karl Weick (1995).

## Outline of Projects 1 through 4

In my first project, I note my individualistic approach to life and the importance that I place on being *right* and gaining approval. I describe early experiences in planning, which prompted my fascination for how leaders *manage* change. I also share an episode from early in my tenure in my current department. Project Two describes my experience when headquarters colleagues successfully adopted and defended what I considered erroneous data. I explore the event and my interactions with others from the perspective of power as discussed by Norbert Elias (1908/1978, 1987/1991), who took a relational view on power;

Michel Foucault (McHoul and Grace, 2007; Foucault, 1975/1977, 1980) and his works on power relations; and Pierre Bourdieu (1982/2003), who wrote about the concept of *symbolic capital*. Project Three involved a negative surprise about one of our in-person service delivery sites. This exploration led me to consider the role of *surprise* and breakdowns or disruptions of our expectations in meaning making; it introduced me to the work of Karl Weick (1995), who brought the term "sensemaking" into organisational studies literature. My inquiry in this project was triggered by the word *conversation*, which I explore in the sense of Mead's (1934/1967) "conversation of gestures," drawing on the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey and Mowles, 2016). I discuss the concepts of *thick* and *thin* interactions and *buffering conversations*. Finally, in Project Four I explore two experiences of meaning making, one at headquarters and the other in my region. Both occurred face-to-face, included discussions about numbers, and evoked significant anxiety. While in the first instance I failed to engage in an explorative discussion, in the second, I succeeded. In my attempt to understand the difference, I end up focusing on the concept of *trust* and its role in our processes of meaning making.

## My Argument

My inquiry explores the phenomenon of trust and its role in our work of making meaning together. I refer to the literature to provide a definition of *trust* as a reference point. Building on this understanding—and drawing on the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating—I describe trust from a social perspective. I argue that trust is a complex, recursive, iterative and emergent patterning of themes organising our experience being together in the living present, which is paradoxical in that it is simultaneously individually experienced and particularised, and socially constructed and generalised, at the same time. I use the term *paradox* in the sense that complexity theorist Christopher Mowles (2015a) used, describing it as "two mutually negating, self-referencing ideas simultaneously producing the potential for meaning making which is not confined to one pole of the paradox or the other" (p. 248).

I suggest that meaning making is negotiated through our interactions and, while idealised as stabilising, it is, at the same time, potentially destabilising. Our work of collective meaning making often arises because of a breakdown or disruption of expectations or habitual activity, which challenges our beliefs and values and can be experienced as conflict, generating anxiety. In turn, as we try to figure out what to do about whatever is happening for us, we form and are formed by our interactions with each other, which may affect our sense of our self and identity and, related to that, our sense of others.

I propose that patterns of *trust relating* both enable and constrain us in our work of meaning making. Patterns of trust relationships may support the collective exploration of difference and negotiation of meaning, leading to the emergence of mutual understanding and novelty by allowing us to stay in relation with each other in a *good enough holding* of our anxiety. I also suggest that trust can constrain us in our efforts to understand what is going on and what we should do about it. Strong patterns of trust relations can be an impediment to meaning making where strong *we-identities* and cult values lead individuals and groups to rely on and trust those colleagues whom they believe think like they do to the exclusion of others. This reduces the likelihood that such we-identities and cult values will be challenged, preventing an exploration of difference and solidifying the status quo.

Lastly, I argue that the use of quantitative methods in our meaning making is paradoxical in two ways. First, they are trusted as a source of objective information and, at the same time, are socially determined and enabled by patterns of trust relating. Second, reliance on metrics can be potentially destructive of trusting relationships, which may further strengthen our trust in and reliance on quantitative information in our meaning making.

## Conclusion and Contributions to Theory and Practice

In my conclusion, I review my contributions to theory. I build on the literature, which understands trust as sociological, considering it from the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating. I place it within the context of the work on meaning making and propose that trust can both enable and constrain us in such processes. I claim a contribution

to understanding trust from the perspective of a large, geographically distributed, national public sector organisation. I also introduce the concept of *buffering conversations* and explain the paradoxical relationship between meaning making and quantitative data.

After I review my contributions to practice, describing the changes that my inquiry has generated in my own practice, I conclude with thoughts about future research.

## Why this Work Matters

The public sector struggles with how it can more effectively serve Canadians and their elected officials. In our department, delivery of services and benefits increasingly lags behind public expectations—due partly to developments in technology—and we are engaged in a significant effort to modernise our delivery.

One of our rallying cries is that our policymaking is *evidence-based*, which suggests that our decisions are grounded on information or evidence, generally quantitative. In the last few years, we have concentrated increasingly on identifying, measuring and reporting on outcomes and results. The government recently adopted what has been called the "Science of Delivery," or "Deliverology," modelled on the work of Sir Michael Barber (2016) in the UK, which focuses on an outcome-based approach with regular "stocktakes" (updates), including at the level of the Prime Minister. Pressure on the public service to deliver results has increased, as have expressions of concern regarding the lack of innovation and engagement of federal employees and the government's challenges with implementing change. In response, a deputy minister-led exercise called *Blueprint 2020* was launched, with the vision of creating an engaged and innovative public service.

Concurrently, there is concern about the increasing incidence of mental illness among public servants. The Technical Committee Report to the Steering Committee on Mental Health in the Workplace, released in September 2015, highlighted the results of the 2014 Public Service Employee Survey, suggesting a significant decrease in engagement and

commitment and high levels of harassment, stress, burnout and disability claims related to psychological health conditions.[2]

This issue has affected all levels of government. The former Clerk of the Privy Council, while facing demands that public servants meet political expectations despite an overwhelming burden of work, has seen his own son struggle with mental illness. Under his watch, all departments (including mine, whose work I led from 2014–2019) started to look seriously at how to address this problem.

German sociologist and philosopher Max Weber (1922/1978) referred to bureaucracies as the most technically superior organisational format for large, complicated operations with highly specialised expert workers to carry out specialised administrative functions according to purely "objective" considerations (p. 973). He suggested that the more they are dehumanised and all "purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements" eliminated, the more perfectly they are developed (p. 975). In an earlier work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905/2002), Weber cautioned that bureaucracies can trap individuals and societies in an "iron cage" purely through efficiency, rational calculation and control (p. 123). He is right on both counts. While the bureaucratic model has advantages for large-scale organisations, the emotional and relational nature of individuals working together cannot be ignored, which poses serious challenges for this form of organisation.

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[2] Ironically, around the same time as the report was released, the definition of the requisite leadership competencies for executives in the public service was amended to include the requirement for "resilience" under the competency labelled "promoting innovation and guiding change" (2015/2019). Interpreted as "demonstrating resilience, composure and a positive outlook in an environment of uncertainty and ambiguity," I refer to it as the *suck it up* competency.

My inquiry has led me to question my original assumption there is a *right* and a *wrong* way to proceed in a complex world in which a good or poor result may depend on when and by whom the judgment is made. I challenge my previous individualistic approach, suggesting instead that the social aspects of our interactions cannot be separated from our individual efforts. This will support our collective efforts to make meaning and, I suspect reduce the incidence of mental illness and increase employee engagement and innovation. My inquiry relates to an important aspect of the social nature of our experience together: *trust*.

## Project One — A Rational Approach to Life

### Introduction

I have always wanted to make a difference. During a career ranging from not-for-profit and non-governmental organisations to the private and public sectors, I became fascinated with the concept of the management of change. I was convinced that it was a prerequisite to making the world a better place. I believed that I could figure out the rules that governed the game and, based on that knowledge would derive the right answer or approach. However, as my career evolved, it became clear that this did not always work. I grew convinced that leaders needed to take more account of the science of complexity in an increasingly uncertain world. Ultimately, this led me to the Doctor of Management (DMan) programme at the University of Hertfordshire and the work of Stacey and Mowles (2016) on complex responsive processes of relating, an area of study that considers insights from the science of complexity, incorporating philosophy, process sociology and psychoanalytic theory. This paper is an exploration of this approach and how it helps me to make sense of my own experiences in my quest to make a difference.

### Childhood

I was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in the late 1950s to two recently arrived emigrants from England. By almost any standards, I was lucky—safe, loved and nurtured. Unfortunately— from my childhood perspective— two sisters quickly followed me, so that I had to share my parents' attention with first one and then another new baby. I have been told that I was not particularly nice to either, being caught, for example, in the act of trying to throw one or the other out of their carrycot.[3]

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[3] This rather antisocial tendency towards my sisters has since abated and I now consider them two of my best friends.

As firstborn, I perpetually tried to regain the number one position in the family and to garner the approval and acceptance I craved. I quickly learned that the best way to do so was to excel academically; I was smart and noted the pleasure my parents took in my classroom accomplishments. I had to be perfect. If I made 98 out of 100 in a test, I would agonise over the two missed points. I prided myself on having the right answer—and in getting to it fast, such that my parents used the expression "full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes" to describe me.[4] I assumed that correctly (and quickly) identifying the issues, knowing the rules and using the right techniques or tools would help me to get things done and be successful. In retrospect, this was rational, neat, tidy, and more than a little naive.

I recognise now how this rush to action has become a key element of my practice, and that I have been unused to reflecting on what is happening for others and me. This tendency was of interest to the pragmatists, in particular John Dewey (1934/2005), who commented on what he called the "lust for action," noting that such "zeal for doing" prevents experience from being truly "experienced" (p. 46). Elsewhere (2015), he contrasted the "reflective" type with the "executive," the "go-getter" and the kind that "gets things done," noting that the failure to "stop and think" provides no "opportunity for transforming meaning into idea" (p. 314). Social Behaviourist and close colleague, G.H. Mead (1934/1967), echoed this refrain, noting that "Delayed reaction is necessary to intelligent conduct" (p. 99). In the domain of organisational theory, a similar point was made by Bellezza et al. (2017), writing on marketing and status signals, who identified "a busy and overworked lifestyle" as the new status symbol in North America (p. 118). In my own desire to achieve and to gain

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[4] The original of this expression is usually paraphrased as "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead" and attributed to David Glasgow Farragut, a flag officer of the United States Navy during the American Civil War during the Battle of Mobile Bay (Spears, 1905, p. 407; Stein, 2005, p. 40).

status, it is hardly surprising that an impulse to *do* (and be quick about it) would become a prevailing theme.[5]

I was always proud of my parents, who were active in their community. My father was a well-respected doctor known for making a difference in the lives of his patients and their families. As I entered the world of work, I envied him his vocation. For most of my own career, however, I seemed unable to find a role with such meaning and impact.

Mead (1934/1967) considered that we are formed socially (in turn, forming our environment and others) and that the *self* develops through adopting the attitudes of others. He described the *generalised other* as the generalisation of the attitudes of the social community or group within which the individual is located. He proposed that taking on these attitudes is the "essential basis and prerequisite of the fullest development of that individual's self," and serves as the "determining factor into the individual's thinking" (pp. 152–56). Pierre Bourdieu (1982/2003), the French sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher, who wrote extensively on the dynamics of power in society, referred to this social reality as *habitu*s, describing it as acquired unconsciously through socialisation, family, schools and other social experiences (Thompson, ed. in Bourdieu, pp. 12–14; Bourdieu, 1977/2015, pp. 78-87). These concepts of the *generalised other* and *habitus* from Mead and Bourdieu have helped me better understand how I have been formed by the groups to which I belong and, in turn, how my behaviour has formed and affected the groups to which I have belonged.

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[5] In *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2013), Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman describes what he calls Systems 1 and 2 of the mind. System 1 is automatic and involuntary, or the "machine for jumping to conclusions," while System 2 is associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice and concentration. He makes the case that an overreliance on System 1 thinking creates errors in judgement and susceptibility to an overdependence on heuristics and biases. Given that he describes an organisation as "a factory that manufactures judgements and decisions," this is clearly an important consideration for leaders.

To illustrate this, I reflect on my first experience in the world of work as a lawyer.

## The Accepted Path

In the mid-eighties, I was called into the boardroom at the law firm where I was an associate. Sitting around the table were five senior partners, there to debrief me on my performance review following the annual partners' meeting in which they determined who would be made partner, who would be asked to leave the firm, who would be hired as an associate, etc. We used to refer to this as the "night of the long knives" in reference to the often-difficult decisions that came out of these meetings.[6]

Bill, an imposing presence, spoke for the group. He told me that I was doing okay, but not as well as my colleagues. He added that he wondered whether I truly loved the law and was a good fit for this work, which was, in his view, necessary for success.

I had never thought that loving one's work was important. I wanted to become a partner because that is what one did when one worked in a law firm. What I heard that morning was that I was not good enough. I had been judged, found wanting and risked failing. I was horrified. Even if somewhere in my psyche I knew that Bill was right, I hastened to assure him (and myself) that I loved the law.

Soon after this, I was pulled into the corporate fray where I experienced for the first time the fun of building something through my involvement in deals and transactions. I managed to find my way back into the inside group, eventually becoming a corporate partner and practising for almost three years before I gave up my partnership and left the firm.

While I did get back on track after my performance review, I was not happy in my career. There is an old joke that asks what the dog does once it catches the car? In my case, I did

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[6] The "night of the long knives" or "*nuit des longs couteaux*" was an expression used by Quebec Premier René Levesque to describe what happened in November 1981 when the Prime Minister and other provincial premiers agreed on a deal to repatriate the Canadian Constitution from Great Britain (Trudeau, 1996; Peckford, 2011).

what was expected of me and invested the time to become a partner, not because it was something that I wanted. Ironically, my dissatisfaction increased significantly once I became partner and had no further goals. Moreover, this happened when I was finishing my tenure leading a not-for-profit voluntary organisation. Law bored me in comparison to that complex, fast-paced world. I loved neither the law nor its practice; it was no more to me than a living and perhaps a source of status.

On reflection, I made my choice of profession in typical fashion, with little independent thought or analysis. Given my high marks, I *knew* the acceptable career options were either medicine or law and, having worked as a nurse's aide, I realised the former was not for me. Having made this decision, in 1974 I enrolled in a Bachelor of Science programme, believing that my prospects of getting the high marks necessary for law school were greater in the sciences than the arts. This worked according to plan and I enrolled in the 4 -year combined Master of Business Administration and Bachelor of Laws programme.

Throughout my academic career, I was able to figure out the rules and produce what was expected. Business study was largely about getting the right answers and backing them up with the appropriate analysis. Law school was similar. While the common perception of legal thinking is one of a barrister using argument or persuasion to convince a judge or jury of the rightness of their position, much of my law school experience was, once again, spent figuring out the rules to find the answers wanted by the professor. I performed well and, after graduating, I started a job in the law firm of my choice, becoming an associate soon after.

 I can now see an obvious disconnect between practising law in a large firm and what I had hoped for—a vocation such as my father's, a profession where I could make a difference. I started out in labour and litigation, where I was bandaging wounds but doing nothing to prevent future mishaps and misunderstandings. I was neither fixing things nor making the world better. We used to refer to ourselves as hired guns—our job was to maximise the benefit to the client within the limits of the law and professional ethics. Whether the right outcome occurred was not our concern.

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Culturally, partners tended to be individualist in their thinking, concerned with the rights of the client versus societal impact. While superficially, there was a fellowship amongst us, it was a lone wolf culture as lawyers jockeyed for billings and status. We called the method of partner compensation, largely based on billings, the 'eat your kill' approach, a mind-set I found difficult.

In hindsight, I also see the practice of law as my first exposure to the importance of taking experience seriously and the benefits of reflective inquiry over the allure of the urgent response. Legal analysis consists of advising on the application of law to a situation using legal precedent, application of statutes and rhetoric, and, by nature, is top-down, rule-based and rational. In the application of law to the facts of a case, however, there is an element of pragmatic inquiry in the posing of the question: "What is really going on here?" The general wisdom concludes that first, you get the judges to *want* to find in your favour, and then you show them how. In other words, taking seriously the experience of those involved, as well as those making the legal judgements. Reflecting on the Greek philosopher Aristotle's three types of knowledge: *episteme* (abstract universal knowledge), *techne* (technology associated with production) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom associated with *praxis* or what we would call practice or experience) (340 BC / 2009), I note the importance of *phronesis* in the practice of law.

However, we also believed that our advice to clients needed to be *right* given their reliance on us, and the often-significant consequences for them of following our counsel. While our recommendations were generally accompanied by caveats and exceptions, we did need to commit one way or another. One of the prevailing sayings in the firm was that we were not paid for our doubts. I wonder now whether the constant pressure to produce billings and achieve the right results, exacerbated by my tendency to rush a task to completion, prevented me from more fully exploring an approach to practice informed by *phronesis*.

One of the final nails in the coffin of my legal practice was reading Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (1974), in which he explores the metaphysics of quality through the vehicle of a motorcycle journey across America with

his son. I remember Pirsig's discussion of the joy he took in the work required to maintain his motorcycle, because he loved riding, and how that translated into excellence in terms of the condition of his bike. I realised that I did not find joy in my practice and, if his reasoning was correct, I would eventually not be successful in my work. Clearly, this was not a viable prospect for a woman who needed to succeed and achieve.

Because of this realisation, the little girl who invariably sought out what was expected of her to win approval and acceptance stepped off the traditional path.

## Tale of Two Changes

While practising law, I volunteered with a not-for-profit organisation, at both local and national levels. CommunityCo raises money and allocates it to other agencies based on an assessment of need for their programs and their effectiveness in delivering them. I found this agency's work, dealing with the vulnerable of our society, emotionally and intellectually engaging. In contrast with the *rights based* individualistic perspective of my law firm, the CommunityCo culture highlighted the importance of societal responsibilities and relationships. Here it was taken for granted that we were all trying to make the world a better place, something that resonated deeply with me.

I became very involved in a strategic planning process at the local level and, latterly, a national strategic visioning exercise. The decidedly different results of these two processes were the start of my fascination with how one effects change in an organisation. On reflection, this was my earliest exposure to the impact of politics and power relations in organisations, where following the rules and getting the right answer does not necessarily work.

The local initiative was my first experience in leading a planning exercise. I was chair of the committee that determined how we allocated funds. Two questions challenged me. The first was our claim to be an *umbrella* fundraiser, implying a promise to protect donors from multiple requests. I believed this was improbable, prompting the question of our real value

to donors. Second, it was unclear how we defined *member* agencies. While typically this referred to those agencies we funded, the presumption was that, once in the group, they would continue to receive monies annually. This practice was unsustainable due to the number of agencies seeking funding and the need for Community Co to remain relevant and responsive to the changing needs and views of the community. I had raised these concerns many times without success and I volunteered to lead the strategic planning process in part to ensure that my questions were addressed.

I had no idea how to do this the *right way*, and in the absence of such knowledge, I worked with staff to figure it out. I was convinced that any successful approach required engaging with the organisation's key stakeholders. Together we established a committee representative of diverse interests and perspectives to envision an excellent CommunityCo, and to explore what was required to get there. Once the board accepted the high-level plan, we created committees to explore its implementation, engaging those affected by the changes—both those who agreed with them and those who did not.[7]

Central to this work was involving the funded agencies. Initially only a few participated, but as others started to see that we were listening and serious about making changes, the number of agencies increased steadily until we consistently had full houses. Despite concerns that our recommendations would seem challenging, eventually the agencies told us to stop consulting with them and to get on with it.

The major changes included determining the allocation of funds through negotiation with the agencies. Over and above the amount they received, we considered what each agency could bring to the table that could be of assistance to the collective. Agreements would be made for several years to enable long-term planning and allow us to move around funds over time.

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[7] The format we ended up using is known in strategic planning as "idealised design" as described by Russell Ackoff (1999).

In terms of answering my two questions, we made progress. We addressed the issue of being an umbrella funder by shifting our focus to becoming a vehicle for community fundraising and priority setting. The question of the identity of member agencies was addressed more subtly. We acknowledged that there could and should be changes over time based on discussion and negotiation between CommunityCo and the agencies, informed by the views of the community (as we perceived them).

As neither of my questions was simple, understandably we did not fix everything. Many of the significant changes that followed (e.g., sharing our fundraising mechanisms with other fundraisers and developing a system whereby donors could give to non-member agencies) were not predicted. In hindsight, however, our approach created better practices of discussion within the local CommunityCo family, such that when issues arose we were better able to explore and make decisions together. We found relationships between the agencies and with us to be more constructive and collaborative. When an agency experienced a problem, they would now reach out to their colleagues and CommunityCo— in direct contrast with previous practice, where they would actively conceal issues.

I credit this development to our engagement process as well as to a governance recommendation that created a formal network of executive directors of member agencies. This group became a mechanism for engagement and a source of professional support for agency executives; it came about because of my early experience at a meeting with several CommunityCo agencies. Although I knew how important my questions were and I was hoping for a good discussion, I was unable to keep their attention because they kept digressing to compare notes on what seemed to me to be pedestrian issues, such as where they could buy inexpensive office supplies. However, these digressions were a signal to me that there was no regular arena or vehicle for them to support each other (or us); this realisation ultimately led to the establishment of the network. In retrospect, I see this as the most significant result of our work, and it happened because of my being truly present in that meeting, so that I realised what was not articulated, but was a significant need.

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The second strategic planning exercise was at the national level. As vice chair of the board I asked to take on the development of a national strategic visioning exercise. Significant changes were coming our way and I knew that we needed to discuss them.

I was confident in my ability to replicate my previous success, recruiting a committee that included progressive as well as more conservative members. This work was significantly more internally focused and, perhaps because of logistical issues (i.e., geography) and the drive to pull together something quickly, it had limited engagement. We felt this would work as we had some of the most talented and thoughtful staff and volunteers around the table, and because the committee's scope was simply to develop a thought piece to serve as the basis for further dialogue.

Based on our discussions, we developed a document setting out the challenges we faced and the case for change, including changing technologies, increased competition for donor dollars, changing social needs and changes to our donor base. The document (supplemented by a workbook for agencies to use when reporting on their own discussions) was designed both as a guide for local agencies to gather their own thoughts on the future and as fodder for a further report.

Reception ranged from polite (if lukewarm) to actual derision—some of the strongest criticism coming from the most powerful agencies. I recall the meeting where the president of one of the largest agencies held up the document and said words to the effect that it was wrong, unhelpful and highly risky, rejecting outright both the discussion and the process. Our work was shelved with no follow-up consultation or report. Ironically, the next time it came to my attention was a decade later, when someone pointed to the document as being particularly prescient in its identification of the issues then facing the organisation.

This outcome was highly frustrating, and I wondered why, in contrast with my previous experience, we had been unsuccessful even in raising questions for discussion when the issues seemed so important. We blamed the outspoken agency president, telling ourselves that she was against change and short sighted in her failure to embrace this initiative.

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However, soon I became chair and, faced with urgent priorities, my own energy for this initiative faded.

Thinking now about the difference between these two experiences, I believe that I was blinded by the success of the first initiative, leading me to believe it would be replicated easily. However, the context was very different. The local organisation was a smaller, less diverse community. The national organisation comprised a large number of fiercely independent (each running their own show) and interdependent (sharing the same name and caring deeply about the health of the brand) agencies. The result was a highly political organisation in terms of the *habitus* and rules governing how we worked together and the roles of the local and national organisations. Senior executives comprised the dominant power group and shut down the discussion.

Norbert Elias (1908/1978), the German-born sociologist famous for his work on the development of self and society, suggested that power is a characteristic of all relationships as it reflects our interdependence and our needs of each other. He proposed:

> These people make up webs of interdependence or figurations of many kinds, characterized by power balances of many sorts, such as families, schools, towns, social strata or states. (p. 15)

He described the balances of power as forming an integral element of all human relationships because of the functional interdependence between people (p. 74). In contrast with the first process, where we actively engaged the local agencies, in the strategic visioning exercise, we assumed control over the discussion without sufficiently involving our colleagues in the network of interdependencies, disregarding the accepted figurations of power.

I now recognise that our failure to engage key stakeholders and disregard of the power figurations was a significant difference between the two processes. In my first effort, we emphasised full engagement of stakeholders. We did not *know* how to run a strategic planning process and, in our ignorance, were more open to listening and learning.

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Engagement in the national effort, by contrast, was limited, and there was insufficient space for dissent and negotiation. The working group dominated the discussion and did not include colleagues across the country. In retrospect, we should have engaged with the wider group early on to define key issues and to determine a process for raising and discussing them. Our failure to do so discouraged our colleagues from buying into the discussion or even agreeing on whether (and how) the discussion should happen.

This failure of engagement did not respect the norms and values of how we worked together. It was accepted wisdom that any changes in the organisation would involve all key stakeholders, including government, agencies, donors, community groups and unions. This involvement clearly extended to discussing the necessity of changes. In effect, we told our colleagues that they were asleep at the wheel and were not aware of key issues affecting their organisations. The manner of this challenge and its inherent disregard was likely perceived as an insult and a threat to the identity and status of recognised successful leaders. We were so focused on the substance of our proposed changes that we failed to consider how they would affect, or be received by, key players.

On further reflection, I also question whether part of the importance of experiential engagement is that, while individuals react to change in different ways, a common reaction is to experience change as a loss—a loss of the known world. The Swiss psychiatrist, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969), postulated five stages of grief following loss. John Dewey (1929/2015) recognised a similar concern in those facing change: "Every thinker puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril and no one can wholly predict what will emerge in its place" (p. 222).

Norbert Elias, in *Involvement and Detachment* (1983/1987), also considered the impact of emotion in resisting the emergence of scientific knowledge that challenges accepted reality (p. 67). He noted we are always both involved and detached, and that those highly involved (and invested) in a system are often particularly afraid of changes to it (p. xxv).

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For those not included in our closely held process, there was little opportunity for reflection, or to follow the progression of ideas. The issues we raised were important for all of us. I wonder now whether a more effective engagement would have enabled others to process their thoughts and emotions and prepared them to discuss proactively some of the complex issues facing us.

I also question whether the issues were sufficiently sensitive that our critics felt we were stirring up trouble unnecessarily. One issue was the probable loss of the monopoly we enjoyed over the use of payroll deductions in our fundraising. This was a significant factor in the organisation's success; for agency executives, more focused on the success of the next campaign than on what were arguably longer-term issues for the business model, this loss would have been a key concern.

James C. Scott (1990), a political scientist and anthropologist, is a comparative scholar of agrarian and non-state societies, subaltern politics and anarchism. In his book, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* Scott described public and hidden transcripts in societies and organisations:

> The theatrical imperatives that normally prevail in situations of domination produce a public transcript in close conformity with how the dominant group would wish to have things appear. The dominant never control the stage absolutely, but their wishes normally prevail. In the short run, it is in the interest of the subordinate to produce a more or less credible performance, speaking the lines and making the gestures he knows are expected of him. (p. 4)

He described, "hidden transcripts" as "discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders" (p. 4). We were all invested in the organisation, but, in retrospect, speaking out unilaterally and publicly was contrary to the wishes of the dominant group and constituted an airing of the hidden transcript. While the issues we raised were discussed frequently behind the scenes—including with those who were now

objecting strenuously to our work—discussing them in public threatened the group and was not permitted.

Finally, our certainty that we had identified the right issues may have contributed to our failure. Although in hindsight we were right, in the moment our certainty blinded us to the fact that others held distinct and differing firm views (certainties) and faced significant constraints (such as short-term campaigns). Effectively we assumed that the facts would speak for themselves and that everyone, of course, would agree. Our experience proved otherwise.

## Books of Influence

Books have been important throughout my career, as both escape and inspiration. Books have also helped to focus my observations—to complete a pattern. Three books have influenced significantly my thinking and led to my current interest in complexity.

I read *Making Democracy Work*, by political scientist and social capital scholar, Robert Putnam (1993), during my tenure at a think tank concerned with regional economic development. It was one of my earliest exposures to research on societal development. The book recounts a 20-year longitudinal study in Italy starting at the creation of the political structure of the provinces. Extensive quantitative and qualitative data collection included social and economic development indicators, voting patterns, citizen satisfaction information and interviews. Findings suggested that, both socially and economically, the South was significantly less successful than the North. The only factor testing as statistically significant was the origin of community formation. During intensely turbulent times, individuals in the South turned to the local boss for protection, competing for his patronage. Society was fundamentally hierarchical, with very little trust. In the North, neighbours banded together, with subsequent strong trust and horizontal relationships. For me, the key takeaways were the apparent superiority of horizontal over vertical relationships and the importance of trust for building healthy, prosperous societies. In the

tradition of looking for tools and techniques, I immediately started thinking one could fix economic development challenges by finding ways to encourage horizontality and trust.

A short time later, I was exposed to the concept of complexity through the book, *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (Wardrup, 1992). This account of the founding of the Santa Fe Institute for the Study of Complexity considers the work of many of the institute's original members. While I continued to think that there was a *right* way to approach organisational and societal challenges, this book prompted me to question the broadly accepted reductionist analysis found in many organisations despite the increasing complexity of our world. My reading also lead me to think about the different forces of competition and cooperation, and how they play out in complex adaptive systems; Wardrup suggested that collaborative or competitive behaviours alone did not work—only in combination does such a system evolve.

The third book that so influenced my thinking was *The Rise of the Creative Class*, by urban theorist Richard Florida (2004), which highlights the benefit of diversity in creating more innovative and open societies. Florida criticised Putnam's theory of social capital, claiming that it can be exclusionary and dampen the entrepreneurial spirit, creating norms that prevent change and adaptation. This commentary, together with those of Putnam and Wardrup, suggested to me that the relevant issue was the balance between competitive and collaborative behaviours in a community or organisation and its impact on social capital. In other words, I considered both Putnam and Florida to be *right*.

I now see these works from an additional perspective. Stacey and Mowles (2016), in their work on complex responsive processes of relating, contended that strategies and changes emerge because of the interplay of the many intentions, choices and actions of people throughout their interactions (pp. 487–97). There is no grand plan, no strategy or political decision that determines the future development of an organisation—or country. Rather, it is the multitude of interactions of people in community creating very different societies, with very different outcomes. Societies evolve through the interweaving of the multitude of interactions creating patterns of relationships and shared history, leading to the dominant

norms, values, ideologies and power relations. Moreover, what I had previously viewed as the balance between competitive and cooperative relationships, I now see as the interplay between individual and societal interests, which informed the work of Norbert Elias (1987/1991). He described this changing relationship between the "I" and the "We" in Part 111 of *The Society of Individuals* (pp. 153–237). Retrospectively, I can see this theme and the various mechanisms that individuals and society use to pursue and protect their interests threaded through my entire career.

## To Ottawa and Back Again

After my stint with the consulting firm, I held several other jobs in Halifax, at the think tank, and as a bank executive. When the latter position ended, I moved to Ottawa to take advantage of the technology boom. Unfortunately, I arrived at my new job just before the boom went bust, and I shortly found myself unemployed.

Noting my extensive background in the not-for-profit sector, a friend suggested that I work in government. The idea was not new to me, but *considering* it was. When I looked into the prospect, I found it more intriguing than I had imagined. I could work to make a difference—and be paid for it. The Gods of Fortune (and networking) smiled on me and I was introduced to someone who liked my background and hired me.

While there is learning to be had from all the years I have worked in government, the following story relates to my current role as head of a region, almost 16 years after my move to Ottawa.

## Budget Woes

Soon after I took on the role as a regional head, I discovered that the region for which I am responsible had the reputation of being unable to manage its budget. A headquarters colleague explained that the region had accrued a large structural deficit that the rest of the department had been required to cover. While the deficit had been erased, the reputational damage remained. I learned that the deficit was, almost entirely, the result of decisions

beyond the region's control, and that our colleagues at headquarters had actively prevented those in the region from any attempts to eliminate it.

The general belief was that we did not know how to manage. Nothing was further from the truth. We had a history of stretching a dollar until it almost tore and, save for the structural deficit, of bringing our budget in on forecast. In a recent year, with a budget of $150 million, we finished the year at .05% of forecast. We did know what we were doing. In their sociological study of an English Midlands town, Elias and Scotson (1965/1994) described this type of mythmaking as weapons creation by the town's establishment. Despite being of the same class as the people whom they denigrated, the established group promulgated an ideology that was "a system of attitudes and beliefs which stressed and justified their own superiority and stamped the other group … as people of an inferior kind" (p. 18). In our case, the myth served to maintain the power relations and, in particular, the way that monies were allocated within the department. After all, why give more money to a region that everyone knows cannot manage its budget?

Early in my tenure, I attended a senior management meeting to approve the following year's budget. As usual, we received the documents only a few days in advance, but it was enough time for me to realise that there was cause for concern. To address pressures elsewhere in the department, the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) had proposed a tax across the board. Others were able to absorb it, but the tax created another structural deficit for our region. I prepared what I thought was a thoughtful rationale for considering other approaches that could address the problem, such as reallocating from business lines that had not spent their full budget in previous years. The meeting was attended in person by headquarters personnel and by videoconference for the regions, but as I was travelling, I had to take it by telephone. In introducing discussion, the Senior Head expressly asked everyone to be frank and raise their concerns. I spoke up, presenting my case, which (I felt) was both reasonable and strong. I could neither see peoples' reactions nor sense the mood of the room, and when I finished, there was no articulated response. Instead, everyone conceded that while the tax was challenging, they would make it work. The budget was

approved as presented, and it was agreed that we would, as usual, monitor and manage as the year unfolded.

A week later, I was at headquarters for meetings and having dinner with a new colleague. As he was originally from our region, I felt we had common ground (and we have since developed an excellent working relationship). However, he told me that although he was sympathetic to our funding woes, I had assumed lead position in the whiner brigade by speaking up at the budget meeting.

I became angry and cynical about departmental leadership. I learned first-hand that dissent or disagreement with the way things were done was unwelcome, and I decided that I was a poor fit because I told it like it is and that my colleagues were avoiding addressing real concerns because they didn't want to ante up to cover this newly created structural deficit. I began to believe that I had made a significant mistake in joining this new department.

Reflecting on this now, I understand that my real mistake was in tackling the problem head on. I reacted quickly and assertively with insufficient reflection or regard for the relations that maintained budget determinations. Stacey (2010) noted that in questioning, "particular abstractions we are threatening current ideologies and patterns of power relations, peoples' very identities" (p. 116). Mowles (2015a) echoed this with his comment that exposing accepted assumptions left "people feeling destabilised and vulnerable" and caused organisations to adopt defence mechanisms (p. 68). In the circumstances, my behaviour was especially egregious given the fiscally constrained world of the department, where any increase in resources would be at others' expense.

My misread of the situation and the nature of the meeting was politically naïve. I had been certain of my facts and thought that I was justified in raising our concerns. I assumed that, if I provided solid evidence, my colleagues would understand immediately that we needed to address the issue. What I failed to infer was that this was not, despite assurances from the Senior Head, a place for discussion or dissent. James C. Scott (1990) described the "empty ritual of public bodies" (p. 12) and German-born sociologist Lewis Coser (1957), writing

on conflict theory, suggested that social arrangements that are habitual and patterned are subject to the "blight of ritualism" (p. 199). This meeting was a regular and ritualised aspect of the governance structure and not a place of discussion and debate. The public transcript was that our Chief Financial Officer had prepared the budget, and the Senior Head had approved it after proper and wise consideration. We would have free and informed discussions and would naturally approve it as presented. The decision was already made. Once again, I had given voice to a hidden transcript in saying the unsayable in front of senior management. My intervention was a direct challenge to the authority and reputation of the Senior Head as a careful and thorough decision-maker. If I was right, then his decision was wrong, and I had said so publicly. As a senior member of management, my speaking out was a serious transgression, because if I did not respect the public transcript, then how could my staff be expected to?

Pierre Bourdieu (1977/2015) suggested that a major aspect of political power is the ability to impose the principles of the "construction of reality" (p. 165). He described *doxa*: subjective principles of organisation that establish what is "taken for granted" in a social structure (p. 164). In my situation, it was taken for granted that we mismanaged our finances, and to surface our concerns directly was contrary to what was permitted within the organisation's social reality. Bourdieu described a form of discipline used when overt violence is not available:

> Symbolic violence, the gentle, invisible form of violence, which is never recognized as such, and is not so much undergone as chosen, the violence of credit, confidence, obligation, personal loyalty, hospitality, gifts, gratitude, piety—in short, all the virtues honoured by the code of honour—cannot fail to be seen as the most economical mode of domination. (p. 192)

My colleague's intervention, made in such a way as to be helpful and collegial, I now see as symbolic violence enforcing the *doxa* of the organisation.

Symbolic violence as described by Bourdieu uses inclusion and exclusion as forms of discipline to bring group members into compliance. Elias and Scotson (1965/1994) also described the enforcement of conformity with standards established by the established, including the practice of ostracising others (pp. 38–39). As head of the whiner brigade, I was clearly on the outside of the dominant group and would remain so until I mended my ways.

Alvesson and Spicer, in their provocatively titled *A Stupidity-Based Theory of Organizations* (2012), described *functional stupidity* as an organisationally supported lack of reflex, substantive reasoning and justification. It requires that members refrain from questioning the organisation's dominant beliefs and expectations. This can facilitate smooth functioning through mechanisms that balance individuals' interests and/or perceptions and those of society (or the group). It may, however, also reward and value conformity over autonomy and independent thinking. Significant challenges may arise when there is a wide gap between the officially sponsored discourse and reality. At my workplace, it operated to enable smooth and efficient decision-making by the department (Senior Head) and drove outliers (e.g., my region) to manage the consequences underground. The fact that there may have been a better way to address the budget challenge—or that the allocation of departmental resources might not be aligned with the work (and an inefficient use of taxpayer dollars)—was irrelevant.

## Reflections

As someone who seeks to make a difference, I have struggled to do so in my rush to achieve, to figure out the rules and to have the right answer. When I joined government, I found an environment that was significantly more complex than I had previously experienced. Norbert Elias (1908/1978) noted the increase in complexity that occurs when the number of participants in a figuration increases (p. 102) and this was my experience in the interplay of the many citizens, stakeholders and other players involved in or affected by the process of governing.

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My exposure to the work of Stacey and Mowles has allowed me to think more critically about the nature of change making in organisations. I had fixated on the need to make change almost as if it were an end to itself, and I can see now the irony in my seeking to learn how to *make* change. Stacey and Mowles' (2016) theory of "complex responsive processes of relating" suggests that traditional views on organisational management, based on assumptions that leaders can predict and control, are flawed. Stacey (2012a) described why the nonlinearity of complex phenomena makes this impossible (p. 112). Mowles echoed his comments:

> The complexity of organizational life can never be contained by formal tools and approaches and will constantly burst through the methods designed to contain it. In pragmatic terms the best we can produce is what helps us to take the next step together by which time we may be facing a completely different set of problems. (2015a, p. 144)

Given the interdependence of groups and individuals and the non-linearity of complex phenomena, no single person can make or determine change on their own. However, as a leader I am constantly asked to do just that. Governments at all levels face complex issues, public demand for visible results and fiscal constraints. There seems to be a concern that the way we do things is not working and that we must innovate and change the way we work. This focus on change making may be inevitable given the complex and often conflicting pressures faced by governments. It is difficult to contemplate politicians proposing a successful election platform that does not focus on improvement, which seems to require that we do things differently. Public servants are thus likely to be preoccupied with how to implement change in one way or another.

In my experience, the implementation of change in or by public sector organisations is highly visible and always one-step away from becoming a political issue, which makes it highly sensitive and risky. John Dewey (1929/2015) wrote about how our need for security often causes focus on the regular to minimise and control the precarious and fluctuating (pp. x-xi). He also described the long rule of custom, rigid conservatism, and regimes of

conformity and intellectual standardisation that arise when society (a group) determines a need to protect itself from deviations from the norm. In the federal public service, concerns about past implementations of policy and program changes within the government led to the adoption of the so-called *Science of Delivery* or *Deliverology,* modelled on the work of Sir Michael Barber (2016) in the UK. The government has also invested significantly in an initiative called *Blueprint 2020*, intended to create a climate of innovation across the federal public sector.

The traditional change-making processes are understandably attractive to bureaucrats looking for safe, effective ways to implement change. While one cannot dismiss them entirely—Dewey noted that "standardizations, formulae, generalizations, principles, universals, have their place" (1929/2015, p. 117)—they often fail to incorporate the political elements of making change, and it is not clear that there is sufficient payback for the significant fiscal and bureaucratic costs they impose. Mowles (2015a) recognised that "the pressure on employees to maintain 'the apparatus,' to feed the beast, means that employees in organisations are asked to do more and more irrational things in terms of what their work requires" (p. 86).

The challenge for a public servant to deliver on the demands and expectations of their political masters remains. In this paper, I have represented my experiences as a leader through the three narratives about my work with CommunityCo and my current government department. My history demonstrates a certain naïveté about power relations and organisational *habitus* as well as a practice that rushes to *get the job done*.

In the interplay of the interests of the individual and society/groups my experience has shown the prevalence of differences in perspectives—both in terms of identifying problems facing the organisation or group, and in determining how to remedy them—and that these differences are an important part of the way the organisation does its business. A number of authors writing on the role and nature of conflict in organisations recognise this. Stacey and Mowles (2016) noted the traditional assumption that success depends on harmonious relationships between members of an organisation (pp. 195–199), and in my experience this

is often the expectation in corporate settings. One is rewarded for being a team player and for *playing nice* with colleagues and disciplined for non-adherence to the party line. However, a consideration of the dynamics of power and "the associated struggles over the distribution of power chances of all kinds" described by Elias (1908/1978, p. 25), suggests that conflict or disagreement is a consistent element of organisational life. Some writers claim that conflict in an organisation increases innovation and the ability to consider experience. Stacey and Mowles (2016) posited, "conflict is a condition for the emergence of the new, for the movement of thought" (pp. 195–99). Likewise, Lewis Coser (1957) argued that conflict prevents the ossification of social systems by increasing the pressure for innovation and creativity (p. 197), and, furthermore, that highly rigid systems that prevent open and direct expression of conflict may be more likely to lead to basic and explosive realignments (p. 202). Flyvbjerg (2001) made the case that "Governments and societies that suppress conflict do so at their own peril," and claimed that doing so was a cause of the loss of vitality of Communist societies (p. 108).

Given that it appears conflict and disagreement are inevitable in how we work together, I am interested in exploring more fully the interplay of power, politics and leadership in the highly constrained environment that is the federal public service. In doing so, I wish to examine how the issue of certainty or lack of certainty has been a factor in my own practice. In reflecting on the three narratives above, I see that the more *certain* I was in how to proceed or that I had identified the *right* issues or answers, the greater was my tendency for Dewey's "lust for action" or "full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes." Certainty and its pursuit were always important for me—the little girl who had to have the right answers. As a result, I frequently failed to take into account or incorporate into my practice a consideration of the political interests and dimensions of a situation. In effect, in my certainty I became blind to data inconsistent with my point of view, to others' perspectives and needs, and to the customs and traditions about how colleagues should work together.

Norbert Elias (1908/1978) claimed that "People always pose their questions in ways which conform to their hypothesis as to what constitutes a satisfactory answer" (p. 148). I look

forward to finding the answers I am seeking, knowing that they will not conform to what I currently believe are my questions.

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## Project Two—Reflections on Power Relations and Symbolic Capital

### Prelude

In Project 1, I drew on three principal narratives as background for my questions on the interplay of power, politics and leadership in the context of change making in organisations. Coming from a practice of "lust for action," an expression used by John Dewey (1934/2005) to reflect privileging the doing and speed of reaction over reflection (p. 46), these attempts to implement change in organisations met with varying levels of success. Where I felt that I had the least success, I noted my disregard of power relations and organisational *habitus*. In my reflections, I also observed conflict in the interplay between individual and societal (or group) interests as well as the impact of certainty on my and others' practice.

In this project, I continue my examination of how I can participate more effectively in organisational politics from a marginalised power position so that I might better contribute to both my organisation and region. I explore a narrative that began early in my tenure, in which misleading data was successfully defended and protected by colleagues at headquarters and became the basis for policy decisions that adversely affected an important regional industry. In considering this narrative now, I understand that the issues of certainty and conflict with which I was preoccupied are largely issues of power relations and group dynamics. Leaning on the works of Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, I consider how power relations affected the development of events within my department.

### Context

I am head of a region in a federal department charged with the delivery of government services to citizens and, in some cases, businesses. We work closely and are interdependent with our colleagues at headquarters—at times a difficult relationship.

Soon after I joined the department, a headquarters colleague warned me to keep an eye on a developing issue affecting a significant industry in the region. She feared that the policy

group in headquarters would mishandle the issue and create serious political and other problems for this industry and the region.

Although one of the area's largest and most profitable industries, it is seasonal in nature and has difficulty securing sufficient workers for its operations. A government wage support program (WSP) serves as workforce stabilisation, supporting workers during periods that the plants do not operate. Other labour supply issues include difficult working conditions and an aging workforce. In many locations, these plants are the principal source of employment and their loss would be catastrophic for rural areas already challenged to maintain population and services.

Even during the season, work availability varies, interrupted by changeovers in the product being processed or by disruptions to the delivery of raw materials. To address downtime and loss of hours, the WSP was modified to allow workers to maintain an open claim even when working. During a layoff, workers can immediately reopen a claim for the period of the layoff, rather than waiting for a new claim to be established. We refer to this as "working while on claim" or WWOC.

To supplement the local labour supply, the industry has made extensive use of temporary foreign workers (TFWs). Our department is involved in running the program that regulates access to TFWs (another department has the policy role). When I joined the department, there were a number of news stories about the overuse of TFWs in a different industry, alleging that they were taking jobs away from Canadians. Politically a hot button issue, this publicity led to a wholesale revision of industry requirements to access TFWs, changes designed to reduce the perceived abuses.

There was a flavour to policy discussions about our region. Stories of WSP overuse were rife and included stereotyping our workers as preferring to draw on this benefit rather than to work. In fact, over the years we conducted several in-depth reviews to determine whether individuals were drawing on these benefits inappropriately. The number of workers we disentitled from the program because it was determined that they were not actively seeking

work was very low. However, the perception of fraud remained, and when the government turned its attention to the use of TFWs in the industry under discussion here, its approach reflected this bias.

As advised, I immersed myself in this file. Key departmental protagonists at headquarters included Sheila, the head of policy development, and Dirk, responsible for data and analysis, who reported directly to her. Some people in my region were involved over the three-year period of this file, including those in data and analytics. However, they were limited in their access to the data controlled by Dirk's staff, which severely curtailed any independent analysis. As we were typically brought in only at the last minute, our ability to make a difference was minimal.

The first challenge occurred when Dirk's group calculated the number of workers claiming WSP in our four economic zones. Based on their analysis, Sheila informed the Minister that there were 'X' thousand workers on WSP who should be hired in preference to TFWs. There was no consideration of the suitability of employees for this work, whether they were within reasonable commuting distance or were working while on claim (WWOC). Although we immediately protested that the numbers were significantly overstated, the Minister was already using the data publicly, and it became the rationale for imposing significant restrictions on the industry's access to TFWs.

I found this development both unsettling and frustrating. I knew Sheila from my previous job in a headquarters role in another department, where we had worked closely and well together as equals on very high-profile policy and program development files. I felt now that she was treating me with disrespect. When I advised her early on that their data was incorrect and that we believed there to be a labour shortage, she responded that they could not change their advice to the Minister simply because I had been lobbied by industry. She dismissed our concerns as unfounded and saw no need to consider them. I also perceived an edge to her response that suggested we were interfering with their work, did not properly understand the issues and should cease our meddling before it caused trouble for the department. I felt that I was being labelled as difficult to work with; I was insulted by her

insinuation that I didn't understand the issues and could be influenced so easily by industry, bringing into question both my competence and my integrity.

Looking back, I observe how quickly our working relationship had adjusted to a new reality. I felt that I was no longer considered a policy colleague collaborating on important work but had been demoted to the role of service delivery, which was, from their perspective, unimportant or, at least, lower in status.

I wonder whether greater sensitivity on my part regarding the implications of my new role might have changed my approach and advanced the file more effectively. I failed to consider the possibility that I might not be accorded the same level of credibility I enjoyed in my former role, and I weighed in expecting my interventions would be taken seriously. I did not appreciate that, in Sheila's view, I might be interfering in what she considered her domain. In retrospect, I believe that she experienced my intervention as a direct challenge to her identity, status and credibility, as I effectively declared that they had mismanaged their analysis, a fundamental element of their policy role.

Once the relevance and importance of this data was public, it was exceedingly problematic to admit that the analysis had been poorly done. The stakes were extremely high for all of us. Misleading a minister is one of the most grievous errors a public servant can make, made worse if the minister has committed him or herself publicly based on that advice. The shame and professional consequences would have affected the credibility not only of Dirk, Sheila and their team, but also of the entire department and, perhaps more seriously, the Minister and the Government. Such a hit to our credibility had the potential of eclipsing the file, casting doubt on the department's work in the minds of decision-makers and our political masters. Senior management might have been threatened by having to acknowledge that such highly regarded executives as Dirk and Sheila could be the source of far-reaching errors: if they erred on this file, where else? Because the game is indeed important to us, we were required to collude to protect the department, its mission and its ability to deliver results.

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The obligation to support the party line was frustratingly evident in a later meeting with the Minister's Office (MINO). I was constrained from advising them with either accuracy or integrity, as this would have obliged me to disagree with the numbers provided by Sheila. Had I done so, I might have been accused of casting aspersions on my colleague and exposing the department's deficiencies. Instead, I had to try to explain the unexplainable, observed throughout by Sheila, wearing (to my eyes) a smug expression, impervious to the fact of her own role in the dilemma. This was further destructive of my relationship with Sheila and it affected me professionally, as it appeared that I had a poor understanding of the file and was unable to conduct a brief properly.

The meeting was an example of what Bourdieu described in *Language and Symbolic Power* (1982/2003) as the ideological production of a particular discourse, noting that it was:

> … all the more successful when it is able to *put in the wrong* anyone who attempts to *reduce* it to its objective truth …. uttering the hidden truth of a discourse is scandalous because it says something which was "the last thing to be said." (p. 153)

In this case, I could not provide my best advice, required instead to accept as truth the assumptions and analysis generated by Sheila and her team. As the file developed further, they continued to paint the region as not credible and to insist that the facts spoke for themselves, were evidence-based and demonstrated what, in fact, they did not—even as the numbers of individuals supposedly available for work continued to decline.

Elias and Scotson (1965/1994) described how the satisfaction derived from belonging to a superior group can lead to a need to submit to the obligations imposed by membership in that group:

> … dominant groups with a high power superiority attribute to themselves, as collectivities, and to those who belong to them, as families and individuals, a distinguishing group charisma. All those who "belong" participate in it. But they have to pay a price. Participation in a group's superiority and its unique group charisma is, as it were, the reward for submitting to group-specific norms. It has to

> be paid for by each of its members individually through the subjection of his own
> conduct to specific patterns of affect control. (p. xxiii)

Later in this project, I suggest that the file developed as it did because policy is considered a higher calling than service delivery. Perhaps Sheila, despite our history (and the facts), was motivated by her need to maintain the higher status of the headquarters policy role over those tasked with implementing policies, to maintain her own membership within the dominant group.

Despite attempts to exclude us, we continued to try to remain involved. Sheila and Dirk agreed to keep us in the loop, and to take into consideration commuting distance and WWOC. Numbers were recalculated and a chart was prepared showing key communities and the number of claimants within each area, this time deducting the WWOC numbers. Once again, the work was done without our knowledge or involvement and given to the Minister before we saw it. Although an improvement on the earlier analysis, they significantly overstated the numbers within each community, as they did not take into consideration the overlapping catchment areas—some by up to 90%—resulting in some workers being counted three and even four times. Again, we intervened and, again, our feedback was unwelcome. The Deputy Minister expressed frustration that we would not— or could not—agree on the numbers. Our intervention resulted in our colleagues including a note in the document indicating a possible overlap in the numbers. The official line remained that the numbers indicated a problem, but the chart was not otherwise amended and the revised document was never made available to the political side of the department. There was a commitment to work with my team in future to ground-truth analysis but, to the best of my understanding, my boss at headquarters was never updated and remained unaware of the validity of our intervention. I made no effort to address this, as I believed I would be perceived as stepping on Sheila's organisational toes and again be branded as a bad colleague. I—and the region—were already thought of as difficult, and I had no wish to give that view further traction. In retrospect, I understand that my self-censorship led me to

accept a subordinate role to Sheila on this file, maintaining the established order and affirming the inferior status of delivery versus policy.

Soon we were back at it. In response to a question from an opposition party member, Dirk's group released figures of workers claiming WSP in each community, once again neglecting to deduct those on WWOC and overstating the numbers because of the geographical overlap. They included in fine print a warning about the potential overlap, but this was overlooked in the media reports and editorials that followed, which lambasted industry for not hiring locals.

This time, however, we were dealing with MINO staff that were fully aware of the reality on the ground. In a difficult meeting (which I did not attend), Dirk was unable to justify his group's work and conclusions and was ordered to return with an explanation and better data in order that MINO could decide how to intervene in this politically sensitive file.

I was puzzled by Dirk's inability to answer MINO's questions as we had had many discussions about the issues of WWOC and community overlap, which should have informed his response. It would have been simple to explain that the data was formatted in response to the question posed in the order paper (it was), and that the community overlap had been noted in the document (it was—in fine print). I did consider that our discussions may simply have slipped his mind but, given the intensity of the issue, this seemed unlikely.

Part of me was gratified that Dirk had been put on the spot by the Minister's staff. I found him arrogant and dismissive of the region's capabilities and role, especially in his exclusion of my team. Despite their rudimentary errors, there had been no accountability for his group's shoddy work. Instead, Dirk was consistently rated highly in performance management discussions and was later promoted[8] and his team received an award for their

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[8] In fact, as of this writing, all the key actors from headquarters (including Sheila) have been promoted.

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work on this file. In contrast, the region and I were labelled as uncooperative and not corporate in our approach. I experienced a quiet satisfaction at the thought of him being grilled by MINO staff and unable to satisfy their questions.

Our task was now to provide MINO with an explanation and recommendations for next steps. I will briefly describe two of the meetings that followed, before further reflecting on the matter and the literature as I work to make sense of these events.

Narrative 1—Meeting of Headquarters and Regional Colleagues

Following Duncan's difficult session with MINO, we convened a meeting to discuss the next steps. Attending by teleconference from our region was Shelly, from our enforcement group, Mark, our chief data person, and me. Headquarters colleagues gathered in a meeting room in the Capital Region. Sheila did not attend, but Dirk was there, along with Pierre, another of his senior managers. Also calling in were Charles, the headquarters group head responsible for integrity operations (i.e., ensuring that the department's programs are delivered according to legislative requirements and that benefits claimants are entitled to them), and two of his staff, including Dale, his data guru. They had recently become involved in the file because of their access to additional data.[9]

First on the agenda was a discussion of how to explain the discrepancy between the data and MINO's views on the file. From our perspective, and for the sake of the department's credibility, we needed to be able to clarify how our numbers had been determined in response to the order paper question. There were other issues that required discussion and decisions by MINO. For example, in response to industry's position that they had an insufficient labour supply, Sheila had agreed that we would step up enforcement of WSP requirements to ensure compliance by claimants and reduce the (department's) alleged

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[9] While we had had to fight to get our data—our on-the-ground knowledge—included, Charles and his team were easily accepted because they brought numbers-based data to the table.

programme abuse. However, given that there was a shortage rather than a surfeit of workers, this was both unnecessary and needlessly difficult politically. Of greater concern was that earlier decisions to restrict the industry's supply of TFWs had negatively affected industry, and a reversal would embarrass the department and the Minister.

Throughout this discussion, Dirk maintained that nothing had changed; the numbers were correct and still suggested a problem with the underemployment of Canadian workers. Fewer people around the table were accepting this and there was growing concern about how to handle our position. Charles outlined the current situation before I described the past data issues. In the ensuing discussion, Charles focused on where we were on the decision to step up enforcement of WSP requirements, given that industry was clamouring for us to provide the workers that the department claimed were available. He agreed that the data now seemed to suggest there was a labour shortage and acknowledged the difficulties of having to justify the earlier decision to restrict access to TFWs. Pierre suggested that the discussion was premature until the numbers were recalculated. He suggested that the data was not necessarily misleading, but simply needed refining. I reminded everyone that we needed to explain how this data could have been provided in response to the original request, without unduly embarrassing the department, and that our immediate boss was very sensitive about the need to maintain credibility with MINO.

The meeting ended with agreement that we would say nothing unless stakeholders inquired about our progress. We would continue working the data, this time with the involvement of our region, and anticipate a further meeting.

Reflecting shortly after the meeting, I did wonder whether my intervention describing past data errors had been necessary or appropriate; however, I easily rationalised that the new players needed to understand the file's context. I also felt keenly the lack of accountability from Dirk or Sheila for the deficiencies and inaccuracies of their team's previous work and—perhaps uncharitably—I wanted to air that. However, I was also convinced of the necessity of exposing the history of the file to ensure that everyone understood the department's difficulty. This was, in part, because there was still no indication from Sheila,

Dirk or their teams that they understood our concerns about their data. I did worry that my speaking out would further inflame the difficult working relationship that had evolved between the region and Sheila's group. Dirk had remained very quiet during the meeting, and I was not sure how to read his behaviour.

Pierre's role in the meeting also interested me. Apart from making a weak argument that the data just needed to be reworked, he had said very little. He was a relatively new addition to Sheila's team and early feedback from my colleagues in the region suggested that he might not automatically adopt Dirk's approach. However, I read his contribution as an attempt to postpone having to admit data errors, in effect a variation of Sheila's policy of denial. My experience had shown a standard bureaucratic response of deferring problems in the hopes of them disappearing, at least until someone else's watch. However, I was certain that with this issue the department would have to either admit its error or find another way to explain previous advice we had given to ministers. I felt that sticking our heads in the sand was not a sustainable strategy and, the longer we waited to address this, the deeper the hole we were digging for ourselves.

I do notice now the beginning of a change in my practice in this meeting. Instead of feeling that I needed to take the lead, I allowed Charles, my headquarters ally, to carry the load. His team's capacity with the data, along with his higher status as a headquarters head of business line, enabled us to set aside issues relating to the region and its history on the file. However, I also now recognise that my doubts around having spoken up at all, despite my certainty of the importance of doing so, indicate how effectively I had been disciplined by my colleagues to adhere to the party line.

### Narrative 2—Meeting with Department Heads

After the data had been re-crunched, we were ready to meet with department heads to review the numbers and our recommendations before they were taken to MINO. As usual, headquarters colleagues were in the room with the department heads, while we in the region attended via teleconference. As Sheila was both senior and policy lead on the file,

she started the presentation. We had struggled throughout its preparation to prevent her from painting a picture that reinforced her message suggesting a significant problem in the industry, despite increasing analysis indicating that there was none. As expected, her presentation emphasised high numbers of workers taking advantage of the WSP. She understated the impact of the overlap and numbers of WWOC, and that the issues (if any) existed in only a few plants; she used aggregate numbers and essentially continued the narrative she had advanced from the start. I did not intervene, as I was not in the room and could not read anyone's body language or otherwise gauge peoples' reactions. My experience of participating in these meetings by telephone suggested that my contributions would go unheard or be dismissed. I recounted in Project 1 a senior management meeting that I attended by telephone in which I had intervened on a sensitive file and later been dubbed "head of the whiner brigade."

However, on this occasion, the senior department head specifically asked if I had anything to add. I responded that the presentation did not necessarily suggest conclusions, but rather areas for further inquiry, which I then outlined. I mentioned the risk of allowing our interpretation of the data to be skewed by perceptions based on the file's history—noting that industry's situation had, in fact, changed. I also pointed out that MINO was well informed about this industry and that we should consider this and not overplay the numbers; these had, in fact, reduced demonstrably from those originally presented, and I anticipated further reductions.

My response was followed by silence. Those of us not in the room, including me, were unable to gauge the reaction of the senior head. I was frankly a little nervous. In an earlier, private conversation, the senior department head had encouraged me to speak out if I ever thought that he was missing anything (the budget meeting had occurred during his predecessor's tenure) and so when asked directly by him to speak up, I felt obliged to do so. On the other hand, this was not a private meeting between the two of us, and I was quite sure that a direct challenge to Sheila would not be well received.

We subsequently learned from colleagues in the room that they felt I had hit just the right tone and that, at the end of my remarks, the senior department head had leaned back in his chair and looked inquiringly at Sheila. We did sense that the department heads were not entirely aligned with Sheila at this point, as they noted several sensitive issues and stressed that, given the new numbers; we needed to be careful to not overstate things.

Looking back, I discern the evolution of my practice in how I intervened in this meeting. I waited to be invited in, rather than my usual approach of engaging early on. My comments were significantly more nuanced than previously and their tone almost pensive, as if I were working my way through the issue—again, in contrast to my typically direct mode of communication. I acknowledged issues but diluted them to "interesting areas for further inquiry." I reminded listeners of the altered perspective of MINO regarding industry's abuse of the WSP and of MINO's awareness of the facts, and I allowed the department heads to pass judgment, rather than assuming that role myself. I did allow myself the pleasure of pointing out the dangers in allowing preconceived biases to affect how we interpret data.

## Myths and Data

I have struggled with the question of how smart and accomplished individuals such as Sheila and Dirk could not only generate fundamentally problematic analysis but also seem unable to recognise their errors in the face of irrefutable evidence. Two explanations come to mind. In the public service, the accepted "public transcript" (Scott, 1990, pp. 13–14) is that public policy is evidence-based, which in my experience usually requires objective quantifiable data. An important question is whether this form of data is sufficient on its own. Many organisational scholars have suggested that it is not, including Rhodes and Brown (2005, pp. 170–71) and Tsoukas and Hatch (2001, 1007–08), who wrote on the importance of narratives to sensemaking. Leadership and competitiveness scholars, Martin and Golsby-Smith (2017, 128–35), agreed that social science research necessarily requires study of data over and above that prescribed by the *scientific method*. I believe that in the

case of this file, the culture of reliance on data so prevalent in the public service was responsible for creating an exaggerated confidence in the figures. This confidence was exacerbated by headquarters' view that regions do not have a useful role in this type of work, and thus consulting with us would not readily occur to them.

Perhaps more germane to this project is my belief that the data was accepted so readily because it accorded with prevailing perceptions about the industry and workforce in the region, including that of rampant abuse of the WSP. While there had been some truth to that claim—as there is for other industries and regions—the facts no longer supported the extent of the allegations. When location and WWOC were taken into consideration, instead of thousands of workers being available, the numbers were, at most, a few hundred spread unevenly across several plants. The constructed storyline had been easily accepted, as it reinforced narratives about the region, feeding into stereotypes and obviating the need for inquiry into whether the data and analysis were interpreted properly.

In trying to understand this, I look to Dewey (1929/2015) and Bourdieu (1982/2003), who suggested that interpretation of our experience is embedded in socially founded patterns of thinking, myths that become systematised and scientific. Dewey considered the impact of beliefs on what we both believe and expect to be true:

> The things of primary experience are so arresting and engrossing that we tend to accept them just as they are—the flat earth, the march of the sun from east to west, and its sinking under the earth. Current beliefs in morals, religion, and politics similarly reflect the social conditions, which present themselves. Only analysis shows that the ways in which we believe and expect have a tremendous affect upon what we believe and expect. (p. 14)

For his part, Bourdieu referred to scientific mythologies, and noted their ability to be self-sustaining:

> Indeed, as pre-dictions, these "scientific" mythologies can produce their own verification, if they manage to impose themselves on collective belief and to create,

      by their mobilizing capacity, the conditions of their own realization. (p. 226)

I suggest that these "scientific mythologies" were the only necessary verification of Dirk's analysis—or, rather, prevented any consideration of the need for verification. Everybody *knew* the industry and workforce in our region were prone to abusing the WSP and so the higher numbers produced by the department surprised no one (except for those of us in the region). This was compounded by the established view that our competence was limited to delivery, so that any perspectives we shared on policy or data were viewed as not credible and thus easily dismissed.

The department's problem was that, with the change in government, not only did the new decision makers not accept the myths about the region *holus bolus*, but they also had direct knowledge of the industry's reality, right down to the level of individual plants, including the difficulties of obtaining sufficient labour. The challenge for our department became how to handle our change in approach, when higher-ups within the bureaucracy were either unaware of their biases or unwilling to address them and the significant overstatements in their analysis were due largely to these biases.

A compounding factor in this dilemma is the nature of policy development work, the value of which is often subjective—and belief in its effectiveness depends both on when it is evaluated and the perspective of those passing judgment. Policy work is most likely to go unquestioned when the advice given aligns strongly with the evaluator's ideology and views. This is illustrated by the evolution of our file, where the previous government was known to perceive our region as prone to overusing government programs. Challenges to accepted analysis face significant hostility and disbelief.[10] Once politicians or bureaucrats have determined their reality, policies and facts that reinforce it are easily accepted and considered good work. Even if that bias is sidestepped, once data has been made public, it is impossible to dispute the analysis without risking the department's credibility. Ironically,

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[10] There is also a suggestion that a motivating element on this file was the previous government's desire to reduce use of the WSP for fiscal and political reasons.

blame will fall on those who speak up and cause the department to look bad, rather than censuring the individuals who caused the actual error. Sheila and the department had already painted themselves into a corner; despite the new government's different views about the region, a reversal in policy advice regarding WSPs would have been difficult to manage, as it would have forced a reconsideration of the newly established more restrictive approach to TFWs.

## Power Dynamics and Relations

Having considered how these individuals could have made such errors, I examine how they were able to defend and protect their work with such success. Here the literature on power and power relations is helpful. There is broad interest in this subject, including its impact on what is accepted as knowledge within a society or organisation. Bourdieu (1977/2015) wrote extensively on this, noting (as referenced in my Project 1), that a major aspect of political power is the ability to impose the principles of the "construction of reality" (pp. 164–65). A number of key thinkers have considered how what is represented to be the "truth" is not absolute, but influenced by context (Foucault, 1994/2000, pp. 111–13), or that knowledge is "determined by power" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 226) or is a "product of art" (Dewey, 1929/2015, p. 382). In this project, I focus on the writings of Elias, Foucault and Bourdieu in examining the power dynamics at work in our department in terms of the evolution of this file. Each of these authors took the position that power is generally not merely a function of hierarchy, but a combination of many factors.

Elias (1908/1978) rejected the use of the word power in the sense that a person does or does not have it, as a relic of magico-mythical thinking, and famously said that "power is not an amulet possessed by one person and not by another; it is a structural characteristic of human relationships" (p. 74). In other words, it is not something that is possessed, but part of all human interactions, reflecting our interdependencies and *need* for each other. Stacey and Mowles (2016) summarised this perspective:

Power is this activity of enabling and constraining each other. The basis of power is *need*, so that when we need others more than they need us for love, money, status, or whatever, then they have more power over us than we have over them. However, this is never absolute because the power of the more powerful depends upon the recognition of the less powerful that this is indeed so. Furthermore, if those others come to need us more than we need them, then the power ratio shifts in our favour—power relations are dynamic. Elias expresses his relational view of power as ongoing processes of configuring power relations between people. Communicative co-operation arises in the process of people holding each other accountable for their actions in some way. They act towards each other in a manner that recognises their interdependence and so negotiate their actions with each other. (p. 402)

Elias (1983/1987) saw power as a function of ongoing processes, and enabling and constraining forces or coercions, which arise through formal and informal governance processes and practices. He used the term "power ratio" to describe the combination of basic determinants, including manpower, social capital, raw material resources, strategic position militarily, level of productivity, education, integration and so on (p. 74). While he used the term in his analysis of the threat of nuclear war and international state relations, I suggest that his concept of power ratio and assessment of the relative strengths and weaknesses of determinants is also applicable to a consideration of power relations.

Based on Elias's description of power I recognise a strong theme of interdependency pervading this file and our relationships within the department. If our region wanted recognition and success, we needed to maintain good relations with our headquarters colleagues and, in this sense; the power ratio was largely in their favour. They had access to the department's leadership, reputation and control over the policy process, including access to data. In contrast, we were often dependent on financial allocation decisions made by Sheila and her colleagues, and the department leadership generally accepted their

judgments uncritically, leaving us less likely to be listened to when there was a difference of opinion.

Headquarters was well positioned to defend and protect their data and analysis. They had a monopoly over the department's policy process, which gave them authority to create and maintain the reality represented by the data. In effect, it was good work because they said it was. While we continued our attempts to inject additional considerations, it was an uphill battle and, for the most part, defended against mightily by our headquarters colleagues.

French philosopher and historian, Michel Foucault, also took a social perspective on power. In their review of his work, social theorists Alec McHoul and Wendy Grace (2007) considered Foucault through the lenses of discourse, power and subjection, or the "theory of the self" (p. viii). Similar to Elias, Foucault advanced a more multi-dimensional approach to the consideration of power than those who describe power in terms of the relationship between sovereign and subject. McHoul and Grace (2007) paraphrased his view that any such attempt to limit the study of power "seriously underestimates the diverse, even 'polymorphous,' character of the relations of force extant in our society, and leaves unexplained the mechanisms required to connect and consolidate these relations" (p. 64).

McHoul and Grace (2007) described Foucault's ideas on power as moving us from the general undifferentiated concept of power to systems of power or power relations in which discourses are integrally part of the dynamic that is knowledge, truth and power. They characterised Foucault's idea of discourse as one that "shows the historically specific relations between disciplines (defined as bodies of knowledge) and disciplinary practices (forms of social control and social possibility)" (p. 26). In Foucault's words:

> … in a society such as ours, but basically in any society, there are manifold
> relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and
> these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor
> implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a

discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. (1980, p. 93)

Otherwise stated:

We should admit … that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (1975/1977, p. 27)

Furthermore, in his consideration of power, Foucault described it in terms of the techniques used in its exercise, which "all draw some authority by referring to scientific 'truths'" (McHoul and Grace, 2007, p. 65). In effect, according to Foucault, the question of how truth can be told is actually "by what techniques, according to what circumstances etc. is it possible for something to *count* as the truth …" (McHoul and Grace, 2007, p. 25).

I can see the significant influence of this discourse on evidence-based analysis (i.e., data, obtained scientifically and untainted by the bias of narrative[11]), which determines truth for the department and is used as the basis for government policy decisions. Data generated by individuals elected by economics and policy discourse as experts is inherently credible and accepted without question—and without *allowing* questions. These truths—or errors—were created and then perpetuated by the region's exclusion from most MINO briefings, by headquarters' control over data and the analytical process by unquestioned roles and

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[11] I note the irony that data portrayed as evidence-based and untainted by narrative was in fact accepted and judged correct *because* it aligned with the narrative/biases of the analysts and audience.

responsibilities, by economic analysis methodologies, and by departmental governance (e.g., the separation of policy and delivery functions).

## Symbolic Power and Symbols

In examining the power dynamics at play in this situation, I also find Bourdieu's analysis in *Language & Symbolic Power* (1982/2003) helpful in his consideration of various forms of capital (i.e., sources of power). I referred to his concept of *habitus* in Project 1, which British Sociologist John Thompson described in his introduction to the book as giving individuals:

> …a sense of how to act and respond in the course of their daily lives. It orients their actions and inclinations without strictly determining them. It gives them a 'feel for the game,' a sense of what is appropriate in the circumstances and what is not, a 'practical sense.' (p. 13)

He specified that individuals interact in specific social contexts or settings and thus behaviours, perceptions and practices are not merely founded in the *habitus*, but in the context of the "fields" (also called "games" or "markets") within which these interactions occur (Thompson, ed. in Bourdieu, p. 14). He suggested there are various forms of capital, including economic, cultural and symbolic, the relative quantities of which determine the "power" of individuals, who continually struggle to maintain or increase the capital available to them:

> The individuals who participate in these struggles will have differing aims …. But all individuals, whatever their aims and chances of success, will share in common certain fundamental presuppositions. All participants must believe in the game they are playing, and in the value of what is at stake in the struggles they are waging ….

> Hence the conduct of struggle within a field … always presupposes a fundamental accord or complicity on the part of those who participate in the struggle. (p. 14)[12]

Bourdieu described the concepts of symbolic power and capital as a form of power, rarely directly exercised, but rather, in the words of John B. Thompson in his introduction to *Language & Symbolic Power*:

> … it is transmuted into a symbolic form, and thereby endowed with a kind of *legitimacy* that it would not otherwise have …. the efficacy of symbolic power presupposes certain forms of cognition or belief, in such a way that even those who benefit least from the exercise of power participate, to some extent, in their own subjection. They recognize or tacitly acknowledge the legitimacy of power, or of the hierarchical relations of power in which they are embedded; and hence they fail to see that the hierarchy is, after all, an arbitrary social construction which serves the interests of some groups more than others. To understand the nature of symbolic power, it is therefore crucial to see that it presupposes a kind of *active complicity* on the part of those subjected to it … those subjected to it believe in the legitimacy of power and the legitimacy of those who wield it. (p. 23)

Fundamental to Bourdieu's analysis is that this is an invisible power, accepted by the dominated or governed. It "can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it" (p. 164), or

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[12] Bourdieu asserted that players' "practices never cease to comply with an economic logic" (1982/2003, p. 16); that the power of the dominant class "rests on economic capital" (p. 168); and that the social space is multi-dimensional, including fields subordinate to the field of economic production (p. 245). While somewhat tangential to my main theme, I find this latter element of his argument overly simplistic and not in accordance with my experience in the public service, where reputational capital, career advancement and hierarchical status are often much more important than economic status—and not just because the three might, in fact, translate into promotion.

elsewhere, "… the language of authority never governs without the collaboration of those it governs…" (p. 113). In particular, he suggested:

> … the more formal the market is the more practically congruent with the norms of the legitimate language, the more it is dominated by the dominant, i.e., by the holders of the legitimate competence, authorized to speak with authority. (p. 69)

My experience is that headquarters branches hold significantly greater power and influence than regions. In Bourdieu's words, they are the "holders of legitimate competence, authorized to speak with authority" (1982/2003, p. 69). This is partly driven by the fact that policy branches are located at headquarters, generally in the same building as the organisation's senior leaders (bureaucrats and politicians). They are more likely to have face time with senior management, ministers and other key staff, and thus build relationships and credibility. Regions, by definition, are not in headquarters—we attend most meetings by teleconference or videoconference,[13] do not brief ministers and are not part of the banter before and after meetings and around the water cooler. Recent cost cutting has increased the work we are expected to do virtually and reduced even further our physical presence at headquarters. The previous government had brought to a halt the practice of bureaucrats engaging with stakeholders external to the organisation, resulting in a further downgrading of the regions' status, as we had previously been key players in stakeholder engagement work.[14]

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[13] Further inquiry into the use of *virtual* meetings (video and teleconference) would be interesting—particularly those where some individuals attend in person. If one accepts that audible tone and intonation are only part of the data conveyed by a speaker (other aspects including facial expression and body language), arguably the full meaning of what is said is unavailable to participants attending virtually, such that some will have more complete data than others.

[14] This also created an environment in which the only evidence that counted was quantitative data and analysis, thus increasing the policy development's reliance on numbers.

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In my case, it was even more difficult. Sheila, who had been a senior player in the department for many years, was well liked with a solid reputation. I was fairly new, having taken over a region, which, as described in Project 1, is the smallest in the department, and has the (undeserved) reputation of being the least well managed of the four regions. This file developed shortly after my arrival, when I had not yet developed the reputation for good work and results that I enjoyed in my previous department. I was in a weaker power position from which to comment on her work and, by implication, challenge her reputation and status.

I did not fully understand how significant my change in role and status was from my previous department. I was head of a policy and program development sector at headquarters with regular contacts and interactions with department heads and MINOs. I had been there five years and successfully led a significant policy and program renewal agenda, including numerous trips to Cabinet and the enactment of several pieces of legislation. Given my tenure and performance, it is fair to say that I was one of the established, along the lines described by Elias and Scotson in *The Established and the Outsiders—A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems* (1965/1994). I was now an outsider from a region, with significantly reduced in-person contact with key decision makers and MINO, no history of performance in the department, outside of the policy hierarchy and in what I was finding to be a lower status group. Yet I had not adjusted my behaviour or interactions to recognise the very different *market conditions* (and power dynamics) in which I now found myself. Ironically, I now believe my continuing attempts to get this issue addressed only served to affirm their view of us as lower status, placing me in the uncomfortable position of having to fall into line in order to be credible. Conversely, every time someone (like me) chose *not* to speak out, we assisted in establishing a community where it is not possible to do so. It was a non-virtuous loop.

Elias and Scotson (1965/1994) described the use and function of gossip and how it reinforced the "community of the righteous" or the established community within the village of Winston Parva (pp. 89–105). They identified both *praise gossip* (designed to

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reinforce the stories the established wanted told about themselves) as well as *blame gossip* (which emphasised the poor behaviours of the outsider group):

Thus in this small setting one encountered and, to some extent, learned to understand an optical illusion characteristic of the making of social images in many other much wider social settings: the image which the "established," which powerful ruling sections of a society have of themselves and communicate to others tends to be modelled on the "minority of the best"; it inclines towards idealisation. The image of "outsiders," of groups who have in relation to the "established" sections relatively little power tends to be modelled on the "minority of the worst"; it inclines towards denigration. (p. 7)

While our region has become the poster child for abuse of the WSP and other government programs, we are not the only region where these programs have been overused. However, whenever the issue is discussed, our region and the industry are always identified as the problem area—an example of blame gossip modelled on the "minority of the worst." In a recent meeting with senior officials from another level of government within the region, it was pointed out that despite the existence of issues with these programs across the country; almost without exception, attention is focused on us as the example of where abuse must be stamped out.

In examining the various forms of symbolic power and capital in play in this situation, Dirk—a Rhodes Scholar with impeccable credentials—would be branded a *high potential* employee. Bourdieu (1982/2003) described the power of the *investiture* as *"the veritably magical act of *institution* by which the party officially *consecrates* the official candidate at an election, and which marks the transmission of political capital" (p. 195). Similarly, he discussed the importance and the power of official naming and of titles. In his view:

> The professional or academic title is a sort of legal rule of social perception, a being-perceived that is guaranteed as a right. It is symbolic capital in an institutionalized, legal (and no longer merely legitimate) form …. The qualification is in itself an *institution* … it is not the relative value of the work which determines

> the value of the name, but the institutionalized value of the title which acts as an
> instrument serving to defend and maintain the value of the work." (p. 241)

In the absence of the ability to determine whether policy advice and analysis is good, the *source* of the advice or analysis (e.g., the person giving it) becomes critical in terms of relying on such advice to support political decisions. As a high-potential bureaucrat, Dirk was an unquestionable source. He and his group were practitioners of economic analysis, a disproportionately influential occupation in the federal government, considered an excellent skill set for public servants. If Canada has perhaps escaped the worst excesses of neo-liberalism, this approach to government and governing is still highly influential and economists are the high priests and priestesses of that calling. In a competition between the high-status economist and low-status operational manager, I suspect the former will always win.

John Dewey is helpful in trying to make sense of the status differential between headquarters/policy and the region/operations. In *The Quest for Certainty* (1929/1984) he wrote about what he perceived to be the denigration of practice and the high value placed on theory, suggesting that it stems from the desire to pursue certainty in an uncertain world:

> This phase of the discussion will disclose that exaltation of pure intellect and its
> activity above practical affairs is fundamentally connected with the quest for a
> certainty which shall be absolute and unshakeable. The distinctive characteristic of
> practical activity, one which is so inherent that it cannot be eliminated, is the
> uncertainty which attends it. Of it we are compelled to say: Act, but act at your
> peril. Judgment and belief regarding actions to be performed can never attain more
> than a precarious probability. Through thought, however it has seemed that men
> might escape from the perils of uncertainty. (p. 6)

In *Experience and Nature* (1929/2015), he described the distinction that arose in Greek society between the mechanical arts—which dealt with "means," involved learning by doing, and was the occupation of the socially inferior—and the liberal arts—which dealt

with "ends" and matters "having a final and intrinsic worth" and occupied those in positions of authority (pp. 90–92). He suggested that this glorification of ends over means persists in the distinction between the university educated and those working on the shop floor, and traced the development of thinking from the Greeks' reverence for pure intellectual inquiry through to the impact of religions such as Christianity—with their vision of values being antecedent and related to the ideal Being—to the embrace of natural sciences and the scientific method. Despite the natural sciences' adoption of experiential analysis, Dewey suggested that in the social sciences, in particular, philosophy, there is an "elevation of knowledge above making and doing," and an "exaltation of pure intellect and its activity above practical affairs" (p. 5).

My experience confirms that practice is still held in lower esteem than theory. While we pay lip service to the importance of service delivery, the department's policy branches are significantly more influential. Despite regions making up three-quarters of the department's workforce, headquarters' personnel receive a disproportionate access to educational and developmental opportunities. At meetings confirming executive placements, regions are asked if relevant headquarters colleagues had been consulted; the latter are never asked the same question. When a business line in headquarters determines the need to create and staff another executive position, there appear to be few constraints on their exercise of discretion, while a region's ability to do so is severely restricted. I have often heard comments that regions are *simply operational* or that we *just deliver services* and have neither a role nor expertise in the department's policy work. In this case, we did not even have access to the relevant data, which was controlled by Dirk and his staff, and so were unable to do our own due diligence but had to wait to be invited into the discussion. This usually happened at the last minute—documents arrived a day before a meeting and often *after* they were publicly released, preventing us from contributing at all. By the time we were involved, the script had been written and our influence was nil.

Dewey (1891) effectively dismissed generalities and abstractions, noting that "There is no such thing as conduct in general; conduct is what and where and when and how to the last

inch" (p. 191). Every detail about conduct makes a difference in terms of what happens because of specific actions. For example, in a discussion between two co-workers, it is not only the words that are used, but also the tone of voice, physical posture, facial expressions and even the timing of comments that can change how the conversation affects the relationship or work project.

I note the attraction of certainty and abstractions in our interactions with headquarters. At headquarters, policy analysis is generally called the *big picture* and, while usually based on some form of data, for the purposes of discussion, debate and ultimately recommendations, it is generally couched in the abstract. In contrast, in the regions we cannot rely on abstractions as we deal with day-to-day realities in our implementation of policies.[15] Dewey (1891) recognised that abstract rules do not provide the needed guidance required in specific situations:

> … but I must repeat that a man's duty is never to obey certain rules; his duty is always to respond to the nature of the actual demands which he finds made upon him, demands which do not proceed from abstract rules, nor from ideals, however awe-inspiring and exalted, but from the concrete relations to men and things in which he finds himself. (pp. 199–200)

In Project 1, I discuss the challenges of complexity and the impossibility of predicting or controlling events due to the impact of non-linear dynamics. In seeking some degree of certainty and predictability in an increasingly complex world, I have already noted the enthusiastic embrace of evidence-based public policy by most governments in the developed world, including Canada. Thus, the scene is set for a situation in which data and analysis coming from a highly respected source is readily accepted—and vigorously

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[15] There is a well-known joke about policymaking in government, which compares it to making sausages—both processes may have good results, but you really do not want to see them happening.

defended from challenge—despite being misleading or inaccurate, which seems to confirm Foucault's views about the link between power and knowledge.

## Reflections on Identity, Status and Shame and their Effect on Power Relations

Throughout this narrative, there are themes of embarrassment and saving face—for the department, Sheila and Dirk, the region, and myself. Stacey and Mowles (2016) drew on Norbert Elias's writings on shame and civilisation, noting that he argued for a close connection between civilisation and shame, as "shame is produced by any kind of transgression against the rules of society that others can 'see.' As people become more self-disciplined and self-aware, their thresholds of repugnance rise" (p. 410). Bourdieu (1982/2003) suggested that as one rises in the hierarchy, demands for proper form and *euphemization* increase together with the required amount of censorship (p. 84). My own experience suggests that these rises in status are accompanied by greater requirements for self-discipline and, result in greater shame in the event of transgression. The higher the profile (and thus visibility) of senior management (e.g., Sheila and Dirk), the greater was the reliance on their work and thus their resulting loss of credibility and status if they erred.

Although I felt that we managed this file as well as possible, I experienced a sense of shame and inferiority throughout the process. Each time I intervened to counter problems with data, I was conscious of Sheila and her group's disapproval and of the department head's annoyance with our continued concerns about the numbers. While the official position was that we needed to resolve these issues, Sheila's status ensured that her continued denial and defence of their analysis endured. In turn, I felt that I was labelled as difficult to work with. I received negative feedback in my performance review from my deputy head, who claimed that I was not corporate and had mishandled the MINO briefing. Even though I was quite confident that my interventions had been appropriate and required, I felt that the situation had developed as it had because I was a lower status member of the department.

On reflection, I see how power dynamics and the consequences of not complying had served to discipline me into playing my role and, in the process, reinforced the power

relations I had been struggling against. Consequently, I found myself increasingly less likely to speak up on this file, to the point that if, in that second meeting, the senior department head had not specifically asked for my thoughts; I would likely have remained silent. Bourdieu (1982/2003) considered how censorship and self-censorship function in what he referred to as the "market," where:

> … speakers take into account—in varying ways and to differing extents—the market conditions within which their products will be received and valued by others. The speaker's assessment of the market conditions, and the anticipation of the likely reception of his or her linguistic products, operate as internalized constraints on the very process of production. Individuals implicitly and routinely modify their expressions in anticipation of their likely reception. (pp. 19–20)

Bourdieu noted that the effect of censorship is more powerful where there are larger differences in capital between parties (p. 78).[16] The culture of the senior management table frowned on frank commentary and rewarded euphemistic participation. The more familiar I became with the culture of the department, the more I found myself self-censoring in meetings and making decisions amounting to which hill to die on. This pressure also came from my staff, who early on pushed me to stand down in the battle over numbers. They saw no benefit and, likely, more risk to the region in continuing to pursue this. Part of their

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[16] Alvesson and Spicer's (2012) work on *functional stupidity* referred to in Project 1 pointed out the impossibility of calling into question dominant beliefs and expectations in organisations. Mowles (2015a) also described situations in which inappropriate practices over a significant period and involving a large number of people continued and that "in each of these cases the ability to raise doubts and questions publicly was severely curtailed" (p. 66). Michael Lewis (2010), in *The Big Short*, wrote about events leading up to the financial crisis of 2008, in particular, the mass blindness throughout the financial industry that allowed the misuse of bonds and resulting accumulation of risk that eventually decimated the financial markets. Likewise, David Orrell in *Economyths* (2010) questioned why no one foresaw the financial crisis. He examined assertions and "proofs" of classical economics, concluding that as a tool for analysis and economy regulation they have outlived their usefulness (p. 237) and yet persisted because it was good for elites in power (p. 173).

concern—and increasingly my own—was that I was simply reproducing the *habitus* by continuing to push for recognition of this point.[17] By the time I spoke up at the department head's meeting, I had learned not to directly make assertions about my concerns on the data—instead, I couched my comments in veiled suggestions and indirect comments and, for the first time, felt I made headway on the file.

Another helpful perspective in understanding this dynamic and how these interactions were also struggles for identity and status, is suggested by Coser (1957). He noted that demands by frustrated individuals to receive their fair share are met with resistance by those with vested interests such as honour, wealth and power, who experience them as an attack on their position and the social order (p. 203). Our demand was for participation in the analytical process and, to maintain her position, Sheila was unable to admit any error in the analysis; regardless how low the number of individuals theoretically available for work; she continued to insist that they showed a problem. Organisational development scholar Doug Griffin (2006), in *The Emergence of Leadership—Linking Self-Organization and Ethics,* also described the tensions and conflicts between groups gaining and losing functions (p. 197), and in this case, we might have been viewed as intruding on headquarters' turf, challenging their monopoly over policy function.

We felt our hands to be tied, as we had neither the status nor the credibility to do other than comply—and in some cases, collude—with the organisation's dominant discourse. If we continued to resist, we risked exclusion, denigration and losing any remaining credibility, further weakening our position and ability to do our job. This highlights the nature of interdependence among individuals in a complex society that Elias (1987/1991) described:

> By virtue of this ineradicable interdependence of individual functions the actions of
> many separate individuals, particularly in a society as complex as our own, must

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[17] Other issues on which we were fighting a rear-guard action and trying to redress the consequences of having long been a low-status region—notably, the budget issue addressed in Project 1, exacerbated this.

> incessantly link together to form long chains of actions if the actions of each
> individual are to fulfil their purposes. And in this way each individual person is
> really tied; he is tied by living in permanent functional dependence on other people,
> just as all others, directly or indirectly, are links in the chains which bind him ….
> And it is the network of the functions which people have for each other, it and
> nothing else, that we call society. (p. 16)

While we were conflicted over the way the file had developed, we found ourselves caught up in trying to protect the department and, by implication, our headquarters' colleagues. Our interdependence meant that our interests were entwined. As much as Sheila and her team were the source of intense frustration, we needed to preserve our working relationship. Moreover, the complex network of relationships within the department demanded that we do so to avoid repercussions for our work with other colleagues. James Scott (1985) wrote about the "politics of reputation" in his work, *Weapons of the Weak*, describing the impact on peasantry of the Green Revolution in Malay. He noted that "a good name is conferred in exchange for adherence to a certain code of conduct" (p. 185); and, certainly, my reputation as a good corporate partner was tied to my preparedness to play the game prescribed by departmental culture.

It was intensely frustrating. We tried to inject a more realistic approach to data analysis but had neither the status nor the internal credibility to redirect the efforts and recommendations of the department on a timely basis, and so were unable to ensure that the discussion and recommendations reflected reality on the ground. James Scott (1990) noted in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* that "slights to one's dignity and close surveillance and control of one's work loom at least as large in accounts of oppression as do narrower concerns of work and compensation" (p. 23), which easily describes the impact of this situation on the region's executive and on me.

I am driven to consider—for both the region and Sheila's group—the impact of getting caught up in issues such as this, and whether the resulting emotional conflict prevents us from engaging more effectively with each other. Elias (1983/1987), in highlighting issues

of involvement and detachment, suggested that greater emotional involvement comes with a decreased ability to understand and "control" events (pp. 66–67). Earlier Elias (1908/1978) commented that the greater the anger and passion involved the less chance there is of more realistic, less fantasy-laden thought (p. 22).

In his consideration of Elias, Mowles (2015a) referred to his concept of the "airman and the swimmer" and how it suggested that to understand social life, one must be both involved and detached at the same time:

Elias argues that it is only from the perspective of the airman that we are able to gain some detachment, a relatively undistorted view of the order of the long course of historical changes and the way we are forming and are formed by them. These long-term historical trends are extremely hard to resist, even by very powerful coalitions of people or groups.

However, there is nothing inevitable about our actions and reactions to the processes in which we find ourselves participating. Only by adopting the perspective of the swimmer, who is obliged to take action in the moment itself, is it possible to see how varied are the different pressures that are brought to bear on the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves acting, in order that we might create opportunities to bring about outcomes of a different kind. (p. 52)

In this case, we were increasingly frustrated with our helplessness and inability to perform successfully our role of providing on-the-ground advice. From Sheila's perspective, we were an upstart region that knew nothing about policymaking and data analysis, trying to tell her team how to do its job. It grew worse as the file evolved and it became increasingly clear that we might have something to offer beyond their expertly generated analysis. The potential negative impact on her group's reputation caused them to strengthen their defence of the numbers. High emotions and threats to identity and status affecting both sets of players in this narrative suggest that we all lacked the required detachment in the sense described by Elias to manage effectively the situation. I think it likely that the longer this drama continued, the more magnified became our differences.

Conclusions

This narrative raised the question of how misconceived work could be accepted and become influential in the policy development work of a government department, despite substantive challenges from those with greater in-depth knowledge of the industry. I considered how intelligent people could make significant analytical errors and, once made, how these errors could be successfully protected and defended.

In my analysis, I noted the generally accepted perspective in Canadian public service that policy is based on evidence and data. This experience shows that the analysis of relevant data may be influenced and shaped by social relations and founded patterns of thinking (Dewey, 1929/2015, p. 14; Bourdieu, 1982/2003, p. 226). Once made public, reputational costs for individuals and the department ensured that the data was protected and accepted as good work. In considering how this happened, I took a perspective on power relations influenced by Foucault, Elias and Bourdieu.

Elias (1987/1991) held a relational view on power and noted the ongoing interdependencies, processes and enabling and constraining forces that configure power relations. In this case, headquarters and the region were interdependent and needed to continue to work together. Due to their location, reputation, relationships and involvement in highly valued policy development work, headquarters' position was higher-status than that of the region, with its lesser-valued service delivery role. Foucault's perspective on power (1975/1977) emphasised the importance of the relevant field of knowledge in determining the production of truth. In this case, the field of knowledge was economic analysis and the truth was represented by the data and analysis generated by the high-status group of economists; disciplinary tactics and consequential self-censoring supported the maintenance of this truth. Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic power and symbols (2003) are helpful to understand how the reputation, status and relationships of headquarters also influenced outcomes.

Finally, I considered how identity, status and shame affected and perpetuated ongoing power dynamics within the department.

In my third project, I explore how issues of governance, accountability and identity and their interplay affect power relations in my work.

## Project Three – A Focus on Conversations

### Introduction

In this project, I continue my consideration of how I can be effective in my role, despite operating from a marginalised position. In Projects One and Two, I considered elements of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977/2015, pp. 78-87; Thompson, ed. in Bourdieu, 1982/2003, pp. 12-14) and power relations and their impact on the interplay between my region and colleagues at headquarters. I noted that, despite the generally accepted positivist approach to data and analysis in the Canadian public service, analysis of relevant data was influenced and shaped by social relations (Dewey, 1929/2015) and accepted patterns of thinking (Bourdieu, 1982/2003). Once the analysis became public, reputational costs for both individuals and the department demanded that it be protected and presented as good work despite its errors, which resulted in adverse consequences for the department. In understanding this dynamic, I took a perspective on power influenced by Foucault (1975/1977, 1980, 1994/2000), Elias (1908/1978, 1983/1987, 1987/1991), Elias and Scotson (1965/1994) and Bourdieu (1977/2015, 1982/2003) to consider the ongoing processes configuring power relations within the department. This led me to examine how the higher reputation, status and relationships enjoyed by the policy side of the department enabled them to control how data was analysed and used in their work on policy development, and why they enjoyed the higher reputation and status in the first place.

I continue here my focus on the challenges of managing a large and complex operational organisation from a distance (often via teleconference or videoconference), working with partners both internal and external to the department. I explore a narrative centred on *surprise*, an unexpected event that affected one of our in-person service delivery sites, and the inevitability of surprises in a complex organisation, looking at it from the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey and Mowles, 2016). I reflect on the nature of conversations within organisations, referring to the phrase "conversation of gestures" coined by Mead (1934/1967, pp. 45–46), and their role and importance in managing once

the inevitability of surprises is accepted. I also consider the work of organisational theorist Patricia Shaw (2002) on ensemble improvisation.

As I deepen my inquiry into social theories of management and organisations, and complex responsive processes of relating, I no longer believe that there is a *right* way to approach our challenges, and I reject the concept of *managing change* in the sense that *managing* is often understood—i.e., directing or controlling. Instead, I am concentrating on how we, as a group of people engaged in common enterprise, *manage*—in the sense of coping or achieving our aims—to figure out the next best steps. Once again, I am drawn to the advice of Chris Mowles (2015a):

> In pragmatic terms the best we can produce is what helps us to take the next step together, by which time we may be facing a completely different set of problems. (p. 144)

## Setting the Scene

One element of my operations is the delivery of services such as workforce support, Canada Pension Plan benefits and passports at in-person locations across the region. We deliver services on a full-time basis at about 60 sites, and part-time at fewer than 30 scheduled outreach sites. There are several partners involved in the management of these sites. Pertinent to this narrative is the Chief Financial Officer Branch (CFOB), which manages the national accommodations portfolio, setting policies on site standards and the allocation of departmental funding between competing projects as well as interfacing with other federal departments responsible for real estate and technology. The person responsible for accommodations within CFOB nationally is Peggy, who is situated in the region and thus easily accessible to us. Day-to-day, however, the key individual in CFOB managing our accommodation needs is Cindy.

The other principal department relevant to this narrative is Public Works (PW), responsible for negotiations with landlords and managing the real property inventory associated with

our operations, including construction and leasehold projects. Cindy deals directly with their staff, although at my level, most interactions are with Catherine, the Regional Director General, new to the region and the third in a series of directors since my arrival.

CFOB and PW work from templates or lists of all our premises, which show salient information such as when leases expire. Significantly, in advance of a lease's expiration date, they work with us to determine our intentions for the property. Contact is made with the landlord and negotiations commence. We allow sufficient time to avoid surprises, and the transition between lease terms is generally smooth. Most discussions happen at the operational level, with individuals that are more senior being involved only when unusual issues arise or when they are required to approve the final listing of sites. Each party has their role in the process, and interactions tend to focus on a specific work site or issue.

Site management is clearly the responsibility of the bureaucracy in its role of managing operations and delivering programs and policies, while the political side of government is responsible for determining policies and programs. However, in the tradition of the expression "all politics is local,"[18] the Minister's Office (MINO) is keenly interested in any significant changes to or issues involving our sites that might impact local clients (i.e., voters) such as landlords, who are generally not shy about making their concerns heard (if, for example, their lease is not being renewed).

When I arrived in the region, there was not a strong working relationship at senior levels between the two departments. I undertook to meet regularly with Catherine's predecessors, which paid off in terms of our ability to manage the inevitable challenges related to accommodations. However, I had met with Catherine only briefly to welcome her to the region, and scheduling difficulties had frustrated our attempts to hold a substantive meeting.

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[18] This expression is generally associated with the former long-time US Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neill, commenting on the importance of keeping local constituents happy (Pierce, 2015; Alarcon, 2012).

## Back from Vacation

I had just returned from three weeks of vacation at my home in Dieuville, Nova Scotia, and I was preparing for what we call a *bilat*—short for *bilateral*, a one-on-one meeting between two individuals—with my boss, Robert. In this instance, there were three of us, as his Chief of Staff generally joins these meetings.

We regularly have bilats to discuss the business of the region and whatever is currently top of the issues' hit parade. One item on my list was a rather unwelcome surprise that had surfaced while I was away: what we had all thought would be an easy lease renewal was now unlikely to happen, as the new landlord had other plans for the property.

This was a full-time site in Aylesford, on Caribou Island, in the north of the province. Caribou, connected to mainland Nova Scotia by a causeway, is rural and, for the most part, sparsely populated. Aylesford itself is a small town with a population between 1,000–1,500 people, most of whom are heavily dependent on the seasonal industries of fishing and tourism. The Aylesford office site is rented from a third party and, as the lease was due to expire at the end of August; we understood that PW had been negotiating its renewal with the landlord. In mid-June, my staff were told that the property had been sold and that PW was in contact with the new owner. At the end of July, however, we were advised that the new owner was not interested in a long-term lease but would agree to a short-term extension to the end of December.

This was very late notice and highly problematic given the potential for disruption of operations. The issue received significant attention and was widely discussed by employees and within the community. The political side of the department also became involved and expressed concern that we had not given earlier notice of the development to headquarters so that it could be included in regular briefings with MINO. The department's Parliamentary Secretary from the area raised the issue and was briefed on it. As I was on vacation, Helen, one of my Director Generals acting on my behalf, had been heavily involved.

As usual, our bilat was by telephone. Robert and his Chief of Staff were on the line—the two of them sitting together in Ottawa and me in my office. I advised him that PW had been unable to find a suitable site in Aylesford and was proposing a temporary (minimum 18 months) relocation to Alterna, a slightly smaller community about 36 kilometres (45 minutes by car) south towards the causeway, while they built a new site in Aylesford. This was clearly not a welcome alternative in terms of its impact on either our clients or employees. Winter driving conditions on the island are extremely hazardous due to weather and to the high incidence of animals on the road, both made worse by the lack of light during commuting hours. While the relocation would require our employees to drive daily to Alterna, it did not appear that there was any alternative.

When I finished outlining the situation, Robert addressed what seemed to be the key point for him. Why, he asked, were we taken by surprise by the cancellation of the lease? Why had we not foreseen events and provided MINO with more notice? I responded that my understanding was that we had only just learned of the circumstances ourselves, but I had just returned from vacation and would provide a chronology of events to give him a better understanding of the situation.

We did follow up with his office to explain how and why matters had developed. The information that PW appeared to have been misled by the new landlord seemed to appease Robert's concerns. My staff continued to work with PW and our colleagues in the CFOB responsible for accommodations in the department to find a solution to the problem. About a month later PW came back with what they felt was a fully acceptable interim solution— another site in Aylesford. We were, of course, delighted and I had the pleasure of telling Robert we had solved the problem. I assumed that PW had considered the usual considerations such as security, accessibility, costs, etc. However, within days, staff responsible for security in our region advised their boss (Matthew, one of my Director Generals) that the proposed site was on the second floor of a building with no elevator and, being inaccessible, was not suitable for our use. When we raised this with PW, they insisted that it was the only option other than Alterna and that we would have to sign a waiver

saying that we had been advised of the lack of accessibility (of the proposed site) and accepted the location regardless of this issue. This was a complete non-starter for us. The federal government was working on legislation to increase accessibility requirements for government and federally regulated businesses and I felt it would be unwise to enter into any arrangement that was not compliant. We responded that we were not prepared to sign an accessibility waiver, and that we had considered the Alterna option in view of its negative impact on clients and employees and were not prepared to relocate.

This was not the first time that we had experienced challenges with PW. When I first arrived in the region, I inherited two projects—a new in-person site in Portsville and a processing site in Lakeview, both of which had significant issues. Portsville had no parking and no suitable disabled entrance. Lakeview had insufficient onsite parking for employees and no offsite parking except for illegal street parking. In winter, it was even more problematic as streets needed to be kept clear for snowploughing operations. Technically, however, both facilities met government standards and so were tendered, accepted and built, leaving us in the region to deal with the ensuing problems.

### It's a Surprise!

Thinking about this now, I reflect on the concept of surprise, which has been considered by writers in the context of complexity. Filbee-Dexter, Pittman, Haig, Alexander, Symons and Burke (2017) considered a number of ways that ecologists have defined surprise, concluding that it describes something that happens contrary to all expectation or anticipation.[19] Complexity scholars Reuben R. McDaniel and Dean J. Driebe, in

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[19] As an example of the impact of chance on the evolution of events, my consideration of the concept of surprise came as the consequence of a power outage, which drove my niece, Karen, and me to a local coffee shop in search of both power and coffee. I was working on my Project and she was responding to reviewers' comments on a paper that she and others had submitted for publication as a follow-up to the paper cited above. In our chat, it became

*Uncertainty and Surprise in Complexity Systems: Questions on Working with the Unexpected* (2005), proposed that surprise is a fundamental aspect of the world around us because we cannot know what will happen in the future. They dismiss the commonplace description of organisations as machines. Instead, they suggest that they are self-organising systems in which new structures and forms of behaviours emerge as a consequence of the non-linear interactions of participants and events, in which "they co-evolve with each other and with the environment in a constant dance of change" (p. 6). More simply stated: "Organizations are experiments in progress" (p. 9). Wardrup (1992) addressed this inevitability in his book, *Complexity—The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos:*

> …it's essentially meaningless to talk about a complex adaptive system being in equilibrium: the system can never get there. It is always unfolding, always in transition. In fact, if the system ever does reach equilibrium, it isn't just stable. It's dead. (p. 147)

While I hesitate to think of organisations as systems,[20] these considerations of surprise are helpful. They acknowledge our inability to predict or control the future—constraints inherent in managing complexity—and how, despite all best efforts, surprises will inevitably occur. In a self-organising, complex world—continually evolving as change emerges from the interplay between the millions of interactions of individuals—the future is unknowable and prediction and control are impossible (Stacey and Mowles, 2016, pp. 445, 505–07). This understanding poses a challenge for traditional approaches to

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clear that while our surprises occurred in quite different situations, both were a result of the failure to anticipate a development and were contributed to and exacerbated by a failure to have effective conversations earlier in the process.

[20] Referring to organisations as systems is problematic both because it reifies them and for reasons related to their inherently complex natures, which are discussed at length by Stacey and Mowles (2016, pp. 191–95).

organisational planning and management, including the management of accommodations. Change—small and large—is constant, and our approach needs to consider this. We organise planning sessions to identify what we need do to ensure that leases are in place and sites are suitable for our operations. However, given that the organisation and the context in which we operate is changing even as these planning discussions happen—and, paradoxically, is changed *by* the planning discussions—the traditional approach of finalising, writing down and publishing a plan misses the point that such a plan is immediately out of date. As part of this process, we make extensive use of templates to capture and summarise data about our sites. Once data is entered in a template, it is assumed correct and verified, effectively freezing reality and pre-determining future *what's* and *how's*. A reliance on templates can lead to a false sense of security and a propensity to hold assumptions that may be invalid, especially when we fail to update templates (and assumptions) as events unfold and the environment evolves. I am not against planning—clearly, it is important to talk about what we think is going to happen and what we would like to happen. My caution is around the artifacts produced because of planning processes, which are often assumed predictive of what will happen. I suggest that, as we work on how to make sense of what *is* happening and how to act together effectively, we need to pay attention to how we work with these artifacts and processes to enable better exploration of the issues.

Complexity scholars McDaniel, Jordan and Fleeman (2003) noted that surprises are generally unwelcome and viewed in organisations as dysfunctional (p. 266). Often managed by blaming someone else (Weick and Sutcliffe, (2001, p. 7), bounded rationality (Simon, 1991), or tight coupling (Perrow, 1984, pp. 89-94), it is assumed that surprises can be avoided through more and better knowledge and planning and/or better systems design (Yourstone and Smith, 2002). Instead, McDaniel et al (2003) proposed an organisational practice that actively accepts there will be surprises and develops a capacity for "surprise readiness," including a practice of active reflection and reflective action, rather than looking for invariable rules or predictions (pp. 275–76), or what Goldenfeld and Kadanoff

(1999) termed "fundamental laws true for all time." They highlighted the importance of sensemaking and recommended embracing opportunities for bricolage and improvisation —as well as a willingness to question, explore and experiment—to address this immutable challenge of uncertainty (p. 89).

Robert's comments reflect the general attitude in my department (and government) that surprises are negative, unwelcome and generally a sign that someone, somewhere, dropped the ball. I have often heard Deputies say that we need to be a 'no surprises' environment. Robert's question implied to me that I should have been more in control of things and/or somehow managed more effectively so that we were aware of this development sooner. This suggests what Mowles (2015b) described as the magico-mythical thinking found in much literature on leadership, portraying the:

> …leader as an authentic visionary who can inspire and motivate because of innate charismatic characteristics that they "have," while producing results and turning everything to the good. (p. 113)

Patricia Shaw (2002) also explores the "heroic leadership myth" in organisations and the expectation:

> …that the task of leaders was to have a good overview, a grasp of the big picture, the real state of affairs which enabled them to direct and co-ordinate the activity of an enterprise. (p. 140)

In the context of a large and complex environment such as the one in which I work, it is a fair question to ask what I, as heroic leader, should or could have done to prevent this surprise. As non-linear dynamics dictate that a small event can conceivably have a disproportionately large impact on operations (Stacey and Mowles, 2016, p. 38), the number of variables I would have needed to monitor is unlimited. In such a world, it is difficult to understand how it is possible to prevent surprises. Assuming that I have talented and experienced managers working for me (and I do), to what else do I need pay attention? How do I separate it (whatever *it* is) from the other issues in play? What details should I

focus on? When I do pay attention, what do I do? We had a process to manage our accommodations and worked closely with our partners to keep abreast of events and developments. What then did we miss? Alternatively, should we accept that we could not completely prevent surprises and try to increase the chances that we would identify information of significance as early as possible? When we do become aware of this information, what do we do with it that will be helpful?

Robert was not the only one questioning why we had been so surprised. I also wondered how we had been unaware of the change of ownership and the new landlord's refusal to renew the lease. Apparently, it was common knowledge that the new owner was buying a number of properties. Everyone knew that this property had been sold—and it is hard to believe that the town's rumour mill had not made this information widely available. Yet neither PW nor our staff had heard it. If our local staff knew, the information had not made its way to management and those for whom it would have constituted an actionable piece of information. Living in a small village as I do, and knowing how quickly news spreads, I found this puzzling. How we could have missed this? Why did local staff not share the gossip? Were PW and CFOB really on top of things? Looking at this now, I am conflicted as to whether this second-guessing was fair. Our operations are numerous, and we do not have staff on the ground throughout the region. Expecting us to know the minutiae of every community in which we are located is unrealistic. However, it bothered me that we might have discovered this earlier, increasing our ability to react effectively to the new development.

## A Concern for Conversations

The next significant discussion around the issue happened four months later at a regular regional senior management meeting. Mathew (responsible for in-person service delivery), Shelly (my lead on integrity and security work for the region) and I were at the table, while other members joined via video link or telephone.

I always enjoy these meetings, mostly because of my high regard for the team. While they take their work seriously and are passionate about what we do, there is a familiarity among us and there is often teasing around the table and lots of laughter. I have been part of this group for almost four years and am able to participate actively in the give-and-take, understanding the in-jokes and allusions to past events. While many attend by videoconference, the relationships and trust around the table allow for good discussions of challenging issues.

On the agenda was a report of the working group set up at a previous senior management meeting, which I had not been able to attend in person. It took place soon after we had become aware of the Aylesford issue, and there had been a lively discussion about how we could have been so taken by surprise and why we had no Plan B. This led to a more general conversation on accommodations and how well we were or were not managing them, agreeing in conclusion that we had been neither sufficiently proactive nor informed. We tended to rely on PW and CFOB, both of whom have different priorities and rationalities, which might not align with ours. What I notice about this narrative is that our contexts and corresponding organisational mandates led to different approaches or ideas of what was acceptable for our use.

Because of this discussion, we had set up a small working group to review our accommodations across the region and make recommendations to senior management. A complicating factor was that we were actively adding accommodations due to a recent increase in hiring. Our political masters wanted to improve the speed and effectiveness of service delivery and provided resources to support this work, which meant hiring new staff and finding accommodations for them. Other regions had limited success in doing so; however, we had managed to increase capacity disproportionately to our size, which we all welcomed. Such activity, however, was usually rushed, in reaction to a request from headquarters, and at the business line level rather than regionally (although I approved it as

head of the region). Accommodations capacity was an increasingly valued commodity as expansion happened opportunistically wherever there was room to put new hires.[21]

When the issue of Aylesford inevitably surfaced, Mathew (who was now in a different role) noted that it was only at the behest of his previous security team that we had become aware of the accessibility issue. He posed the question—almost rhetorically—how the issue could have gone so far without us learning about it. He referred to the creation of the working group and, although their recommendations had been approved, he noted that their work had been neglected in the rush to hire new capacity. He repeated his concerns that we were too reactive and relied too heavily on CFOB and PW, such that when things went wrong, as with Aylesford, we had no other options. In his view, their priorities were determining our agenda. CFOB, who had the final say on what was resourced, was mainly concerned about reducing the overall cost of the national properties' portfolio. PW were bound by rules and regulations that did not reflect our business needs or consider the impacts on our clients and employees. Decisions were often made in response to an opportunity to bring more business to the region, when our partners identified the need to make a decision, or when a lease was about to end. From Matthew's perspective, we needed to make sure that the right conversations were happening among the senior management team and that we were being sufficiently intentional about how we managed accommodations.

Following Matthew's intervention, there was general discussion and agreement that we needed to be more proactive in managing the issue as a region. In the short term, the working group was asked to update its review to reflect additional considerations, and we agreed to finalise the list in the following two weeks for the purpose of determining short-term investment needs. We also identified a need to re-examine how we manage

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[21] When the region was downsized five years earlier, the number of what we call *footprint sites* was significantly reduced, and staff in those locations were forced to relocate or lose their jobs. There was now significant sensitivity about expanding anywhere other than in these locations due to concerns about employee and union reaction, further reducing capacity for staffing expansion.

accommodations and we dedicated upcoming meeting time of the region's leadership to that end.

I was very uncomfortable during this meeting. I had not been at the previous meeting in person and, while I had been vaguely aware of the working group, I had not really focused on their work. I worried that this confirmed that I was not on top of things in the region. Directly after this meeting, Mathew and I had one of our regular bilats and I used the opportunity to learn more about the creation of the working group and the issues we had just discussed. In our private conversation, he expressed his frustrations more fully, claiming that CFOB was not sufficiently creative or flexible, and complaining that Cindy had been working with the individual business line leads, circumventing regional Strategic Committee decisions. He noted that, as the result, 83 people had been hired in Newfoundland and only six in Nova Scotia, and the latter had all been jammed into a single boardroom. Nova Scotia, the most populous province, now had the fewest employees, which he felt was inequitable in terms of opportunities for Nova Scotia staff.

Still feeling a sense of discomfort, I asked him what I needed to do more of or differently. He repeated some of his concerns and suggested that we needed to have more intentional conversations on accommodations among the senior management team. We moved on to another topic, but I continued to feel exposed and concerned that I had not been paying enough attention to the issue of accommodations and had delegated this issue by default to others and to our processes.

### Good Guys / Bad Guys

My initial reaction when Aylesford became an issue was a reawakening of those feelings of irritation and anger with PW that I had experienced over the Portsville and Lakeview sites. I wondered how they could be taken by surprise by the landlord and questioned the thoroughness of their search for alternative locations. I was frustrated and concerned that they would consider acceptable a solution that disregarded the safety, convenience and accessibility concerns of our clients and employees. In this case, accessibility, increasingly

a priority of our political masters, was not even on their radar until we raised it. It seemed that PW was prepared to ignore these concerns rather than adjust or adapt their mandated requirements. This is even more perplexing as I later learned their Minister's number one priority is the accessibility of premises and workplaces.

In terms of CFOB's contribution, I was frustrated by the ease with which they were willing to accept PW's recommendations. First, they proposed the unsatisfactory Alterna option and then an inaccessible location. Each time we thought we had a solution, they stopped exploring other options and we lost valuable time—a real concern given how soon we were going to have to vacate the Aylesford location.

Considering this now, I see how easily I slipped into a form of us/them thinking—i.e., that we were the good guys and cared about our employees and clients and that PW and (to a lesser extent) CFOB were the bad guys and did not. In other words, if they had simply done their work properly, the problem would not have happened. This is similar to the dynamic I revealed in Project 2 between our region and headquarters colleagues, in which I grew quite dismissive of their competencies. I now question whether this is my way of distancing myself from responsibility. When things go wrong, we often attempt to find out who should have seen it coming to reassure ourselves that our procedures and processes are effective, and that if everybody did what they were supposed to, surprises would not happen. I note how I made the same assumption as Robert in my reaction to the surprise of the Aylesford site—it would not have happened if we had only paid more attention to what was going on. In other words, the kind of reactions to surprise described by McDaniel et al. (2003, pp. 275–76).

Being angry with PW and CFOB for not caring about our employees was more comfortable than admitting that I might not be on top of the accommodations file or that I should have done something differently. I had accepted the burden of the "heroic manager" standard described by Patricia Shaw (2002) in thinking that I should have been able to prevent this from happening. According to that standard, I *should have been* in control. I *should have* kept closer tabs on what was happening with accommodations. I *should have* donned my

magic cape and used my wand to create a better process to ensure that any gossip about land transactions would have ended up in the right ears. This thinking disregarded the size, complexity and number of communities in the region and highlighted the impossibility of always being on top of things. It also ignored the fact that we had worked very hard to mitigate the problem since the issue had been discovered. These feelings of inadequacy and frustration with both myself, and my partners at CFOB and PW, also failed to acknowledge that each of us naturally has different considerations of what is successful performance. In any event, it begged the question of whether any of us *could* have seen this coming, as, until late June, the landlord had been in negotiations with us to renew the lease. We were not aware that he was looking to sell the property or that, when he was able to do so, the new landlord wouldn't be interested in extending our lease.

Perhaps more importantly, this reaction overlooks that different perceptions and considerations are helpful as we try to solve problems in our workplace. Vilification and rejection of others' concerns because they are different from mine is, in effect, the equivalent of looking a gift horse in the mouth. A better approach is to value different perspectives for what they can teach us and to engage intentionally in exploratory conversations about the issue at hand. This leads me back to Matthew's concerns that we had not held sufficient and appropriate conversations about accommodations. I pride myself on having created an environment in which staff can freely express themselves and challenge each other and me;[22] however, considering the role of conversations as part of how we manage the region is a new perspective for me.

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[22] Matthew had spoken forcibly and frankly in the Strategic Committee meeting and in our bilat afterwards and, despite the critical nature of his interventions, they were well received by his colleagues and me.

## Conversations and Complex Responsive Processes of Relating

Stacey and Mowles' (2016) work on complex responsive processes of relating described the inherently social nature of individuals working together. They noted that change emerges from the interplay and interdependencies of the millions of interactions occurring in organisations (p. 402). Their work was heavily influenced by the writings of the pragmatic philosopher George Herbert Mead (1934/1967), introduced in Project One, and to whom I turn to explore the concept of conversations raised by Matthew. Mead proposed a way to think about communications that he called the "conversation of gestures," in which one person makes a gesture to another evoking a response, in turn evoking further responses:

> When, now, that gesture means this idea behind it and it arouses that idea in the other individual, then we have a significant symbol … which answers to a meaning in the experience of the first individual and which also calls out that meaning in the second individual. Where the gesture reaches that situation, it has become what we call "language." It is now a significant symbol and it signifies a certain meaning.

> The gesture is that phase of the individual act to which adjustment takes place on the part of other individuals in the social process of behavior (pp. 45–46).

According to Mead, we are able to see ourselves as others see us, as in our conversations we "gesture and call out a response in ourselves and in the other person at the same time" (Mowles, 2015b, p. 250). These are ongoing temporal social processes with gesture and response being phases of a social act, and "cannot be separated from each other, because together they constitute meaning" (Stacey and Mowles, 2016, p. 342). They are both self-referential and reflexive processes involving the body and its feelings.

Conversation in this context is used in the sense of an *exchange* or *interaction*, the latter being like that described by Stacey and Mowles (2016) in their writings on complex responsive processes of relating, describing the inherently social nature of individuals working together. In this context, I argue that it includes all gestures, including vocal,

physical or non-vocal symbols, direct and indirect. For example, an originating gesture can be the writing of a book or blog. The responding gesture may be directed at or towards someone other than the original author and evoke a response from yet another person (or persons).

Consideration of these daily conversations in organisations therefore includes not only formal and informal meetings and in-person communications, but the many different forms of documentation—lists, templates, presentations, talking points, etc.— that abound, particularly in the public sector, each with its inherent benefits as well as limitations. I have already discussed tangentially in my Projects the challenges I face participating in national and regional meetings through telephone or videoconferencing. The inability to read body language and facial expressions and to participate in the casual and, possibly more unconstrained, discussions that occur before and after meetings—what I term *water cooler discussion*s—are significant impediments to full participation in the work of the organisation.

In helping me to understand what Matthew had in mind in his reference to conversations, I draw heavily on the work of Patricia Shaw, in her book, *Changing Conversations in Organizations—A Complexity Approach to Change* (2002). She examined the nature of conversations and conversational processes and suggested they are fundamental to the business of organising and organisations, as "organizing is conversational process and organizational change is shifts in the patterning of conversation (p. 124).

Shaw (2002) grounded her analysis in the patterning of communicative action in complex responsive processes of relating described by Stacey and Mowles (2016):

> However, what is not unique to me is a way of thinking about such social learning processes, a way of thinking about the processes of organizing in terms of conversational gatherings where we take action to shape and reshape the meanings of our enterprises and of ourselves. My practice reflects a process perspective that we are calling … *complex responsive processes of relating* … a way of

> understanding how the non-linear, iterative nature of human relating, patterns itself as emergent narrative themes that organize our experience of being together, constructing identity and difference simultaneously. … This way of thinking suggests that we are constructing together a future that is always already given shape by history but which is always open to further shaping as the simultaneous continuity and potential transformation of the patterning process of communicative action. (pp. 43–44)

Her book traces a series of consulting interventions in an organisation called Ferrovia and speaks to how we are continually engaged in collective sensemaking in the self-organising shaping of organisations and individuals as each forms and, in turn, is formed by the other. Participants co-create an emergent story and each plays an important part. She suggested that our work is always relational as we tell our stories and react to the stories others tell us—in other words, it is intensely social. While no one is *in control*, the process is not *out of control* as it evolves within the bounds of enabling and constraining factors in the workplace.

She proposed "ensemble improvisation" as a way of thinking about communicative action where participants together improvise the next step in how to go on together in an ever-evolving world of perceptions, objectives and conditions:

> Again, this is the paradoxical nature of the experience of the flow of present time as we reshape the past and co-construct movement into the future in the way that I keep drawing attention to. The dramas evolve in a self-organizing way as we participate together in this social theatre. I have emphasised the spontaneous, improvisatory nature of this process. The word "improvise" is often used to convey notions of unrehearsed, unpremeditated, unintentional, unmotivated action, but by linking it to ensemble in "ensemble improvisation" I am again trying to get at the inherent paradox. All of us, with our conflicting intentions, plans, hopes, fears and choices emerging, are literally acting our way into plays that we are spontaneously

> forming and which are forming us at the very same time. We make a difference and become different in a patterning process we can never control. (p. 122)

Shaw referred to the value of being open to the novel, the ambiguous and the unexpected, and stressed the importance of responsiveness and accepting the paradox that, as we work together, we are changing and being changed at the same time. Her recommendations correspond with those of McDaniel et al. (2003), who suggested an approach of bricolage, improvisation and the importance of collective sensemaking (pp. 275–76). She also acknowledged that the social drama of working together as we improvise and act into the future is not always comfortable or fun. It can be exhilarating but may also frustrate and create tension and anxiety as the process is often emotional and participants face the potential of exclusion, as described by Elias and Scotson (1965/1994, pp. 38–39).

In her work at Ferrovia, Shaw commented on the richness of coffee breaks, where there are no prescribed or scripted conversations and where participants have the opportunity for genuine exploration and discovery. I consider *water cooler discussions* invaluable—I really miss them in my virtual meetings with headquarters colleagues. Our meetings are generally highly scripted and organised and often attended virtually, offering no opportunity for interaction outside of the controlled and pre-determined agenda. We attempt to control by setting constraints on what is to be discussed. We agree in advance on rules of conduct. We drive, often prematurely, for closure on issues, particularly in highly complex and pressured situations. Instead of exploratory discussion, meetings generally comprise highly polished and what we refer to as *cooked* PowerPoint presentations (known as *decks*), with limited time for discussion. We expect that any highly critical perspective will have been raised and resolved in advance so that no one will be put on the spot or embarrassed. Conflict is inappropriate if one is performing as a good colleague, and we are clear about what cannot

or should not be said, as well as the issues that should—or should not—be raised.[23] We rely extensively on lists or templates populated with data considered relevant by its creators, and on divisions of roles and responsibilities, none of which allows for mindful participation, exploration or reflection about what is going on or being noticed within and between departments.

Anthony Suchman (2011), who writes about organisational theory in the health sector, rejected the view of the organisation as a machine and proposed instead a view that sees organisations as conversations (p. S43). Rather than creating blueprints (or templates) for how we solve problems, he proposed the importance of paying attention to the quality of conversations (p. S44). In our practice, collective sensemaking and exploration is often limited, as is the effective sharing of information and acknowledging the benefit of different perspectives. Our means of managing accommodations is a good example. We rely heavily on accommodations templates and there is little joint exploration and sensemaking between partners, or even between hierarchical levels in the same department. As a result, we are likely to find ourselves in the paradigm described by Shaw (2002):

> … the experience of constructing the future together in interaction, a process which is still taking place, is muted and the likelihood of people constructing the familiar together is greater. Outcomes, procedures for working together, agendas, roles to be taken up by those present, form of contribution, pre-prepared slide presentations, room layout, all conspire to reduce the experience of uncertainty. The experience of acting into the known is engineered—participants know what they are here for, know what they should do and know what the outcome should be. (p. 32)

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[23] This expectation and ground rule ignores the advice of Mowles (2015b), drawing on the writings of pragmatic philosophers that "novelty and innovation arise not from conformity and unity, but from the engagement with difference" (p. 165). Given that the public service is increasingly preoccupied with innovation in the workplace, this veneration of harmony and alignment, and counsel to avoid conflict and differences, is truly ironic.

Shaw often referred to "sensemaking", a term introduced to organisational studies in the 1970s by organisational theorist and psychologist Karl Weick (1995), interchangeably with "ensemble improvisation,". Weick proposed sensemaking as the process of making sense individually and in groups (pp. 4–6). Among the authors that followed his work, Brown, Colville and Pye (2015) defined sensemaking as "those processes by which people seek plausibly to understand ambiguous, equivocal or confusing issues or events" (p. 266). While often positioned as retrospective interpretation, the question of resulting action seems to be included. Authors Maitlis and Christianson (2014), for example, refer to "cycles of interpretation and action" (p. 67). Drawing on this literature, I take sensemaking to be intrinsically social, originating with a question or uncertainty that is the cue prompting a need to make sense, a process of collective interpretation and a prospective creation of meaning, in a sense of next steps emerging from the collectively made meaning.

In reflecting on our experience, I note that our habitual processes for site management, which everyone had dutifully followed, did not prevent us from experiencing a surprise. Our processes were well established, and we all knew our roles and responsibilities. To recap the situation, the key players were personnel at PW, CFOB and the region, and colleagues at headquarters. Discussions often happened in organisational silos, with little in the way of collective dialogue. PW and CFOB were responsible for maintaining lists or templates that documented important facts about each site and lease. In advance of expiration dates, discussions were had with landlords to ensure time to locate other accommodations. We reviewed templates independently and in conversations with our partners and built our planning around them. Conversations at more senior levels were reserved for unanticipated issues, or those we could not resolve at the table. Concerns about changes to sites, relocations etc., would be reported to headquarters, who would in turn advise Robert and MINO. There would thus be no surprises or negative impacts on operations. What we hadn't foreseen or been made aware of was that the previous landlord was engaging in renewal negotiations with us at the same time as he was trying to sell the

property, and when he was successful, that the new landlord would have other plans for the site.

Once we were in problem-solving mode, conversations between Cindy and her colleagues at PW happened because PW was the expert on how to resolve the situation. There was little of the dynamic, opening-up, inclusionary exploration of options described by Shaw (2002) and others. Instead, conversations were exclusionary, synoptic and static, and served to shut down further exploration due to our understanding of who was responsible for this element of the site management process and their enabling (and constraining) factors. Considering this now, I wonder whether this dynamic was in part a consequence of individuals at a lower management level feeling constrained by what they understood to be the policies and requirements of good site management. It was only when those of us at a higher level got involved that there was an increase in degrees of freedom and openness to challenging assumptions.

Templates are perhaps the extreme form of synoptic and static interactions and, in this case, effectively dominated the *conversations of gestures* involved in how we do business. Shaw (2002) suggested that we often discuss issues using idealised templates and blueprints rather than engaging in the unpredictable or ambiguous (p. 19). Once information is entered into the template, we believe we have captured what we need to consider and use as a foundation for our decisions and actions. We are on top of things and in control and, moreover, can document and prove it by producing the template. Discussion becomes constrained and limited to the information provided by these forms. In an evolving situation, however, we run the risk of being poorly served in our complacent reliance on their synoptic guidance.

Thinking about our work on accommodations prompted further reflection on what I call *thin* and *thick* conversational processes.[24] *Thin* describes synoptic, closed-down, static and exclusionary processes such as the use of templates, rigid separation of actions along lines of roles and responsibilities, and heavily scripted and/or virtually held meetings where exploration is limited in terms of both what and how we discuss issues. Data is often incomplete, rationed or coloured by what is considered significant through the control of agendas and process, limiting the ability of participants to interpret what is going on. *Thick* refers to exploratory, dynamic, opening-up and inclusive conversational processes, and does not typify the way in which we have been managing our accommodations. As we form and are formed by our interactions with each other, the consequences of thick or thin sensemaking/ensemble improvisation processes significantly impacts our working together. Two examples suggest themselves to me.

In virtual meetings, body language and participants' interactions are not visible and opportunities for *buffering conversations* cannot happen. I use this term to refer to conversations between participants on the side of meetings (i.e., before or after) to explain or soften their interventions, often used to repair or maintain relationships that may have been put at risk in an exploratory or sensemaking process. This concept came to mind based on my observation of interpersonal dynamics that occurred before one of our in-person meetings. While we were milling around the table waiting for everyone to arrive and settle in, I noticed two of my colleagues chatting. Charles had left his assigned seat and come around the table to speak with Steven about a previous meeting. He began the conversation

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[24] I have adopted these terms from social anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973, pp. 3–30). He coined the terms "thick" and "thin" descriptions in the context of his ethnographic work, drawing on the work of the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle on "ordinary language philosophy;" a philosophical methodology that problematises the tendency of philosophers to distort or forget the everyday meaning of words, thus leading to traditional philosophical problems.

by expressing his hope that his comments during a previous meeting had been "okay" and then clarified his intention, adding again that he hoped Steven was "okay" with how the discussion had turned out. I didn't pay attention to the details of this exchange, being more interested in the thought that this sort of interaction was a familiar pattern, an ongoing part of the way in which we continually negotiate and attempt to maintain and shape our personal relationships with colleagues—to build our social capital. When we are unable to engage in buffering conversations such as these in support of the relational impact of interventions, it hinders the development and maintenance of working relationships, which adversely affects future interactions.

A paucity of data (as in virtual meetings) may also affect (either increase or decrease) the emotional impact of an intervention, thus shaping how meaning is made. The absence of body language challenges our ability to perceive an interaction's meaning and intention and may cause us to misjudge the credibility or trustworthiness of the person making the intervention. In interactions between individuals who work together regularly, it may affect their understandings, working relationship and the history they are co-creating in their conversational processes.

### Considering What We Bring to Conversations

I want to explore further how we engage with internal and external partners. I will restrict myself to two factors that influence what individuals and groups are aware of, to what they are motivated to pay attention and/or view as important. Depending on the nature and health of our interactions, these factors are either helpful or can lead to blind spots and missed opportunities to identify emerging changes affecting our work together.

#### What we see.

First, there is always the question of what information is available to us, and when we become aware of it. David Rock (2009), Malcolm Gladwell (2005) and Daniel Kahneman (2013) have written about the ways in which the reasoning and perception of individuals (or

groups) may differ or be faulty based on unique histories, capabilities and experiences that cause us to see different realities or data. Shaw (2002) discusses how this can happen in the "codification" of activities, which increases with their professionalisation, and how it affects our communicative activities, noting that:

> … all such systematic discourses are a jointly sustained way of ordering the essentially vague and open nature of our communicative action in the living present …. within the rationale of an accepted systematic discourse, aspects of our experience become *rationally invisible* to us, the discourse itself does not afford us opportunities to draw attention in certain ways, and a certain kind of voice is literally unable to speak. This sense of being constrained in a prison one is helping to sustain can affect all of us. (p. 97)

Discourses, or the codification of activities, may determine what individuals or groups will be aware of and able to address. I described an example of this in my Project Two (thesis p. 45); where erroneous analysis that was created as a consequence of accepted narratives about our region led to a Minister receiving incorrect advice and policies being developed that reflected inaccurately what was happening in the field. Despite the high degree of competence, professional pride and belief in the immutability of numbers shared by the individuals who caused the error, their analysis of the data was flawed from the start.

Knowing that what is rationally visible or invisible may differ from one individual or group to another becomes an important consideration in social processing (or conversations) as we work together to figure out what is going on and what we need to do about it.

### What we care about.

One of the factors we deal with daily is that we all have different objectives or goals (what I like to call *marching orders*), responsibilities and constraints that result in differing perceptions of what is important in our work, what constitutes successful performance and, thus, what we care about. Foucault referred to "fields of knowledge" or discourses related to different disciplines and how they determine what constitutes their truths or accepted

realities (including constraints and needs) (McHoul and Grace, 2007, p. 21). In *Reason's Neglect—Rationality and Organizing* (2008), critical management scholar Barbara Townley considered the concept of rationality, making the case that reason, and thus rationality, is an expectation of social interactions between people—e.g., that a person has good reasons for what they do—and constitutes an explanation or justification for an action, belief or decision (p. 4). Cognitive and social scientists Hugh Mercier and Dan Sperber (2017) also considered reason as a social competence, noting the importance of cooperative behaviours for humans' evolution, suggesting that it is exceptional "not only by its scale but also by the open-ended variety of the forms it takes" (p. 183).[25] They defined reason as a process of "attending to reasons for adopting new conclusions" and suggested that it fulfils two main social functions: producing reasons to justify oneself and arguments to convince others (p. 32). According to them, it also provides an indication of our acceptance of responsibility for past decisions but, more importantly, indicates a "future line of thought and conduct," allowing others to anticipate how they might behave in the future (pp. 126–27).[26]

Reasons and rationalities are tied directly to the situation and reality of the individual or group in question, in the sense that what is considered a good reason is thought to be so by virtue of the perspective, needs and situation of that individual or group. Realising this helps us to consider what different individuals will pay attention to and care about. I would argue that this is a much more effective way of understanding the dynamics around the

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[25] In their consideration of reason, Sperber and Mercier (2017) argued that reason is for individual benefits, even though these benefits are achieved in social interaction. While their point is well taken, I disagree, noting the importance of cooperative behaviours for the evolution of the human species, and the significance of supporting social competencies such as reasoning for the functioning and health of such behaviours. I suggest that reason provides both individual and social benefits.

[26] Their view was that the perceived flaws in the functioning of reason and rationality were not relevant to the function that these social competencies fulfil, but rather a required social skill that enables us to work in cooperation with others.

Aylesford site issue than the good guy/bad guy discussion that initially dominated my reactions.

In this narrative, the different ways partners approached the issue of accessibility and employee safety was illustrative of their differing rationalities and objectives. Throughout our dealings with PW, they were certain in their knowledge that they were complying with the rules and regulations governing their work in the real property area. The Treasury Board (the federal department that manages public assets and public servants) has mandated policies, approved by the political arm of the government that PW is tasked with implementing and by which we are bound. For the past decade, the predominant priority of politicians (and thus bureaucrats) has been reducing costs (leading me to say many times that in Ottawa *strategic* has come to mean cost cutting and nothing else). This is changing, however, as the current government shows significantly greater interest in social considerations,[27] including *inter alia,* diversity and inclusion, and accessibility. They are also serious about providing better service to Canadians, which means that our work has a higher profile and is better supported. As an example, the need to invest in more and better service to Canadians was included in a recent throne speech (the document setting out the government's priorities for an upcoming legislative session). However, despite a change in governing rationalities, legacy policies remain, and politicians are, in my experience, fiscally challenged to reinvent them quickly or at all.

I also note this difference in governing rationalities/reasons in the context of the differences between senior management and more junior-level employees in departments in considerations of what is and is not appropriate as a solution. While my team had concerns about the Alterna suggestion, they accepted at face value the assurances of PW that this was

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[27] In a recent senior departmental meeting, the Deputy Head remarked with pride that we had filled three tables at a dinner celebrating the appointment of new executives within the public service. I could not help reflecting that, in the past, the cost of this would have been a source of concern.

the only viable solution. Both CFOB and PW junior staff are transaction driven and impacts on clients and employees are less important. In contrast, during conversations throughout the development of this file, Peggy and Catherine had pronounced themselves to be in complete agreement with my concerns. Both were reasonable, honest and practical in their approach. While with other colleagues I might have considered that I was being managed or placated, I knew from experience that neither of them would hesitate to disagree with me when appropriate.

In hindsight, I wonder whether Cindy and her colleagues felt significantly less freedom in the constraints that governed their work, thus rendering their conversations less exploratory and more synoptic. I also reflect that they work closely together, and my impression has been that they place a higher priority on their relationship than on client experience and outcomes. Combined, these factors could account for the way this file developed.

An additional factor is that each individual and organisation, and each level and division within each organisation, has different clients, direct and indirect. In applying codes and standards, interpretations may easily vary or be valued differently depending on who is making the judgment and their perception of the different situations (and needs) of their clients, the nature of their responsibilities and the interests they are required to satisfy. Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips (2011), in their discussion of the politics of bureaucracy, noted that rules differ and may be interpreted differently from one part of a bureaucracy to another (p. 240). Karen Norman (2012a; 2012b) made a similar observation in two blogs commenting on a research narrative set in the health care sector. She referred to Norbert Elias (1965/1994; 1996) and his consideration of social norms, in which he acknowledges such norms are expected to be integrating while they are, in fact, often contradictory and disintegrating or dividing and separating.[28] Norman acknowledged that Elias's discussion

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[28] Stacey (2010) made the point that separating norms and values disregards that the two are inseparably part of the evaluative themes that form the basis for our choices and actions (pp. 192–93). For the purposes of this exploration, I am doing so to focus on the element of integration/disintegration because of social norms.

focused on groups at the nation state level, but argued that these conclusions are equally applicable at the we-group and even at an individual level. Generalised and abstracted norms are taken up in different ways and at different times across the organisation.

This requirement to juggle or balance multiple and often conflicting social values or rationalities has also been referred to as the balance of "competing goods." Theologian Michael Jinkins (2004), in his consideration of Machiavelli's writings on the topic, noted:

> There are, for Machiavelli, different, contradictory, conflicting and competitive goods within as well as between societies. Mere knowledge of the goodness of a good does not insure right action. It is often necessary to make choices between competing goods. And, the various goods cannot simply be ranked hierarchically, one good leading to another. Nor is there a commanding reference, an external authority to which one may appeal by which to rank one good in relation to another, so providing an infallible assurance that one is making the right choice. There is the possibility of several right (and wrong) choices. (p. 132)

My management approach of trusting others based on my assessment of their good faith and capabilities, while seemingly well motivated and respectful of colleagues, misses the point that their governing rationalities, reasons, beliefs and constraints may differ or even be contrary to mine. This is not to say that because their views are contrary to my understandings and beliefs they should be repudiated or mistrusted. Quite the opposite. It is, rather, that the richness and potential for innovation and discovery inherent in our differences cannot happen without both openness to and effort dedicated towards exploration of such differences through our conversations and interactions. As suggested by Stacey and Mowles (2016), in the absence of difference there can be no innovation and evolution (pp. 195–99).

This also leads me to consider that an important aspect of collective meaning making is not just the answer arrived at, but the effect that the experience has on participants. As we are forming and being formed by our interactions at the same time (Elias, 1987/1991, p. 316),

the sensemaking processes we engage in result in changes to our relationships, power relations, mutual understandings and identities that continue to bear fruit—for good or for ill. In fact, this experience, and the collective sensemaking it ultimately prompted with our partners in CFOB and PW, did lead to the development of a significantly more positive collaboration on the issue of future accommodations with exciting implications for our region and for the department.[29]

## Conclusions

In this project, I explore a narrative that unfolded as the result of a surprise discovery affecting one of our region's in-person service delivery sites. In the process, I have explored the concept of surprise and the expectations (including my own) of me as a manager that I be in control of events and issues in my area of responsibility. I note that how, even when I understand prediction and control is impossible in a complex environment, I easily accept this expectation for my partners and myself in our mutual work on site management. I consider the importance of conversations in the context of complex responsive processes of relating, in particular, the nature of ensemble improvisation proposed by Shaw (2002, pp. 28, 42–43, 96). I propose the concept of *thick and thin conversations* based on Geertz's work on "thick description" (1973, pp. 3–30). I discuss how the lack of more exploratory, dynamic, opening-up and inclusionary (thick) discussions and a reliance on the more synoptic, static, closing-down and exclusionary (thin) conversations may have contributed to both the Aylesford surprise (in our belated awareness of the lease issue), as well as to some of the missteps in how it was handled. Finally, I look to considerations affecting the information that we are or become aware of, together with some of the literature on reasons and rationalities, to explain how differing

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[29] While interesting this is easily, its own narrative and thus I have left it out of this discussion.

perceptions and differences in what individuals care about might have contributed to the challenges we experienced.

These reflections have led to changes in my practice, in particular, how I conduct meetings. I am more relaxed about timelines in agendas and less inclined to cut off discussion. I am more insistent on reserving open space in meeting agendas where participants may raise any issue. I have also started to push back on excessively content-laden meetings, where insufficient time is available for the group to jointly explore or digest what they have heard and what they now think about it. While one might assume that these measures result in more and longer meetings, potentially overwhelming the patience and schedules of those attending, focusing on quality conversations has not increased the meeting load. Instead, I believe that it has made more effective use of our limited time in terms of how we make sense of what we are trying to do together.

While making good or useful decisions is obviously important in an organisation, increasingly I am convinced that the way in which the conversational processes behind those decisions happen is more fundamental. In a complex, ever-evolving world of competing goods (Jinkins, 2004) in which it is impossible to say where one problem ends or starts and another begins or ends, each issue that we face is inextricably intertwined with the many others at play, and it is not always clear which problems we need to address. Successfully exploring any one challenge affects all others, both in terms of the outcomes of that problem-solving exercise, but, perhaps more importantly, through whatever impact such exercise has in strengthening or weakening relationships between individuals and groups as we form and are formed by our interactions. In the workplace, where we continually need to discover how to go on together, this makes the nature of our interactions, and how they happen, particularly important.

## Looking Forward to Project Four

Our department is currently engaged in a large-scale rethinking of the way in which we deliver service to Canadians, which will have implications for our workplace practices, our

governance structures, our technology and even our human resource policies. One element of what is being called our *transformation strategy* is a focus on staff engagement. Intended to be an improvement on the traditional sender-receiver model of communications,[30] this approach will bring our employees (and, in some cases, our clients) into the processes of discussion and implementation and is billed as "the new way we will work together." I propose to focus on the experience of collective sensemaking and ensemble improvisation in conversational processes in my workplace to see what light they shed on how such engagement strategy might develop.

In doing so I propose to inquire further into the literature on sensemaking inspired by the research of Weick (1995) and how it has developed. I am also aware of the literature coming out of University of Montreal on organisational communication. While they do not self-identify as complexity scholars but, rather *theorists of communication*, their consideration of complexity, now referred to as *communication as constitutive of organizations* (McPhee and Zaug, 2000; Schoeneborn, Blaschke, Cooren, McPhee, Seidl and Taylor, 2014), has parallels with the literature on complex responsive processes of relating and builds upon the work of Weick.

### Postscript

The Aylesford story ended back in Dieuville, where I was when it started. I was sitting in the local café on a sunny Saturday morning in December, waiting for friends with whom I have a regular breakfast date. I noticed an email on my phone from Catherine, saying that she had an update for me on Aylesford and that I could call her any time over the weekend. I did so and, after we exchanged pleasantries, she gave me the confirmation I had been hoping for—an agreement with the landlord had been reached to extend the Aylesford lease

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[30] Also known as the Shannon-Weaver model (Shannon and Weaver, 1963) it is the simplest communication mode and describes communication as a linear means of sending and receiving information.

for ten more years. While the rent would increase, it was considered fair and thus acceptable. Most importantly, we did not have to move out of our current space.

The story of how it was resolved is typical of our region. One of the landlord's best friends works for PW and approached his buddy personally with a request to reconsider his previous decision not to extend the lease. This approach turned what had been a no-brainer business decision for the landlord into a more nuanced quandary, which in the end was resolved in our favour. In the process of working through this challenge, both departments learned a lot about how we can better work together—through conversations and, in effect, what Patricia Shaw would describe as ensemble improvisation.

## Project Four—An Inquiry into Trust

### Introduction

This fourth project continues my exploration of the challenges of leading in a large government department from a position of relatively low power and status.

Originally, when I decided to study in the field of managing in complexity, I was intrigued by the interplay between competitive and cooperative behaviours in groups. Projects 1 through 3 focused on an exploration of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977/2015, pp. 78-87; Thompson, ed. in Bourdieu, 1982/2003, pp. 12-14), power relations (Elias, 1908/1978) and, latterly, sensemaking and conversational processes from the perspective of the theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Griffin, 2006; Mowles, 2015a, 2015b; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2005; Stacey, 2010; Stacey, 2012a; Stacey and Griffin, 2005; Griffin and Stacey, 2005; Stacey and Mowles, 2016). I became increasingly convinced of the importance of sensemaking and conversational processes in Project 3, as the interdependence of individuals and groups (Elias, 1987/1991, p. 16) means that we are always working in relation to other individuals and groups in the interactions, conversations and sensemaking activities that constitute the work of organisations (Weick, 1995; Simon, 1991; also see Sloman and Fernbach, 2017; Simon, 1964; Tompkins, 2015; Boden, 1994;).

In Part 4, I continue my consideration of sensemaking and conversational processes, but from the perspective of the role, impact and nature of trust in relationships among individuals and groups as they engage in meaning making. In this process, I have come full circle and return to a more nuanced understanding of competitive and cooperative behaviours within groups.

The issue of trust in relation to organisations and leadership has increased significantly as a subject of scholarly interest since the 1960s.[31] Writers have suggested that trust is "pivotal to the functioning of society" (Schilke, Reimann and Cook, 2015, p. 12950); needed to manage the uncertainties and complexities of life (Luhmann, 1979/2017, pp. 15, 98; Sztompka, 2006, p. 23; Misztal, 2001, p. 9) in a more complex world with increased human agency, risk and complexity (Sztompka, 2006, p. 906); reduces transactional costs (Fukuyama, 1996, p. 27); lubricates "the inevitable frictions of social life" (Putnam, 2000, p. 135); facilitates social cooperation (Hardin, 2006, p. 1); and opens up possibilities for further action that would not otherwise be possible (Luhmann, 1979/2017, p. 12). Prominent German sociologist and philosopher Niklas Luhmann (1979/2017) also famously suggested that for the individual, "a complete absence of trust would prevent him or her from even getting up in the morning" (p. 5).

I pursue my inquiry through two narratives. The first reflects on the dynamics of my experience within the organisation at the national level, and the second explores a recent and difficult discussion among senior management in my region. I examine the concept of trust by drawing on the work of authors who have written extensively on trust and from the perspective of the theory of complex responsive processes of relating.

### Narrative 1—Indisputable Facts

I was sitting with Tom and Gerard, two of my regional Assistant Deputy Minister colleagues (ADMs) responsible for the operations of two of the three other regions in the department. Gerard and I were tired, having spent much of the night in the emergency department with our colleague, Warren, who had fainted at the previous evening's group

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[31] In a recent blog, *Trust in Organisations*, Ralph Stacey illustrated this point with the results of a Google Scholar search on trust, organisations and leadership. It registered a few hundred entries per annum in the 1960s, increasing to a few thousand in the 1970s, 10,000 in the 1990s, before jumping to an average of 40,000 articles per year in the early part of this century (Stacey, 2012b).

dinner. He had recovered but was resting and absent from the meeting. Seated at my far left were Sonia, the ADM for Workforce Support Programs (WSP),[32] responsible for the WSP program nationally in headquarters, and some of her staff. Beside them sat the Chief Operating Officer (COO), Robert, and his Chief of Staff. This was an ADM-only meeting, which tends to signal that Robert has significant concerns. Our meeting agenda included a document prepared by Sonia and her team that outlined recent numbers on Employment Insurance (EI) productivity.

These numbers measure the work activity required to process applications for workforce support and to adjudicate applicants' entitlement to benefits according to the regulations. If they meet requirements, applicants are *put into pay* and start receiving benefits. If they do not qualify, they have the right to appeal. Increasingly, we have automated this work, and processing staff are involved only in complex cases. The numbers we were looking at came from work site records used by local managers to determine individual staff performance. They were mostly based on the number of work items (of which there might be several in a claim) completed over a given period. Additional measures included the cost per work item, which purports to document how productively we are using our financial resources. The regional Director Generals (DGs) responsible for benefits delivery—including Helen, in my region, who reports to me—together with their headquarters colleagues, had been exploring how to measure productivity in WSP across the national network. It was not easy. The numbers we used were gathered on a site-by-site basis and depended on human collection and reporting and, as such, were subjective, difficult to compare, and potentially open to gaming. Increasing automation and work practices designed to be client-focused has made processing more complex and time-consuming, and targets based on pre-automation work are suspect. Certain types of work were not included in the numbers presented, even though they are non-discretionary, which further understated staff

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[32] This program, governed by federal legislation, is intended to support unemployed workers.

production. Although quality of work—in my view fundamental to sustainable excellence in service delivery—was one of the number sets looked at, it was not integrated into the productivity numbers. Finally, budgets available for processing used in calculating work item costs were treated differently across the regions. For example, our region had received an investment in the second half of the year to hire staff to increase production. As it takes time to get new employees up to speed, their productivity was lower, which made our results worse. Other regions had received investments later in the year, and these amounts were not included in the calculations. None of these issues mattered when the numbers were used to manage individual performance, as managers could apply their judgment based on their awareness of each individual situation. However, I believed that their usefulness was limited for comparison across sites nationally.

At a previous meeting, at which I had been represented by Helen, the first cut at the numbers had been introduced by a DG from Sonia's sector in headquarters, who positioned them to show that nationally only 63% of regional staff were working to 100% productivity (calculated by output per productive time). Robert, who later described this revelation as a moment "when the top of his head had blown off," had demanded that we provide site-by-site numbers for comparison to explain this productivity problem.

This current meeting was held to review these site-by-site numbers, which had been produced by headquarters staff and presented in complex, formula-based tables. We had only been given them the night before and I, along with my regional ADM colleagues, had received a hurried brief from our staff shortly before the meeting.

Sonia took us through the document. My attention was drawn to the first discussion point—how to resolve the productivity problem. When Sonia finished her presentation and Robert asked for comments, I responded with the usual compliments about the good work in putting together the document. Then I referred to the first discussion question and suggested that we might be premature in concluding there was, in fact, a problem with productivity. It was not yet clear that the numbers, and the methodology with which they were developed, were sufficiently robust and reliable for comparison purposes. I was

hesitant about documenting as fact something that would create a paper trail for further audits/access to information requests and, more importantly, preclude deeper exploration about what was actually going on.

Robert responded immediately. Looking directly at me and holding up what has been tagged *the blue sheet*, he said that the numbers were indisputable proof of a productivity problem. He looked to Sonia for confirmation, who quickly repeated his statement, almost word for word. Everyone else remained quiet.

I was completely taken aback. I assumed that we all recognised that the numbers were questionable, that they were simply a necessary starting point for dialogue. Instead, it appeared that Robert and Sonia had already made up their minds and saw further discussion as unnecessary. A rush of anxiety washed over me and I wanted to disappear into the ground. I instantly regretted having spoken up and feared that Robert would presume that I was not on board and not on top of my areas of responsibility or being naïve and obstructive. I was concerned that I was at risk of being excluded (Elias and Scotson, 1965/1994, pp. 38–39). In retrospect, I might have stood my ground and questioned the basis for Sonia's assertion that the productivity problem was indisputable; I might have tried to convince them of the need to investigate the issue further. However, in my anxiety, I neither trusted my ability to do so nor that it would be *safe* to try. Instead, I sought to find a way to retract my comments (which was, of course, impossible) so that I could be seen to be on board and supportive. I agreed that there was an issue—although I wasn't yet convinced of this or, perhaps more accurately, of *what* it was—and went on to say that because it was early days and the numbers were still unreliable, we couldn't really know what they might be telling us. I hoped that this addition to my initial remarks would shift attention away from my unhelpful opinions and me and back to Sonia's agenda. The conversation continued for a few minutes longer as I attempted to negotiate myself back into the group. I was relieved when the COO redirected his attention to Sonia and my colleagues, and the discussion turned to what we could do to solve this undeniable problem of productivity.

Sara Filbee                                                              September 2019

Later in the meeting, Gerard brought up his concerns with the collective agreement, which restricts our ability to give overtime only to higher performers, as it requires that it be evenly allocated among all employees. He implied that productivity numbers would improve if we were able to ensure that the right people were assigned overtime. Supported by Robert, there was general agreement that this was an action item to pursue; despite the practical challenges of amending collective agreements and the reality, that over-reliance on overtime is a more expensive mode of production. In retrospect, in light of the group's fixation on numbers and the quantification of results, it was incongruous that he did not offer (nor was he asked for) any indication of how such change would materially improve the issue.

Other than this, my two regional colleagues remained silent. As we headed to lunch, Gerard commented that the meeting had not gone that badly. No one referred to the exchange between Robert and me.

## Reflections on Narrative 1

My initial reaction to this meeting was one of significant discomfort. The more I considered how my intervention had been received, the more upset I became. I felt isolated, silenced, disrespected, vulnerable, stupid, ashamed and angry. I felt that I had let down the region and wondered why I had spoken out when it was clear that Robert's mind was made up. I also wondered what was wrong with me that I could not—and had not—stated my concerns more effectively. What was wrong with Robert and Sonia that they did not understand that the numbers were not good enough for comparison purposes? I was angry at how the regions' perspective—the people that do this work—was so easily disregarded. Robert's immediate response that the numbers were indisputable implied that my judgment meant nothing, despite my experience. I assumed that Sonia was aware of the many discussions about the challenges of these numbers, and yet she quickly fell in line with Robert's assertion. I was not surprised by my other colleagues' silence, despite knowing they shared my concerns. While we often claim to be all in this together, when push comes to shove, it

is extremely unlikely that anyone would stand up to Robert in defence of a colleague. I was surprised at Gerard's comments about overtime, given numerous conversations in which we concluded that overtime was not a good investment of taxpayer dollars. Despite this, everyone had nodded approvingly when he advanced this suggestion.

I suspect that Gerard spoke up because the numbers showed his region as performing the worst. While Robert often uses the expression "team before self," there is always a level of competition between regions, particularly evident in what I saw as Gerard's frequent promotion of his region's accomplishments. Stacey and Mowles (2016) drew on Groot to suggest two types of conflict: polarised, in which there is a winner and a loser, and explorative, in which individuals explore generalisations and negotiate different interpretations to make them particular, causing adjustments to themselves and to others (p. 370). In *Trust in Numbers*, Jerry Muller (2018) wrote about the negative effect of polarising competition:

> … if the individuals or units respond to the incentives created, rather than aiding, assisting, and advising one another, they strive to maximize their own metrics, ignoring, or even sabotaging, their fellows. (p. 172)

Given Robert's resolve to compare sites, I feared that our energies would increasingly concentrate on demonstrating how each of us outperforms the others, detracting from our stated goal of team-focused behaviour.

Further reflection has caused me to examine why I was unable to respond calmly and logically to Robert's assertion that the facts were indisputable. My learning set also questioned this. After all, this important issue concerned everyone. We were all under pressure to deliver on our commitments to reduce backlogs and speed up service to Canadians. We had received increased investments, for which we now needed to account. It was imperative that we engage in an exploratory conversation about what was going on. I do not mean that we needed to explore root causes, because there are many issues at hand, including the impact of attrition, the slowness of our technological systems, and the

increasing complexity caused by requirements to be client-centred in our approach to claims.

My reflections have developed through my reading of the literature and discussions with my learning set. Early drafts reveal an unyielding perspective that I knew what was going on. I was right and had been treated poorly. I had an ethical responsibility to raise my doubts and the response was disrespectful and inappropriate. I had been in a no-win or double bind position. Had I said nothing, I would have simply ignored what I considered responsible and required of me. On the other hand, I was not on message when I spoke up and thus risked exclusion and/or censure. I was right. They were wrong.

I now understand the interactions differently and can see how each of us was doing the best we could, given the situation. First, I note the effect of anxiety and emotion on all sides. Robert and Sonia were justifiably concerned about the need to deliver on production commitments to the department and Parliament. The numbers showed that we were unlikely to meet those obligations. My comments could have been interpreted as suggesting that I might not be relied on to help turn this around. While my concerns were valid, I expressed them poorly and so, even had the others been open to my intervention, how could they have understood it as helpful? Sonia might have felt that I was surfacing what Scott (1990) called "hidden transcripts" (p. 4) in my critique of her group's work on the numbers. That discussion was acceptable between us, but not in front of the boss. Ironically, while I noted my own sense of vulnerability in being unable to pursue the subject, I now see that my intervention may have made my colleagues feel unsafe, which in turn increased my own fears. As Elias (1987/1991) described it, by my actions I formed and affected the others at the same time as I was being formed and affected by them (p. 316). In the process, my lack of trust in my colleagues was creating a condition in which they were likely losing trust in me.

My anxiety did not allow me to persist in my intervention and prevented me from making sense of what was going on, both for myself and for others. While sleep deprivation from my evening in the emergency department may have exacerbated my vulnerability, I do not

believe that it determined my reaction. In the moment in which I had to decide whether to push the issue or to fall into line and negotiate myself back into the group, I was afraid to do the former because I did not feel safe. In my literature review, I found the work of leadership and management scholar Amy Edmondson helpful (in Kramer and Cook, 2004, p. 241). She used the term "psychological safety" to describe the "interpersonal climate" that determines the consequences of taking risks in a work environment, whether by asking a question, seeking feedback, reporting a mistake or proposing a new idea. Organisational behaviour scholar William A. Kahn (1990) likewise noted that psychological safety allows an individual to participate "without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career" (p. 708). I have misgivings about the adjective "psychological," given that I adopt the multi-dimensional view taken by sociologist Ian Burkitt (1999), in which "mind" is "an effect of bodily action in the world" and thus not separate from the body (pp. 2, 12). However, *safe* was the first word that resonated viscerally when I described my experience. I did not feel safe as I didn't trust that I would be listened to by Robert, that my colleagues would weigh in to support me, or even that I could articulate my perspective effectively. Later, I refer to the work of organisational behaviourist Kenwyn Smith and organisational psychologist David Berg (1997), who wrote on paradoxes in group life and suggested that the process of trusting "creates a group in which people feel increasingly safe disclosing the weak and the ugly" (pp. 119–20). I return to this discussion later when I discuss the issue of emotion and anxiety and explore the feeling of being safe in *unsafeness*.

Thinking about this now, I reflect on aspects of my history within the department and in government. In previous projects, I wrote about my region's challenges in having its concerns heard and addressed within the department. I was disciplined and excluded as a consequence of speaking up when asked to share our concerns about the budget (p. 36) and, again, in Project Two, when I attempted to draw attention to errors made by others to mitigate the consequences for the department. This time, I was more socially aware than I had demonstrated when I spoke at the budget meeting in defence of my region's interests, where I had been overly confident that my intervention would be accepted as helpful. In

contrast, at this meeting, I immediately understood that I was out of step with the social dynamics of the meeting, and intuitively understood that I needed to mitigate the impact of my comments.

Part of my discomfiture stemmed from past encounters with Robert in which he had expressed concern that I was not in control of, or on top of my files. One experience stuck in my mind. I had been trying to gain his support to hire an executive to address pressing and high-risk challenges in one of our branches. Robert demanded proof that we could afford the hire, despite my assurances that we had the money. Although he eventually conceded, I was left feeling that he did not trust my word or financial competence and had little confidence in my ability as a manager. Quite possibly this was an exaggerated fear, as he has described me in recent management performance discussions as well-placed in my role and noted his appreciation of my engagement in the job's operational aspects. However, I continue to feel that he doubts my capabilities. When I considered during the meeting whether to press my point, I remember feeling helpless, and that I would be unable to persuade him of my reasoning. Ironically, in part I was motivated to speak out to demonstrate that I was on top of the situation. However, when he pushed back, I capitulated. It had been important to me to try to elicit a more nuanced discussion of the challenges we were facing, but it was much more important that I be accepted as part of the team and seen as someone who *got it*.

Lastly, a significant aspect of how I reacted in this meeting is a general feeling I am caught up in a large, unfeeling organisation in which I am unimportant, imminently replaceable and not worthy of trust. When I moved to the region to take this job, I had a terrible experience with a program intended to support employees who relocate at the government's request. This resulted in several years of severe stress and significant financial loss. Those administering the program persisted in suggesting that I was not doing what I needed to sell my home, that I was not serious about doing so and thus that I risked losing what little support was available to me. It took two and a half years for my home to sell—after one year; they threatened to end the program unless I received special permission to extend it,

which required strenuous efforts on the part of my boss to obtain. These events caused me a resurgence of depression and panic attacks and left me feeling helpless, with a healthy distrust of government processes.

My experience highlights the challenges of working in a bureaucracy. German sociologist and philosopher Max Weber (1922/1978) viewed bureaucracies, with their explicitly assigned official duties, stable means of authorizing and enforcing decisions, and methodical provision for how such duties are carried out, as "*the* means of transforming social action into rationally organized action" (p. 987) according to purely objective considerations. He suggested that the more complicated and specialised the modern culture, the more they were needed. Professor of Management, Barbara Townley (2008), likewise also acknowledged their benefits in excluding arbitrariness of action (2008, pp. 49–50). However, as Weber (1905/2002) warned, bureaucracies can turn into an "iron cage," trapping individuals through their systems of teleological efficiency, rational controls and calculation (p. 123). Ironically, the more perfect their ability to take out "all personal, irrational and emotional elements" (Weber, 1922/1978, p. 975), the more they are dehumanised—and dehumanising. One legacy of my experience with bureaucracy was to develop an ongoing and significant sense of vulnerability and lack of self-worth, which continues to destabilise me in my dealings with those in authority. It also reduces my feelings of safety, which enable participation and engagement in the meaning making in my work.

I have written in past projects about the principle of evidence-based public policy and the concept of "Deliverology" popularised by Sir Michael Barbour (2016), which has confirmed that *evidence-based* in our government means measurable and quantifiable. I believe that this preoccupation is an extension of the desire for objectivity and rationality fundamental to the bureaucratic form of organisations. A number of authors have written about metrics in government and organisations. James C. Scott, in *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998), explored how means of measurement and standardisation are needed for a state to control and make

identifiable and discernible (he uses the term "legible") the governed (pp. 2, 183). Historian Jerry Muller (2018) also described the distorting effects of performance metrics and how they often serve to replace judgment based on experience with standardised measurement because the former is personal, subjective and imbued with self-interest (p. 6). German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/2013) went further to suggest that the use of statistics simulates "an objectivity that in reality depends on the legitimacy of the questions asked" (p. 312) and thus actually deforms knowledge. I often refer to this as *pseudo-science*, as the numbers provide an illusion of scientific credibility and certainty by their apparent concreteness and precise nature.

Scott (1998) used the Greek term *mētis* to describe, "a wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment" (p. 313).[33] He argued that these skills are particularly important in complex and "non-repeatable" environments where "formal procedures of rational decision making are impossible to apply" (p. 316), and yet are often displaced by an over-dependence on quantitative metrics. I described my belief that the numbers created a wall of indisputability that made them inviolate. Everyone except for Robert had been part of conversations that acknowledged significant problems with the numbers—in particular, how they had been put together—yet they remained an irresistible force that underpinned our decisions.

Science historian Theodore Porter (1995) wrote about the drive to supplement or, in some cases, replace personal judgment and expertise with quantitative rules, blaming it on cultures of distrust. He suggested that this is particularly evident in the United States, where "mistrust of government is rife" (p. 195). The combined years of experience and knowledge of operations of those of us in the regions meant nothing when pitted against the perceived

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[33] He distinguished *mētis* from *phronesis* because the latter incorporates an ethical dimension of conscience and care, while the former is secular and ethically neutral. The term "cunning" is sometimes associated with *mētis*, but Scott suggested it also describes the knack that comes with an experience encountered frequently (Scott, personal communication, December 26, 2018).

reality of the numbers. Having my—and my regional colleagues'—competence and expertise so discounted further stoked my anxieties and feelings of vulnerability.

I believe that our relationship with numbers is paradoxical. My experience suggests that in the Public Service *habitus* (as described in Bourdieu, 1977/2015, pp. 78-87; Thompson, ed. in Bourdieu, 1982/2003, pp. 12-14), using numbers to quantify what we are trying to manage is always defensible. Numbers provide a measure of safety for all of us because they appear objective, inspiring our trust. My attempt to question their suitability for our purposes was experienced by colleagues as unhelpful. The numbers were developed by Sonia's group, the experts in such matters, and thus are not to be questioned—even if they contradicted the practical experience or judgment of those of us in the regions. The paradox is that, for numbers to be useful, they need be considered valid, or at least reasonable, by those subject to them (Porter, 1995, p. 45), generally, those with operational knowledge. Yet, in this case, these were the ones whose opinions were dismissed as personal, subjective and self-interested. I also argue that such disregard of judgment in favour of quantitative analysis can impose a high psychological cost (Porter, 1995, p. 77) on those whose opinions are discounted. Gadamer (1981) also recognized this, writing that the increase in the requirement for objectivity takes a toll as the more our lives fall "under the compulsory structures of automatic processes and ever less does humanity know itself and its spirit within these objectifications of the spirit" (p. 15). Later, I discuss the inherent anxiety in processes of making meaning together and how quantification assuages our unease as it is assumed to exclude subjectivity and emotion and thus be trustworthy. Yet in the process of managing our anxiety and thus helping us to make decisions, the failure to recognise our expertise may also increase our anxiety.

I now turn to my second narrative, in which a difficult conversation at my senior management table in the region prompted me to reflect further on concepts of *safety* and *trust*.

Narrative 2—A Difficult Conversation

This narrative relates to a meeting of my senior management in which we were discussing the work of the diversity and equity committee, which Peter, one of my DG's, chairs. There is pressure to increase representation of minority groups in the employee population. We count the number of individuals (self-identified) in such groups with the expectation that the percentage of these workers in our workforce will be at least equal to the percentage of those workers in the overall regional workforce population. In my region, we do fairly well in meeting our equity group targets, but we have all agreed that we need do more.

This senior management group works well together, and I look forward to our meetings. Most have worked together for many years and there is an atmosphere of trust, with lots of teasing and laughter. When interests conflict there is sparring between individuals, but it generally is addressed through both group and informal one-on-one conversations.

Peter commented that we needed to balance competence and skills with equity requirements given that we are responsible for finding the best person for the job, and thus *merit* must always be our primary concern. This reminded me of an experience in another department, where, in my view, several visible minority group members had been over-promoted. Unfortunately, three of them were unable to fulfil the requirements of their jobs, placing both the department and the sector at risk. Despite significant coaching and support, we eventually had to demote them. It was difficult for everyone, especially the employees, and the episode had left a lasting impression on me.

While I was thinking about this, my DG, Colleen, who is African-Nova Scotian, entered the discussion. She spoke forcefully, rejecting Peter's premise and asking why the issue of competence, or the lowering of standards, always arose during discussions about equity. There was an awkward silence. Peter responded to the effect that he had not meant to suggest that equity hires were not competent, but that we must be careful to hire on merit. I was at once ashamed of my immediate acceptance of Peter's comments and wondering how I was going to handle what I perceived to be a very sensitive situation. Colleen's remarks

also reminded me that I had a similar reaction to hers whenever it was suggested that the equity hire of a woman would lead to a bad placement.

After a few minutes, Colleen said that she felt this was going to be too difficult a conversation and perhaps we should move on. My immediate reaction was to agree, but I hesitated. Another of my DGs later told me that my head went down as I was obviously trying to decide what to say. In what felt like forever, but was probably only a few seconds, several thoughts raced through my mind. I experienced significant discomfort and nervousness about where further discussion might take us. I worried that I would be shamed in front of my team as a racist because of my initial reaction to Peter's thoughts. I prided myself on creating an inclusive and positive work environment for all employees and I was concerned about the potential fallout among my team members—both if we talked about it and if we did not. I am proud of the way my team works together, their ability to disagree and to challenge each other alongside their obvious affection, caring and respect. While I inherited the team when I took on this job, I believe that the positive way we work together is partly due to how I engage with them. I was horrified at the idea of losing this. In the end, I realised that the issue was already on the table and, while it might be more comfortable to leave it, the lasting impact of what already had been said would be much more harmful. I also reflected on the community meetings in the Doctor of Management programme, in which difficult and personal dilemmas and conflicts are worked through, involving both faculty and students. I realised on balance that I felt the team was up to it. I felt safe in what was potentially an unsafe situation, and I trusted that we would be able to handle it together. Therefore, I said that I knew it was likely to be a difficult conversation, but if Colleen was okay with having it, I thought it was important to do so.

Colleen was willing to continue. She talked about her experience as the only visible minority in a group and how she felt that she was always put in the position of being the spokesperson for minority groups. She pointed out that the leadership of the region was predominantly white, which in her view showed that we had not done enough to open the

workforce to minorities. Peter continued to engage in the discussion, stressing our responsibility to ensure we have the "right people" in the "right jobs." Walter, the diplomat in the group, reflected on Colleen's difficult situation, being the only person of colour around the region's senior management table. He referred to the progress we had made (partly shown in the metrics on equity), but accepted Colleen's argument that we needed to do better. Anna, the fourth DG, weighed in to say that we clearly have an issue and need to "put our money where our mouth is". In the end, we were able to move on—certainly not to a perfect place but having had an honest exchange.

When I decided to write about this conversation, I shared an early draft with Colleen. She was supportive and provided further context on her perspectives. She noted that she felt unhappy initially after reading my narrative because of my reaction to her comments and the feelings I described, as she cares about the people she works with and values her relationships with them. However, it also prompted her to think of the many times in her life and career when she ignored similar assumptions for fear of making waves and because she didn't want anyone to think that she had been promoted solely based on equity. She told me that she had been asked openly in the past if she "played the race card" to advance her career. To avoid perpetrating the stereotype of the angry black woman, she usually responded with a joke or distracting comment.[34] This was the first time she had participated in an honest and difficult exchange with colleagues and she felt that we had come away with a greater understanding of what it was like to be her during those conversations. She now felt more understood, a bit raw from having participated in a professional and emotionally charged exchange about her racial identity, and proud of the team for staying in the tough conversation. She also believed that we were in a better place as a team, with a shared understanding of where we were on the issue considering our respective experiences, histories and identities. She felt that we were often too polite to share our

[34] I was astonished when she shared that she did not think these individuals realised the offensiveness of their comments, as I am unable to see them otherwise.

feelings, which then surfaced in unhealthy ways in our interactions. In Colleen's words: "We are more alike than different, quite honestly, but in that moment my colleagues heard my voice and recognised my selfness."

I also spoke with Peter, Walter and Anna in the process of writing this narrative. Peter acknowledged that it was a good discussion, but that the exchange had not changed his view that, as a bureaucrat, his role is to hire the best person for the job—and that he would do everything he could to eliminate bias from hiring decisions. Both Peter and Anna suggested the unlikelihood of being able to have that discussion elsewhere; Peter stating that he "would be devoured at the national table" for expressing his perspective. Walter recognised how easy it would have been to "jump over the elephant" and accept Colleen's invitation to talk about something easier. He felt that we came out of the difficult discussion stronger as a team and in our relationships with each other. We could admit to each other that we have biases and had not been doing enough on the issue of equity and diversity. Anna also experienced the exchange as tense and emotional, and she was concerned about Colleen's burden of responsibility on this issue, resolving to do more herself. In her words, it would be "nice if we got to a place where Colleen did not need to say anything."

### Reflections on Narrative 2

This second narrative developed differently for a few reasons. While each of us had different concerns during the meeting, they did not limit our exchanges. Part of my own unease was my fear that the discussion would negatively affect our relationships and ability to trust each other. However, I also sensed that we could have the conversation safely because we enjoy higher levels of trust and common cause in our regional group. I use the word *safe* not to idealise our way of working together nor to disregard my feeling of *unsafeness*, but to reflect my confidence that we could have an emotional and challenging conversation and yet be safe in the inherent unsafeness.

I joke about how my team has grown up together. They have worked together for many years and I, with almost five years with them, am the relative newcomer. We have tackled

disagreements and difficult issues and, even where individuals feel strongly, we are generally able to engage in a way that leaves everyone feeling supported and respected.

The feedback I received from my supervisors and learning set was that, in this narrative, being the boss, I had more power chances than Colleen, Peter, Walter and Anna. Certainly, I recognise my hierarchical seniority and can understand that I have power over them in the sense described by Elias (1908/1978, p. 74), as they need my approval for their own success. As a leader, I cannot dismiss the significant influence I have on how we work together, particularly on whether the environment feels safe for us to engage in difference. However, I do not feel particularly powerful. At the end of the day, I make the final decisions, but it is rare that I make an important one without talking it through with my team. In our interdependence, I need them as much as they need me. I care about them as individuals and colleagues and respect them and their capabilities. I value their willingness to share a different perspective or to tell me when I am wrong. I rely on our ability to work as a team. I remember fondly an episode that illustrates our ease with one another. Anna was driving four of us to a meeting. I was riding shotgun, while Colleen and Tara, my previous Chief of Staff, sat in the back seat. Tara was trying to give me some advice and I was not paying attention. Finally, Colleen lost patience with me and yelled, "Sara, can you please listen to Tara?" Anna initially froze, but relaxed as I started to laugh, turned around in my seat and said, "Yeah, I will."

The significant variable in these two narratives is *trust*. In the second story, I was able to say that we should persevere with what I knew would be a difficult conversation because I trusted the members of my senior management team and believed that they also trusted each other and me. It was my expectation that we would be able to have this discussion *safely* in our *unsafeness* and that we would end up with a better mutual understanding and secure or improved relationships.

## The Challenge of Sensemaking

Before I explore the notion of trust in the literature, I will examine how the very nature of meaning making in groups is potentially anxiety creating. I adopt the perspective of Ralph Stacey (2012b), who noted in his blog about trust that it is only when individuals differ from each other that novelty and innovation can emerge and there can be successful sensemaking. The exercise of managing difference is not, however, necessarily easy; collective meaning making is always potentially anxiety provoking and destabilising, particularly in a work setting, given the significance of negative impacts on one's livelihood and prospects for advancement.

In my Project 3, where I introduced the discussion on conversations and sensemaking, I referred to Karl Weick's (1995) work, which described the latter as the process of making sense generally prompted by a cue that disrupts prior expectations (pp. 4–6). Such disruptions can obviously have an impact on those who experience them and McDaniel et al. (2003) suggested these cues, or "surprises," are usually experienced as dysfunctional (p. 266). Business scholars Mengis, Nicolini and Swan (2018) wrote about "epistemic breakdowns," which they describe as disruptions of expectations, which are deeply unsettling both cognitively and emotionally, because previously understood ways of knowing a problem turn out to be unworkable (p. 607). This latter may be an extreme view, but making sense of ambiguity necessarily involves uncertainty, emotions and messiness, which can be difficult to handle, particularly in a bureaucratic organisation and culture where we are supposed to be "in control and decisive" (Weick, 1995, p. 186). Even where the breakdown is not quite as existential, organisational behaviour and knowledge scholar Barbara Simpson, and learning theorist, Nick Marshall (2010), identified the inevitability of anxiety induced by learning situations (p. 357).

This may arguably be exacerbated in the public sector. Psychotherapist Paul Hoggett (2006) wrote about how the public sector, in its concern with the governance of societies, continually deals with inherent and irresolvable value conflicts (p. 178), making value

determinations challenging and anxiety provoking. Furthermore, he noted that governments provide "a receptacle for anxieties that individuals were unable to contain within themselves" (p. 181). I use the terms *safe* and *unsafe* to describe the affectual experience in processes of meaning making in potentially conflict-laden contexts. While we can try to make these situations safer, the process of engaging with difference, which we must do to make meaning in our workplace, is necessarily anxiety provoking. This is particularly the case for individuals or groups who are highly involved (and invested) in a system, who are often afraid of changes to their accepted reality or status (Elias, 1983/1987, p. xxv).

Additionally, anxiety can also be experienced as our processes of meaning making can challenge our sense of who we are. In the process of our interactions, during which each of us is, in the words of Elias (1987/1991), "forming" others even as we are being "formed" by the reactions and actions of others (p. 316), neither the individual nor the group emerges unchanged from meaning making. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, in his essay *Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes* (in Malpas, Arnswald and Kertscher, ed., 2002), proposed that a changed understanding of self emerges from engagement in meaning making in hermeneutics "in coming to see the other correctly, we inescapably alter our understanding of ourselves. Taking in the other will involve an identity shift in us. That is why it is so often resisted and rejected." (p. 295)

This suggests that sensemaking can be particularly difficult because it challenges us by *changing who we are* both in our *selfness* and our *groupness*, raising issues of identity and the question of whether we feel able to countenance the resulting change in ourselves. I saw this positively in Colleen's statement: "in that moment my colleagues heard my voice and recognised my selfness." Mead (1934/1967) stressed the importance of recognition in this sense of "selfness," which highlights the potential vulnerability for us in meaning making:

> If he could not bring that peculiarity of himself into the common community, if it could not be recognized, if others could not take his attitude in some sense, he could not have appreciation in emotional terms, he could not be the very self he is trying

> to be. The author, the artist, must have his audience; it may be an audience that
> belongs to posterity, but there must be an audience. (p. 324)

In both narratives around trust, we faced a significant dilemma: trying to make sense of numbers that indicated we might fail our commitments to Parliament and to our department; and negotiating different perspectives on employment equity. In both cases, risk and uncertainty were heightened by the potential of negative consequences if we failed to manage to figure out how to move forward together. All of us faced the likelihood of a change in our identity as good operators and respectful and unbiased public servants. There was more than enough anxiety to go around as we tried to make sense of what was going on.

## What is Trust?

Many writers have agreed on the importance of trust in human conduct (Hosmer, 1995, p. 380). Finding a common definition of the term is difficult, however, because it is so frequently used in everyday speech (Collard, 1989, p. 202; Hardin, 1999, p. 429) and "is one of those powerful words which everyone understands but turns out to have many different uses which shade into one another" (Cook, 2003, pp. 2–9). Further complicating our understanding is that trust is both a noun and a verb. *I have trust in a colleague*; *I have a colleague whom I trust*. It can thus be an adjective—*she is a trustworthy or trusting colleague*—and an adverb—*she worked trustfully with her colleague*. Some authors have focused their efforts on *trustworthiness*, suggesting that it is distinguishable from—if related to—trust (Kiyonari, Yamagishi, Cook, and Cheshire, 2006; Hardin, 1996; Cook and Schilke, 2010) or that one cannot discuss one without the other (Hardin, 2006, p. 1). In my consideration of the definition of trust, I focus largely on its use as a noun despite the risk of reifying the concept.

To ground my consideration of trust, I draw on the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (2004), which identifies ten meanings of the noun trust. Excluding those definitions that refer to the legal usage of the word trust (as legal structures or instruments), they define it as:

> 1. a faith or confidence in the loyalty, veracity, reliability, strength, etc., of a person or thing. b. the state or condition of being trusted or relied on. 2. the obligation or responsibility placed on a person who is trusted or relied on … 3. reliance on the truth of a statement etc. without examination. 4. A confident expectation. 5. a person or thing upon whom one relies or depends … 6. a thing or person committed to one's care: a charge. (p. 1671)

Larue Tone Hosmer provided a helpful review of the literature in his article "Trust: The Connecting Link between Organizational Theory and Philosophical Ethics" (1995). This literature aligns with the Oxford's definition of trust in terms of confidence, obligation or responsibility, reliance and confident expectation. He proposed that the concept is used in five different contexts: "(a) individual expectations, (b) interpersonal relationships, (c) economic exchanges, (d) social structures, and (e) ethical principles" (p. 381).

I do not discuss trust in either economic exchanges or ethical principles, but I find that the other three concepts of trust can show how approaches to thinking about trust vary from individualistic expectation, to relational or "the dependent relations of a dyad" (p. 383), to a discussion of the social structures or mechanisms inherent in trust (p. 388). For this discussion, I group together trust as individualistic expectations and as interpersonal relations. Once one excludes trust in inanimate objects[35] (I trust the sun will rise in the morning) or animals (I trust the dog won't bite), individualistic trust based on expectations necessarily implies that one is at the very least in dyadic relations with another individual, thus necessarily involving interpersonal relations.

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[35] Although I restrict myself here to a consideration of the paradox of the individual and the social, I acknowledge and agree with Ian Burkitt (1999), who draws on Elias (1987/1991, p. 97) to propose "three basic co-ordinates of human life: the shaping and positioning of the individual within the social structure, the social structure itself and the relation of social human beings to events in the non-human world" (Burkitt, 1999, pp. 13–14). He appropriately takes the view that "life is the relationship between organic bodies and between bodies and the ecological system*" (p. 25).

### Trust as individual expectations in interpersonal relations.

A number of scholars have defined trust as the confident or optimistic expectations of one individual about another's actions (Hosmer, 1995, p. 381) which involve risk and reliance (or some form of commitment) of the trustor on the trustee as to how the risk will be managed or addressed by the former (Luhmann, 1979/2017, pp. 23, 27; Sztompka, 2006a, pp. 25, 29; Hardin, 2006, p. 27). It has been described as interpersonal, relational and relating to people (Luhmann, 1979/2017, p. 25; Hardin, 2006, p. 19; Hurley et al., 2014, p. 353; Cook, 2005, p. 6; Latusek and Cook, 2012, p. 513), and by Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka (2006a) as a "bet about the future contingent actions of others" (p. 25).

In the consideration of trust as interpersonal, one key difference is whether scholars view it as cognitive, involving an individual's assessment of another's trustworthiness based on "beliefs that derive from personal experience, reputation, or similar sources of information" (Cheshire, Gerbasi and Cook, 2010, pp. 180–81; Farrell, 2006, p. 686) or as both cognitive and emotional. Political scientist Russell Hardin (1999) who takes a cognitive perspective, proposes trust as a three-part relation involving a trusted, a truster and a matter at stake (p. 38) and describes trustworthiness as a matter of moral commitment, character or disposition to be the kind of person who keeps trusts, and that all three are cognitive "because all depend on assessments of the trustworthiness of the potentially trusted person" and "are in the family of terms that includes knowledge and belief" (p. 17). American professor of management Robert Hurley (2012) likewise developed a "Decision to Trust Model" that focused on cognition versus emotion, despite recognising the work of others suggesting that trust judgments involve both emotion and cognition, as he believed cognition to be the most powerful element of decisions to trust (pp. 27–33).

Other researchers disagree with this view, as do I. A number of scholars have pointed out that trust expectations are not just cognitive, but include the emotional and even the moral (Sztompka, 2006a, p. 22) and that focus on the rational alone discounts the important role of emotional and social influences on trust decisions" (Kramer, 1999, p. 573). Similarly, Gareth Jones and Jennifer George (1998) have suggested that one's emotional state may

colour how one forms opinions about others, and that trust decisions are built on expectations which are, in part, emotional (p. 534), while organisational theorists Schoorman, Mayer and Davis (2007) have cited the influence of emotions on the "perception of the antecedents of trust and, therefore, the trust in relationships" (p. 349).

My perspective is influenced by Ian Burkitt's work on emotions, embodiment and identity, which suggests that it is impossible to separate mind from body (1999, pp. 2–12) and emotions from the cognitive or rational (2014, p. 21), and that there is no "neutral, non-personal, unemotional way of engaging with the world" (2014, p. 21). He expressed this particularly well in "Emotional Reflexivity: Feeling, Emotion and Imagination in Reflexive Dialogues," in which he wrote:

> Emotion is not just something that we reflect on in a disengaged way, it is central to the way people in social relations relate to one another: it is woven into the fabric of the interactions we are engaged in and it is therefore also central to the way we relate to ourselves as well as to others. Emotion then, is about the way we engage and interrelate with others and with ourselves (2012, p. 459).

Emotion and cognition cannot be separated; each is integral to and interrelated with the other and one cannot therefore experience one without the other (see also Wetherell, 2014, p. 24; Baldwin, 1988, pp. 52–53; Smith, Wetherell and Campbell, 2018, p. 1).

I have discussed how meaning making processes require us to enter into what may be messy, conflictual and identity-changing situations, which will be necessarily affected by one's own and others' emotions. In these Project 4 narratives, my decision to act or not was both cognitive and affect-based, relying upon my feelings and emotions, instincts and intuitions just as much as my cognitive abilities. In the first narrative, I chose to retreat because my experience suggested that I would not be heard, and I feared that persisting would lead to disadvantage. My actions were governed as much by fear, by my feelings of being unsafe, as by any calculated sense of my likely success (or failure) in pursuing the discussion. In the second narrative, while I was rational in my considerations of our

capacity to have what I suspected would be a difficult conversation, I was influenced significantly by my caring feelings for those involved and by my concern for how the team's failure to address the issue might impact on our interpersonal dynamics.

Barbara Misztal (1996) and Niklaus Luhmann (1979/2017) have both written extensively on the fragile nature of trust, which involves assessing the risk of relying on another (Misztal, 1996, p. 125; Luhmann, 1979/2017, pp. 31–32). In my experience, this makes sense given trust involves an assessment of the risk of relying upon another (Misztal, 1996, p. 125; Luhmann 1979/2017, pp. 31–32). The felt risk of trusting can weigh heavily and a single negative experience is likely to outweigh several positive experiences, because even one breaking of trust introduces uncertainty into a relationship that was not there before. This holds particularly true in relationships that require us to interact with one another on an ongoing basis.

The balance of opinion in the literature shows trust to be fragile, both cognitive and affect-based and involving risk, vulnerability or uncertainty in situations in which there is some expectation of or reliance on others, all shaped by the context of the person trusting. These factors were present in both my narratives. However, although I accept them as necessary elements of trust relationships, they are insufficient on their own to understand my interactions in these two meetings. I need to incorporate the thinking of scholars who have considered trust from a social perspective.

### Trust from a sociological perspective.

Many scholars have taken a sociological approach to trust, writing on social trust (Cook, 2005), generalised trust (Cook, 2005; Latusek and Cook, 2012; Yamagishi, Cook and Watabe, 1998), and social capital (Fukuyama, 1996; Putnam, 1993, 2000). In this approach, attention moves beyond dyadic interpersonal relationships to social structures (Hosmer, 1995, p. 388), and from trust based on personal expectations and interests to trust rooted in ethical responsibilities and obligations, encompassing how people relate to each other and

identifying "the right, proper, obligatory relationships, and invoking values rather than interests as the justification for prescribed conduct" (Sztompka, 2006. p. 4).

British sociologist Barbara Misztal (1996) proposed that it is not so much about formal organisation or structure as it is a "sense of belonging, trust and responsibility, and duties towards others who share our values, interests and goals" (pp. 206–07). She conceptualised trust as a social mechanism explained by an individual's beliefs and motivations, and the social relations and obligations inherent in them being "a routine background to everyday interactions through which the predictability, legibility and reliability of collective order is sustained, while the perception of its complexity and uncertainty is restricted." (p. 97)

Sztompka (2006a) similarly highlighted the importance of mutual obligations in a moral community, which he described as:

> …a specific way of relating to others whom we define as "us." Three moral obligations define the parameter of the "us" category. "Us" means those whom we trust, toward whom we are loyal, and for whose problems we care in the spirit of solidarity. (p. 5)

While a social perspective on trust encompasses considerations from the literature on individualistic expectations or interpersonal relationships, it also suggests trust as a mechanism, process, quality or pattern of relating to one another, which emerges in social interactions (Stacey, 2012b). This better explains how I interacted in the two narratives when faced with difficult (i.e., scary) decisions. In each, the patterns of my relationships and interactions based on my history and experience formed a backdrop that determined how *safe* I did or did not feel in engaging.

### Towards a complex responsive process of relating perspective on trust.

Building on the social perspective of trust and seeing it from the vantage point of complex responsive processes of relating (Griffin, 2006; Mowles, 2015a, 2015b; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2005; Stacey, 2010; Stacey, 2012a, 2012b; Stacey and Griffin, 2005; Griffin and Stacey, 2005; Stacey and Mowles, 2016) requires an understanding that population-wide

patterns emerge as the result of local interactions of individuals, affected by power figurations, emotions and evaluative choices such as norms and values. After exploring this, I briefly revisit my discussion from Project 3 about buffering conversations in light of this examination of trust.

Earlier, I commented on the potential confusion caused by the use of trust as both a noun and a verb (and adjective and adverb). I believe the real reason for the ambiguity is that trust is paradoxical. In using this term, I adopt Mowles' (2015a) definition of "two mutually negating, self-referencing ideas simultaneously producing the potential for meaning making which is not confined to one pole of the paradox or the other" (p. 248).

Trust is highly particularised, as scholars who take an individualistic approach have highlighted. However, the fact that it is interpersonal, taking place in localised interactions between individuals and groups makes it inherently social. It is thus particularised and localised, and social all at the same time. One can think about trust in similar terms as Elias (1908/1978) does in his consideration of *power*, which he describes as relational and a "structural characteristic of human relationships" in which interdependent individuals enable and constrain each other in ongoing processes of configuring power relations as they negotiate their actions (p. 74).

In the first narrative, we were all negotiating what it meant to be good public servants. Gerard was offering his ideas on increasing productivity. Sonia was defending the numbers generated by her team, which are her responsibility and perceived as necessary for evidence-based solutions. I was seeking to engage in an exploration of the numbers and their validity. Robert was preoccupied with meeting our commitments to the department and Parliament (I later learned that the Senior Department Head had taken him to task over our poor productivity results). In the process, we were all enabling and constraining each other. Moreover, I was also constraining myself in my doubts about my ability to persuade my colleagues of the problem with the numbers. Out of this—and our individual and collective histories and experiences—emerged patterns of distrust and trust that then played out in our interactions and working together.

I am using the term *groups* as if they are unchanging collections of individuals, but I am talking about the groups/individuals that existed on a particular day and at a particular time, acting into the living present in which the "present both forms and is formed by the past and the future at the same time" (Stacey and Mowles, 2016, pp. 32–37) in the shadows of other individuals and groups that were not present but had an influence on each of us. According to Plato, Heraclitus of Ephesus claimed that no man ever steps twice in the same river (Plato, *Cratylus* 402a) and so it is for individuals and groups. The group that meets Monday is a different one than arrives on Tuesday. In the first narrative, all of us had a slightly different relationship with each other following our shared experience the previous night when one of us ended up in the emergency department.

It was not just a question of what was going on between Robert and me in that first narrative, or between Colleen and me in the second. Nor was it simply between individuals in my region (represented by me) and headquarters colleagues, or others in my region and their colleagues in other regions. I was interacting with each of my colleagues and with the many groups, they represented. I, and each of the others, were also acting into an environment that (for me) included the echoes of past experiences with each of them, as well as my personal history in the public service. The calculations or assessments are different for every permutation and combination of those involved in an interaction; the sum of these relationships, past histories and experiences came together in our interactions in our work together.

G.H. Mead (1934/1967) proposed that we, in our interactions, take the attitude of the other at the same time as the same response is called out in the self (pp. 15–56). This is echoed by scholars writing on the expectation of "reciprocity" implied in the act of trusting (Sztompka, 2006a, pp. 51–52, 69–77). This can take the form of "the expectation of returning the good entrusted, and the expectation of mutual loyalty and trust" (p. 52). Putnam (1994) referred to the "norm of generalized reciprocity," which he defined as serving to reconcile self-interest and solidarity. He explained it as a combination of short-term altruism and long-term self-interest: I will help you out now based on the (probably

unenforceable) expectation that you (even though I may not know you) will reciprocate by helping me out in the future (pp. 172). In a later work, *Bowling Alone* (2000), he explicated the interrelationships between reciprocity, honesty and trust, describing the principle of generalised reciprocity as the touchstone of what he referred to as social capital (p. 134).

Social theorist Kenwyn Smith and organisational psychologist David Berg (1997) brought another perspective to reciprocity in their book *Paradoxes of Life, Understanding Conflict, Paralysis, and Movement in Group Dynamics*. They examined what they called paradoxes of engaging, which include those of disclosure, trust, intimacy and regression, suggesting that these paradoxes arise when "members begin to ask how much of themselves they are willing and able to contribute to the group and how much is required of them for the group to be effective" (p. 109). They proposed a definition of the "paradox of trust" as the dilemma in group life in which one needs to trust others, but the development of that trust depends on pre-existing trust. Consistent with many writers, they suggested that before we are willing to trust others, we want to know whether they are trustworthy, whether there is reciprocity (pp. 119–20).

The expectation of reciprocity plays an important role in the emergence of patterns of trust in local interactions as we take on the attitudes of others. In the second narrative, I felt safe—even in the throes of my anxiety—that I could trust my colleagues and that they would trust me as we negotiated a difficult conversation. Trust was reciprocal and mutually reinforcing. In the first narrative, when considering whether to pursue or retreat from my questions about the numbers, I was concerned that Robert had no confidence in me, which weakened my capacity to trust my own abilities, perhaps reinforcing Robert's view that I was missing the point and further undermining his confidence in me. The potential for a cruel and negative circle is obvious: because you do not trust me, I do not trust you and because I do not trust you, you do not trust me. As a result, I decided that it was easier and safer for my career to be an obedient civil servant rather than to rock the boat.

At the October 2018 DMan residential we played a version of the prisoner's dilemma game, dividing into groups and having to choose between two variables. Different

combinations of the variables led to different monetary consequences, with the class maximising its potential for profit if all groups chose the X variable. Defection by any single group might bring it a handsome reward, but the group would lose the others' trust and the likelihood of everyone picking the X variable would disappear until negotiations re-established the possibility. I noticed that our assessment of the likelihood of reciprocal behaviour changed as we were persuaded that other groups would—or would not—reciprocate our trust. I also felt the ebb and flow of my emotions as I reacted to acts of support or to what felt like betrayal or game playing as different strategies played out.

## Buffering Conversations and Trust

Before I conclude this project, I will resume a discussion from my third project in which I referred to *buffering conversations* and their role in making sense of and/or renegotiating our relationships and expectations of each other. I used the term buffering in the sense defined in the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (2004), which refers to "a device that protects against or reduces the effect of an impact" (p. 197).

Buffering conversations anticipate, respond to or clarify our intentions about what has happened and our future expectations of each other. They generally take place in what feels more like a controlled environment, one-on-one, where enablers and constraints are less complex, and we feel that we can better manage expectations of reciprocity through the visibility of our actions and open communications. Various thinkers have written about how we form expectations of each other, e.g., *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977/2015, pp. 78-87; Thompson, ed. in Bourdieu, 1982/2003, pp. 12-14) or the *generalised other* (Mead, 1934/1967). In all cases, we form expectations of the dynamic into which we are acting—what we think will happen and how others and we might react. We cannot be certain of any of these, yet they form the basis for how we relate to others. When they are disrupted or found to be wrong, we try to make sense together of what has happened to inform how we will go on together. Through buffering conversations, we supplement the information we, and others, rely on in assessing whether to trust or not; we negotiate to create allies and

perhaps to find a space in which we can reconcile the public and hidden transcripts (Scott, 1990, p. 4). In the process, we try to increase the sense of reciprocity among ourselves and thus enhance our probability of being seen as trustworthy.

Within the narratives in this project, I participated in or overheard several buffering conversations. Gerard's reference to the EI meeting "not going too badly" as we three regional ADMs headed out to lunch together, now seems to me to have been a mutual reassurance that we had made it safely through a difficult experience. I also had subsequent one-on-one conversations with Robert in which I referred to the meeting and attempted again to show how actively we in the region were contributing to the national network's overall production.

A more powerful buffering conversation followed the meeting about employment equity. That evening, as we gathered at a nearby restaurant to celebrate another of our colleagues, Colleen asked Peter how he was doing. "Not too well," he replied. "Today I had a fight with my buddy." She laughed and he smiled before chatting about it further, and in the process, they worked to renegotiate their relationship following their earlier intense exchange.

## Conclusions

Reflecting on the normative aspect of trust, I believe that one of the challenges of writing about the concept is the danger of reifying or glorifying it. Trust is not a thing. It is also neither necessarily good nor bad. Trust as a concept is meaningless in the abstract or in the "vaguely warm and fuzzy" (Hardin, 1999, p. 429) statements bandied about suggesting it is something that is good to have in an organisation or society. Trust is highly particularised and social and its characterisation as good or bad is in the eye of the beholder. For example, in the budget narrative in my Project 1, I was naïve in trusting that I could intervene in the way that I did and be heard and listened to. My trust was, in retrospect, unwise and probably unhelpful in my early days in the department as I sought to establish myself as a credible partner. On the other hand, I believe that the patterns of trust we have established

in my region allow us to more readily embrace our differences and be *safe* in the *unsafeness* that difficult issues often engender.

The social mechanism or pattern of trust is likewise dynamic and inherently social and relational. It encompasses the intentions, emotions, concerns and motivations of individuals as they attempt to make sense of their interactions with others in the non-linear iterative processes of working together. It is influenced by the power figurations, emotions and evaluative choices facing individual(s) in an interaction and, therefore, has a significant impact on the existence, nature and extent of their interactions with other(s). It is paradoxically based on the individual and particularised in their experience and actions, while at the same time inextricably intertwined with the social in that it forms and, in turn, is formed by the history, experience and expectations of others in the figurations and context, whether one describes context as *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977/2015, pp. 78-87; Thompson, ed. in Bourdieu, 1982/2003, pp. 12-14) or as a result of taking into account the *generalised other* (Mead, 1934/1967, p. 152-6).

Trust is an ongoing patterning of the narrative themes that emerge in our interactions, which organises our experience of working to make meaning together in the living present and affects our identity and ability to engage with difference. A subtheme of this project is the impact of the use of metrics on sensemaking and in our relationships. I am left with the paradox that quantification helps to manage complexity and scale of operations and thus is generally trusted to assist us in our work to make meaning; however, it also artificially reduces complexity and diminishes available information through the increase in anxiety and emotions and disregard or dismissal of practical knowledge.

As I draw this project to a close, there are areas I wish to explore further. Reflecting on Projects 1–3, I see themes and issues that resonate with my previous narratives. This includes, for example, how concepts of power relations and *habitus* affect the expectations and dynamics in which we are all caught up. In addition, there are implications for practice from my study of trust. Trust is "easier to destroy than to create" (Kramer, 1999, p. 593), which has consequences for a bureaucracy, with implications for how we make meaning

together. Jones and George (1998) have proposed three forms of trust: distrust, conditional trust and unconditional trust (p. 537). While all trust is conditional to some extent and unconditional trust might better be described as *blind* trust, I agree that they raise important ethical considerations for leaders in bureaucracies in terms of what we ask our colleagues to trust us *about*, knowing how limited is our ability to control what will happen in the future (p. 543).

Weber (1922/1978) considered bureaucracies to be "the means of transforming social action into rationally organized action" (p. 987) according to purely objective considerations and suggested that the more complicated and specialised the modern culture, the more bureaucracies were needed. My discussion on trust poses challenges in terms of meaning making in bureaucracies, which has implications for our ability to engage with difference. The International Winston Churchill Society has published his famous description of democracy in a speech to the House of Commons, 11 November 1947:

> Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

I suspect that bureaucracies can similarly be considered as the worst form of organisation for management on a large scale, "except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

## Synopsis

The synopsis constitutes a *knitting together* of the process of my inquiry over the course of my participation in the DMan program. I trace the development of my thinking starting with the first project, an experiential autobiography, which provides the grounding for my inquiry. In projects, two through four, I explore narratives in my current work with the Federal Government that I experienced as disturbing or puzzling, as well as the literature and reflections evoked by my reading, writing and discussion.

I discuss the methodology that I use in my inquiry and provide a summary of each of the projects and my thinking at the time they were written, and then take a further reflective and reflexive turn to review and expand on emergent themes in an attempt to show the progression of my thinking.

I summarise my key arguments based on my inquiry and research, its impact on my work and the contributions I claim to make to knowledge and to practice. I conclude with some thoughts on opportunities for further research.

To begin, I turn to a discussion of the methodological approach I used in my inquiry.

## Methodology

My research was conducted under the auspices of the Professional Doctorate in Management Programme at the University of Hertfordshire and is based on an inquiry into my experience and practice in senior management in the complex environment of the Canadian Public Service. To explain my research method, I describe the method of inquiry followed in the DMan programme. I draw on pragmatic philosophy (Baert, 2017; Martela, 2015; Flyvbjerg, 2016; Mowles, 2015a, 2015b; Gadamer, 1960/2013; Dewey, 1938, 1916/1953) to claim that research methods should be informed by the nature and purpose of the inquiry and the practice context (Mowles, 2015a, 6–9) and/or disciplinary, institutional and societal setting (Baert, 2017, pp. 149–50), and I situate my method within the qualitative interpretivist paradigm. I explain my choice of reflexive narrative methodology, address its benefits and limitations, clarify how my method is distinguished from other research methods, and outline the ethical considerations.

### The DMan method

I describe in detail the DMan method of research at the University of Hertfordshire in the introduction to my thesis (see pp. 13). In summary, the approach is pragmatic in the sense described by Bent Flyvbjerg (2016, p. 134), and is situated in the interpretive qualitative paradigm, with students reflecting on themes of importance to them in their workplace practices (Stacey and Griffen, 2005, pp. 1–2). Through the device of reflexive narrative inquiry, the researcher enquires into a workplace issue or event  that puzzles, confuses and/or disturbs them, an approach that has been described as "breakdown" (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 31) or "mystery" (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011, pp. 65–66) research.

The DMan thesis includes four projects and a synopsis. The first project illustrates how the researcher's understandings, perspectives and ways of thinking have been formed by past experiences and communities. This begins the process of identifying the animating question for the research inquiry. Projects Two through Four focus on narratives based on work

practices that have puzzled or disturbed the researcher and constitute the raw material of the research. The synopsis includes a summary of the analysis and argument, a methodology discussion and an outline of the work's contributions to theory and practice.

Emergent inquiry is inherent to the research method and, consistent with an established approach to some professional doctoral theses, the research is based on my own practice. The animating question emerged through the iterative processes of research, writing and reflexivity prompted by breakdowns in my understanding. This required me to pay attention to the evolution of my thinking throughout reading, writing and discussion, which is demonstrated in the development of my projects as I wrote and reflected on my experiences. Accordingly, the projects were edited only to better expose the reflexive turns that occurred in my thinking and my practice over the development of the inquiry.

American pragmatist John Dewey (1938) wrote that all inquiry is a social exercise (p. 19; also see Martela, 2015, p. 546); this perspective is built into the DMan programme's methodology, which acknowledges that we are necessarily fallible and limited by our perspectives and prejudices. It also incorporates the critical perspective of the community of inquirers (Bernstein, 1992, p. 328) that educational philosophers Michael Pardales and Mark Girod, drawing on the work of Charles S. Peirce, described as a "jury to ideas and hypotheses" (2006, p. 301; also see Shields, 2003) to challenge the research and to help determine what is interesting and credible in the work (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011, p. 75). Social interaction, discussion, debate and challenge within the community of DMan researchers are key to the way their work evolves and is held to account. This underpins the elements of challenge and dialectic provided by the researcher's own reflexivity and by the scholarly literature. Students are afforded the opportunity to present at critical stages in their research to obtain feedback from faculty and other students, who challenge and debate their research, helping to clarify their thinking and assumptions. Work is judged by whether it is plausible and persuasive rather than predictive and valid.

Individual learning sets provide each student with a smaller group of peers within the larger research community with whom they meet via Skype and during residential sessions to

review, explore and challenge each other's work.  Over time, learning set members develop a professional intimacy that enables them to judge whether an individual's practice description is plausible and generalisable to the experience of others.

The work done in this community and the collective processes of reflection and reflexivity about experiences of learning and research is modelled on the group analytic tradition in what the Institute of Group Analysis calls a *median experiential group* (Mowles, 2017a, p. 7; Stacey, 2010, p. 223). During four-day residential sessions held four times a year, all DMan faculty and students meet for three 90-minute sessions, during which there is no agenda and no one in charge. Participants are encouraged to share observations about their work practices and to raise questions and challenges experienced in their research. Participating in the experiential group meetings is an exercise in the practice of uncertainty and provides an opportunity to encounter and explore "themes organising the experience of being together and the power relations they reflect" (Stacey, 2010, p. 223), all of which informed my inquiry.

Discussions within both my learning set and the larger community of inquirers supported my pursuit of a credible thesis by challenging my choice of language, description of context, and the content and conclusions of my narratives. They also prompted considerations about what was extraneous or missing from my work and from my review of the academic literature.

Discussions involving challenging work issues sometimes triggered emotional reactions and provided an opportunity to further understand experiences, in my case leading to a change in my practice. When faced with a decision whether to pursue a difficult conversation (see the second narrative of my project 4, pp. 124), my dialogues in community meetings enabled me to engage in the discussion in an effective way.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of how these challenges to my research inquiry can reveal biases and assumptions. In any group review, similarities or differences within the group will naturally influence the extent of the challenge. In the DMan

community, participants reflect a diversity of nationalities and experience, but also exhibit similarities in perspective and situation, which makes testing of biases imperfect. This is similar to the workplace—and any exercise in meaning making—and in my pragmatic approach, I argue that it suffices to be aware of this constraint.

Finally, reflexivity is a key element of the research method in the DMan programme. Organisational theorist Chris Mowles (2015a) explained reflection as a second-order process, allowing us distance from our own participation or involvement. Reflexivity is a third-order process in which we reflect on what and how we are doing; what we think about what is going on and the sense we make of it; and what we think about the way we think (pp. 60–61). Mowles (2015a) described its utility as a research methodology to get beyond "what we take for granted and our habitual ways of thinking about the world, our prejudices if you like, which are invisible to us until we are brought hard up against them through the experience of difference" (p. 61). The processes of challenge and dialectic and the iterative nature of the writing, discussion and debate inherent to the social and emergent research method that I adopted encouraged me to be reflexive, which is evident in the evolution of my written work over the course of the programme. This reliance on reflection and reflexivity in my narratives allowed me to be more thoughtful about my interactions in organisational processes and to explore more fully the nature of my experience.

### Taking a pragmatic approach to method

In the DMan we accept the view expressed by pragmatist and sociologist Patrick Baert (2017) that there is insufficient similarity among disciplines to justify a unity of method in scientific inquiry (pp. 147–50). We take a pragmatic approach to our choice of method, reasoning that the method used to pursue an inquiry should be suitable for the nature of the research. Otherwise we may be in the situation Ann Cunliffe (2011) described:

> If we are driven by method, we may end up shaping our research around methodological obligations and the need to fit "data" to technical requirements, rather than being sensitive to what is going on around us. (p. 667)

Autoethnographer Arthur Bochner, in his consideration of qualitative methods, noted that the question of those seeking rigor (often through positivist approaches) is often "how do you know?" but draws on the pragmatist Rorty (1989) to suggest that we need rather to ask: "Why do we talk that way?" (Bochner, 2017, p. 360). He suggested that qualitative inquiry has "explicit moral and political objectives" (p. 360), and the goal should be based on "the many ways in which the virtuosity of qualitative inquiry broadens and deepens our sense of a human community, and its contributions to justice and solidarity" (p. 361). He proposed that qualitative inquiry is about *meaning* and that "[q]ualitative inquiry provides a material intervention into people's lives, one that not only expresses but also creates experience, putting meanings in motion" (p. 366). The knowledge (or meaning) that we are seeking is not one of certainty or control but, as noted by Rhodes and Brown, drawing on Czarniawska, "rather emerges from a reflection on the messy realities of organizational practice" (2005, p. 182).

A helpful statement of a pragmatic approach to method is one proposed by Dewey (1941), who suggested the concept of "warranted assertability," i.e., theories that are helpful and will stand the test until a better explanation comes along (p. 11). Not all forms or types of understanding are equally valid and, accordingly, we need to judge any warranted assertion by its ability to meet the needs of the community (p. 540). Social research has a temporal characteristic, since knowledge is fallible, not because it is untrue in the realistic sense of understanding, but because alternate explanations generated in subsequent research may force us to change our perspective. The very nature of complex situations is such that we cannot seek truth or falsities, but instead look to how relevant and efficacious their subject matter is with respect to the problem being addressed (Dewey, 1938, p. 176). This epistemological position of pragmatism is referred to as *fallibilism*—when an understanding has repeatedly been proved helpful or effective, it may serve as a stable base for future inquiry (Dewey, 1938, p. 7; Martela, 2015, p. 540).

Svend Brinkmann (2014) also considered a pragmatic approach to method, drawing on the work of fellow pragmatist Charles Peirce to propose the use of an abductive form of

analysis, as compared with inductive and deductive approaches (pp. 721–72; also see Thomas, 2010, pp. 575–82). Induction analysis is data-driven and not suitable for use in an experiential form of inquiry, which cannot yield certain or general knowledge. Deduction is theory-driven analysis in which hypotheses are articulated based on theories and tested empirically. Such empirical testing is not appropriate to experiential inquiry, as the testing itself changes the practice and understanding of what is going on—it is not simply descriptive, but interventional. Instead, abductive inquiry is proposed as a form of reasoning suitable for seeking an understanding of what is going on in the context of uncertainty and complexity (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011, pp. 4–8). Inquiry arises from "some kind of breakdown in the researcher's understanding" (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 31), which starts from a form of disruption or surprise that challenges the understanding of the way the world is. It serves as a creative and imaginative method to arrive at "the best available explanation taking all into account" (Martela, 2015, p. 549), rather than yielding fixed or universal knowledge. Brinkmann (2014) proposed a delightful category of data he referred to as "stumble data," described as data one stumbles on, as in the case of a breakdown where the inquiry helps one to regain balance through better understanding what is going on (p. 724).

Such a pragmatic approach to inquiry into practice allows the researcher to pursue valid cognitive objectives other than causation and prediction (Baert, 2017, pp. 149–150) and to focus on a pragmatic and historical consideration of everyday situations and the context of the practice under inquiry with a view to action (Brinkmann, 2016, pp.134, 167). Such an approach reflects that understanding, interpretation and their application to the situation of the interpreter are intertwined and inseparable (Gadamer, 1960/2013, p. 318). Thus, cognitive objectives may include critiquing society or self-understanding, which confronts our preconceptions and biases and explores our "blind spots" (Baert, 2017, p. 166); moving from a causal to an explanatory objective, making the inquiry "not a quest for scientific truth but a quest for meaning" (Rhodes and Brown, 2005, p. 167); contributing not through validated knowledge, but in the suggestion of relationships and connections to facilitate

human problem-solving (Weick in Martela, 2015, p. 547); allowing the testing of one understanding against another (Bernstein, 1992, p. 4); making "*a case for a particular way of understanding social reality, in the context of a never-ending debate*" (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018, p. 370); or making sense of experience versus uncovering scientific truths (Mowles, 2015a, p. 13). Psychologist Svend Brinkmann (2012), who might be considered a new pragmatist, having written a book about Dewey, wrote about qualitative inquiry, taking it further in his suggestion that "human life as such is a research process, a hermeneutic process of inquiry that makes it impossible to draw a line between 'doing research' and 'being alive'" (p. 6). Philosopher and organisational researcher Frank Martela (2015) also asserted the primacy of experience from the perspective of the pragmatist (pp. 539, 558), proposing that we are first actors and only secondly thinkers, and that "pragmatism starts from the practical situation and 'repairs the boat while sailing'" (p. 556).

### Taking an interpretivist, qualitative approach to method

In taking this approach to determining method, I have placed myself within an interpretivist, qualitative paradigm as opposed to what is often referred to as positivist, quantitative research. This is consistent with the increased acceptance of qualitative methods for researching organisations from the perspective of complexity (Stacey and Griffin, 2005, p. 2). In a positivist paradigm, the researcher takes an objective and empirical approach to their work, often involving quantitative data, which aims at generalisation, replication and prediction (Thomas, 2012, p. 30; Bochner, 2017, p. 360). In any social inquiry characterised by complexity, however, the lack of predictability caused by nonlinearity, in which "one variable can have a more than proportional effect upon another" (Stacey and Mowles, 2016, p. 38), makes for very complex connections, which may render invisible any links between cause and effect. In the words of organisational theorist Karl Weick (1995), "structures of mutual causality mock the language of independent and dependent variables" (p. 155). This precludes employing a positivist or realist approach to an inquiry seeking the "ideal of universal, general, and timeless knowledge" (Tsoukas and

Hatch, 2001, pp. 990–91), or conclusions in the form of "If … then" propositional statements (Stacey and Mowles, 2016, p. 51).

Interpretivist qualitative methods help us to examine how people understand their experiences and recognise that social science is "political, interest- and value-laden" (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011, pp. 6–8) and not dedicated to the creation of "objective, nonideological knowledge derived from scientific observation of empirical reality" (Berger and Quinney, 2005, pp. 1–2), but also oriented toward meanings (Bochner, 2017, p. 363). This view understands that knowledge related to the social sciences is necessarily based on how we interpret the world and may lead to multiple interpretations rather than a single, measurable truth. As we are unable to separate ourselves from what we know, who we are, our values, and how we interpret the world, incorporating these considerations is necessarily central to how we engage in research (Stacey and Griffen, 2005, p. 1; Stacey and Mowles, 2016, pp. 508–12).

### Reflexive narrative as method

While I rejected a positivist or realist approach, there remain several qualitative methods that I could have pursued, each with advantages and limitations. In this section I discuss my rationale for the use of reflexive narrative methodology and consider the issues that this choice engenders, consulting the literature on both reflexive narratives and autoethnography.

To reiterate, my project is a professional doctorate examining my workplace experience and practice, exploring what is going on for myself and others in situations that I have found puzzling or disturbing. Organisational dynamics scholar Barbara Simpson (2009) recognised such a "turn to practice" in theorising, which she attributed to increased concerns about the disconnect between "academic theorising and the practical experiences of organising and organisation" (p. 1329). As I have already determined a pragmatic approach to method, the question turns to the most appropriate method for this kind of inquiry.

I have chosen reflexive narrative as a means of inquiring into my experience and practice. Organisational narratives have been recognised as an appropriate research method in the social sciences to address issues of experience, temporality, paradox, motives, local conditions and complex relationships, to go beyond the general and the abstract (Czarniawska, 1998, pp. 1–17; Rhodes and Brown, 2005, pp. 170–71; Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001, pp. 1007–08; Benton and Craib, 2001, p. 103; Berger and Quinney, ed., 2005, pp. 1–11) and to help us understand lived experience (Berger and Quinney, ed., 2005, p. 5) and the emotional experience of organisational life (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2011, p. 64). This approach allows me to explore how history and context contribute to the meaning I make of my experience and practice (Mowles, 2015a, p. 61), focusing on temporal issues and locating observations in real time, rather than seeking general findings with timeless application (Rhodes and Brown, 2005, p. 177). This allows me to be sensitive to the "situational particularity missing from the propositional statements favoured by the logico-scientific mode of thinking" (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001, p. 999) and also highlights the visible paradoxes and complex causal relationships that Rhodes and Brown (2005, p. 177) assert are inherent in the processual characteristic of organisations, helping to "dissolve the duality between traditional scholarship and subjective experience in a way that is methodologically sophisticated and theoretically justified" (p. 180).

Narratives enable researchers to engage with the "lived realities of organizational life" (Rhodes and Brown, 2005, p. 182). They are told in the language and from the perspective of their narrator and are influenced by their interpretation of the past and present, expectations of the future, and cultural understandings and experiences. Narratives ground our understanding of the complex systems and priorities of our workplaces (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001, p. 1007). They require a social constructionist approach (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011, pp. 103–104), which recognises that the way we understand the world is linked inextricably to how we are socialised (Mowles, 2015b, pp. 75–79) and makes explicit the way of thinking and the assumptions and ideology reflected (Stacey, 2010, pp. 221–24).

My narratives were thus chosen according to what constituted a breakdown or disruption in my practice—they evoked emotions, surprised me or were otherwise disturbing. Brinkmann (2012) commented on how topics sometimes almost choose themselves (p. 178), which I experienced through the emotional resonance of my narratives. This is a process of emergent inquiry in which the writing itself is part of the research process and "an integral part of the process of creating meaning" (Berger and Quinney, ed., 2005, p. 10) through the ongoing writing, reading, reflexivity and sharing of work. In order to maintain the integrity of the trajectory of the development of my understanding, I did not return to and rewrite earlier projects, despite significant temptation to do so.

This method is consistent with the pragmatic approach to inquiry into practice for which I have argued, which suggests that cognitive objectives other than causation and prediction are appropriate for qualitative research (Baert, 2017, pp. 149–150). In my research, rather than attempting to devolve general laws or to make predictions or even to understand what *caused* my experience, I instead sought to understand what was going on for me and for others in my practice in a way that would be generalisable or recognisable for those affected by similar workplace dynamics. In turn, this serves to clarify my experience and practice, and to develop warranted assertions which will serve until new information changes my view of what is going on.

Before continuing to address critiques of my method, I will explain my claim that reflexive narrative is a form of autoethnography, a field that Learmonth and Humphreys (2012) have described as eclectic (p. 103). In this method, one writes about one's own self and identity in the context of organisational studies (Learmonth and Humphries, 2012, p. 100) to "illuminate the relationship between the individual and the organisation" (Sambrook and Herrmann, 2018, p. 223); one seeks to describe and systematically analyze one's own experience and to understand cultural experience, combining elements of autobiography and ethnography (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). Ellis likewise described autoethnography as starting "with personal experiences and studying the "us" in relationships and situations" (2007, p. 13). The term itself is derived from the Greek words

*auto* (self), *ethno* (nation) and *graphy* (to write) and means to "write (research) about a nation (group of people) and the self (the researcher)" (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012, p. 83). While one might argue that autoethnography is the study of the self in the context of group culture as compared with ethnography (the study of a group that does not necessarily include the self), I suggest that one cannot write about the individual without writing about the social. As the individual is inextricably interrelated to the social (Elias, 1991, p. 16), one cannot know the 'I' without also inquiring into the 'we.' In writing about the self, one must necessarily explore the group(s) of which one is a part in order to avoid the "dualistic separation of the individual and the social" in the examination of practice (Simpson, 2009, p. 1332).

### Addressing critiques of the narrative / autoethnographic method

Having outlined my choice of reflexive narrative methodology and made the case for its value and applicability to the nature of my inquiry, I will address its limitations, in particular questions about its objectivity and lack of empirical analysis, as well as perceptions of the potential solipsistic or self-indulgent characteristics of this research method.

#### *Lack of objectivity*

One concern with this form of research claims that it lacks objectivity or any means of providing validation free from the researcher's prejudices and biases. This critique is common to the qualitative/interpretivist paradigm and, while I have in part addressed it in my discussion of the rationale for a pragmatic approach to method, further examination is warranted. While this issue is often conjoined with an objection to the lack of empirical analysis, I believe it deserves separate consideration.

Ann Cunliffe (2011) summarises this issue, drawing on philosopher Terry Eagleton's (1991) work on ideology:

> Objectivism is privileged as more methodologically rigorous and scientific, subjectivism as pejoratively "anything goes," where "there is no such thing as truth; everything is a matter of rhetoric and power; all viewpoints are relative; talk of 'facts' or 'objectivity' is merely a specious front for the promotion of specific interests." (p. 666)

As Arthur Bochner noted, such a preference for objectivism suggests that science can indeed "provide a God's eye view above the contingencies of language and outside the circle of historical and cultural interests" (2017, p. 362). This, among other considerations, ignores the performative nature of language (Ford, Harding and Learmonth, 2008, p. 38), which "constructs rather than mirrors phenomena" (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011, p. 7). I argue, in the words of sociologists Berger and Quinney (2005), that there is no such thing as "unmediated reality" (p. 11) and no single authoritative voice. One must be conscious of the many different stories and perspectives (Rhodes and Brown, 2005, pp. 177–79) of those involved and not rely solely on the trained observer who claims to be the holder of the "truth" (Berger and Quinney, eds., 2005, p. 6). The story is as much about the researcher and their perspectives, experiences and culture as it is about the world being studied (Cunliffe, 2003, pp. 994–95).

Although an approach based on experience and historical exploration cannot be objective in the positivistic sense (Stacey and Mowles, 2016, p. 17), it is nonetheless valid and useful in understanding the human condition. German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/2013) suggested that "understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event" (p. 310) and the interpreter "cannot separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstandings" (p. 306). Research requires a Hegelian perspective that recognises the impossibility of the researcher standing outside of the experience (Mowles, 2015a, pp. 30–34); they are part of the narrative and must impact and be impacted by the interactions being explored (Searle, 1995, p. 12). There can be no objective observer of a situation "in an otiose contemplative survey of it" (Dewey, 1916/1953, pp. 72–73): the subjective and objective are

paradoxically intertwined. Organisational studies scholars Jackie Ford, Nancy Harding and Mark Learmonth (2008) took this proposition even further, suggesting:

> More generally, the claim to a disinterested (objective) pursuit of truth made by positivist research has been challenged: indeed, the impossibility of any research being utterly objective or "untainted" by the subjectivity of the researcher, is widely argued…. (pp. 22–23)

I agree, noting that any research or writing is necessarily from the perspective of the writer and based on their experience, their inquiry and cultural understandings. In the words of Dewey, "the ways in which we believe and expect have a tremendous affect upon what we believe and expect" (1929/2015, p. 14). Even with more positivist, quantitative methodologies, the researcher must make choices as to what and how to measure, as well as assumptions and determinations as to the salient variables and criteria.

Brinkmann (2014) brought another somewhat paradoxical perspective to the consideration of objectivity in qualitative research. In his review of abductive inquiry, he suggested that qualitative research, in particular breakdown-based research, is at its most objective when it has the loosest of designs. He reasoned that the more one either *collects data* (induction) or *frames it* (deduction), the less is its objectivity and thus "givenness" (p. 724). Inevitably the collection or framing of data requires choices, which will inevitably be based on the researcher's understandings and perceptions. Moreover, relying on induction or deduction (and thus depending on data) can lead to information that restricts further exploration, because it cannot be measured or does not fit into the established framework. One might lose the ability to pursue an inquiry because there is nothing left into which to inquire.

If separating the subjective from the objective in my inquiry into practice is impossible, how can my research, once liberated from the "ontological obstructions of the scientific concept of objectivity" (Gadamer, 1960/2013, p. 278), be considered valid and useful in advancing our understanding of the human condition? As meaning can be neither measured nor counted, deriving it from an event or experience will always comprise an interpretive or

hermeneutical element (Sayer, 2000, p. 17) and be subject to some level of bias and prejudice. If one adopts Gadamer's definition of prejudice as "a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined" (1960/2013, pp. 283–89), then not all prejudice is necessarily a false judgment. We can never know all the facts and must make our best judgments on the evidence available to us at the time. Rather than demanding objectivity, we must examine and clarify the meaning the researcher brings to the task of developing their understanding of the situation (p. 280), a constant challenge that I sought to manage through ongoing processes of social interaction and discussion, debate and challenge within the community of DMan researchers, as well as through my own reflexivity and reading of the scholarly literature.

### *Insufficiency of Empirical Analysis*

A further critique of narrative methodologies is the insufficiency of their empirical approach to the "data" and analysis in the research. While I acknowledged this concern earlier (see p. 158), the question of how (or whether) qualitative research (in this case reflexive narrative or autoethnography) can include empirical analysis demands further consideration. Helpful to this is the approach of Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg, in their book *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research* (2018), in which they reviewed reflexive methodologies within the context of the qualitative/interpretive paradigm. They described their work as an attempt to "manœuvre" between the two conventional positions of having an empirical orientation or giving "unequivocal priority to theoretical and philosophical considerations, which tends to make empirical research look odd, irrelevant, naive or even feeble-minded" (p. 3). They claimed that it is pragmatic and productive to assume a reality beyond the egocentricities of both researcher and community about which we, as researchers, should be able to say something insightful (p. 3). In proposing a means to address the conundrum presented by these opposing conventional approaches in the qualitative/interpretivist paradigm, they explored four major traditions: grounded theory, hermeneutics, critical theory and postmodernism, as well as discourse

analysis, feminism and the genealogical method. They suggested that aspects of each of these may be productive in combination "as part of a reflexivity-stimulating framework" (p. 339) and proposed that researchers should *invent* reflexive methodologies "in line with their preferences, skills, energies and the work tasks at hand" to generate "novel and innovative interpretations and results (pp. 339–40).

Alvesson and Sköldberg anchor their approach in abduction (see p. 148) and, as I have done, take the pragmatic approach that method should not be determined in the abstract, but related to the "particular research problem and research object" (2018, p. 9). In addressing the challenge of empirical material, they argued that one cannot unambiguously prove the veracity or falseness of a theory but can generate arguments that support or dispute theories and how we understand the world in the context of a *never-ending debate* (pp. 369–70). Empirical analysis is not about proof, but about developing insights and/or problematising what we take for granted. In taking this position, they argue for *richness in points* as an important aspect of an empirical approach:

> Research rich in points is thus to be found in the field of tension between habile empirical contact, reported first-order interpretations (data), the imaginative and relatively free handling of these, and a well-judged combination of depth and breadth in the interpretive repertoire. In ambiguous empirical material, and not least in *rendering the material ambiguous in a thoughtful manner,* lie the conditions for richness in points. (p. 372).

They come out firmly on the side of a pragmatic approach to research that does not discard all aspirations to empirical analysis, but rather redefines and judges empirical inquiry by whether the research method is sufficiently interpretationally rich to enable a qualitatively new way of understanding aspects of our social reality (p. 374).

Learmonth and Humphreys (2012) bring this debate over empirical analysis to their consideration of autoethnography. In particular, they compare the approach referred to as *analytic autoethnography* described by sociologist Leon Anderson (2006) with the

*evocative autoethnography* identified by autoethnographers Ellis and Bochner (2006) in their article critiquing Anderson's paper.

Anderson (2006) proposed five key features of analytic autoethnography, which he suggests clearly differentiate it from evocative autoethnography:

> (1) Complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis. (p. 378)

He positions analytic autoethnography as a subgenre of analytic ethnography and argues that it has a "value-added quality of not only truthfully rendering the social world under investigation but also transcending that world through broader generalization" (p. 388).

Ellis and Bochner's enthusiasm for autoethnography arose because they wanted to move ethnography away from being an account of a detached observer to one that embraced "intimate involvement, engagement, and embodied participation" (2006, pp. 433–34). They accepted four of the five features of analytical ethnography proposed by Anderson, objecting only to his commitment to theoretical analysis (p. 437), arguing that the drive towards evocative narratives stems from a desire to distinguish research storytelling from more traditional empirical approaches:

> If you turn a story told into a story analysed, as Leon wants to do, you sacrifice the story at the altar of traditional sociological rigor. You transform the story into another language, the language of generalization and analysis, and thus you lose the very qualities that make a story a story. (p. 440)

This debate was entered by Learmonth and Humphreys in *Autoethnography and Academic Identity: Glimpsing Business Doppelgängers* (2011), where they examined their sense of *doubleness* in terms of their academic identities through comparison with Louis Stephenson's 1886 novel *Jekyll and Hyde.* Learmonth and Humphreys argued that one can take an approach that incorporates both the power of the evocative and the contributions to theory of analytical autoethnography (p. 105). Although one objection to autoethnography

is that the knowledge created by narratives is unimpressive (Czarniawska, 1998, p. 3), if we are to properly inquire into practice and experience, we need to accept that what we consider analytical in reflexive narrative is different from that found in, for example, the study of a larger population. In an inquiry into one's own experience and practice in a complex world, no experience can be predicted or replicated exactly, nor can it be generalised to universal laws. Dewey said it succinctly: "conduct is what and where and when and how to the last inch" (1891, p. 191). Czarniawska (1998) addressed this in her declaration that we need to relinquish "some aspirations to power through the claim of factuality and one-to-one correspondence of theory and the world," allowing for a "dialogical relationship with organizational practice" (p. 17) in an inquiry into practice and individual experience. It is increasingly accepted that there are other useful cognitive interests that can be fulfilled through qualitative research, and narrative "offers the possibility of retreating from abstraction in a way that engages with the experiences of work, management and organizing" (Rhodes and Brown, 2005, p. 179).

To extend this line of thought, it is unlikely that one could have a complete absence of either the evocative or analytical for research purposes. What is described as *evocative* is effectively what Clifford Geertz (1973) referred to as *thick description*, which conveys the context, temporality, intentions and emotions involved in the experience being described and is a necessary part of what one would consider the "data" of the experience. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) referred to this as *richness in points* and argued that its inclusion is how we achieve our objectives of developing insights and challenging established ways of thinking. Separating the evocative from the analytical is tautological, as you cannot have one without the other for a generative piece of qualitative research.

I have attempted to write in the evocative tradition of telling stories about my experience in the workplace. At the same time, through reflexivity and study of the scholarly literature, I have sought to incorporate analytic perspectives as I try to understand what is going on for me and for others in my workplace.

Sara Filbee                                                           September 2019

### *Solipsism, Narcissism and self-indulgence*

Another limitation of autoethnography and reflexive narrative methodology is the risk of the research narrative becoming a solipsistic or narcissistic account featuring the researcher (Berger and Quinney, 2005, ed., p. 5), the work being diminished by self-absorption and losing its sociological promise (Anderson, 2006, p. 385). Even self-critique can become what Learmonth and Humphries (2012**),** drawing on Coetzee (1992), called a particular "form of bragging" (p. 110). I have control of the pen and am focused on what is going on for me; I can choose to portray myself as I wish.

This concern has been addressed by autoethnographic scholars, including sociologists Emily Bishop and Marie Shepherd (2011), who counselled a "continuing examination of personal subjectivity" (p. 1283). Similarly, Doloriert and Sambrook (2012) noted the importance of ensuring focus on the group in addition to the self (p. 85). Berger and Quinney, in their introduction to *Storytelling Sociology: Narrative as Social Inquiry* (2005), also challenged the inevitability of self-indulgence, recognising that writing about the self is a way that we write about others and that, while we tend to generalise based on our experience, there "is never a single story that can be told" (p. 8).

In acknowledging these concerns, I point to elements that counter these inherent risks in my research methodology. I have described the social process of challenge and debate within the DMan programme, in particular with members of my learning set who consistently questioned my narratives and how I described my (and others') actions. The scholarly literature also countered any propensity to self-indulgence by providing alternative perspectives and constructs that challenged my interpretations of what was going on. In frequent and ongoing iterations of my work, I noted the impact of these challenges and my own resulting reflexivity. Reflexivity, of course, is not a perfect safeguard against self-indulgence; as Ford, Harding and Learmonth (2008) pointed out, it is not "sufficient to be merely reflexive," but also necessary to understand how "I infect my writing" (p. 27). Throughout the process of my research inquiry, one can note significant changes in the way

that my narratives (and the actions of myself and others) are described, making evident the evolution of my inquiry as a result of these challenge processes.

### Comparison and critique of alternative methods

A reflexive narrative method is a pragmatic option to explore the complexities of the workplace from the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating. It relies on the challenges and dialectical debate of the researcher's individual and social reflexivity, as well as a reliance on scholarly literature to assist in analysing and understanding experience. Similar methods that I rejected in favour of reflexive narrative methodology were hermeneutics (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018; Gadamer, 1976/1981); case studies (Thomas, 2010); and ethnography (Watson, 2011), including at-home ethnography (Alvesson, 2009). While these have some common features of reflexive narrative methodology, they are either not experience-based or do not include an inquiry into the researcher's experience, and not all methods necessarily involve reflexivity or incorporate a strong social element in the process, elements fundamental to the nature and demands of my research.

Hermeneutics has traditionally been considered as the interpretation of texts (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018, pp. 115–73). Writers such as Gadamer (1976/1981) have extended this to include interpretation of speech and speech acts (p. 119). While there is a hermeneutic element in my inquiry, my narratives are also experience-based and used to make sense of my own experience, what was going on for others and myself, and to inquire into connections between observations and events.

Case studies (Thomas, 2010) are a research method that describe a situation in which the researcher may not be a participant. They involve reflection, but the absence of reflexivity in this approach means that case studies not useful for my purposes.

Ethnography (Watson, 2011) is commonly used in social anthropology research, which investigates the frequently long-term experiences of a cultural group, its shared meanings

and symbols (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018, pp. 108–10). At-home ethnography (Alvesson, 2019, p. 159) involves the investigator's participation, although in such cases the interest is focused more on what is going on in observed interactions and events in which the researcher has a limited personal stake (Sambrook and Herrmann, 2018, p. 222). Both ethnography and its variant, at-home ethnography, involve reflection, but not necessarily in a reflexive way.

### Discussion of choice of literature

My pragmatic approach to research is also seen in my relationship with the scholarly literature; in contrast to many academic dissertations, which begin with an extensive literature review that identifies a knowledge gap to serve as the focus for a research question, my evolving thoughts, questions and experiences led me to an inquiry into trust, which in turn guided my reading. In choosing this approach, I also rely on communications theorists François Lambotte and Dominique Meunier (2013), who drew on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) to argue in favour of intellectual bricolage as an ideal way of addressing complexity of phenomenon (2013, p. 87). They suggested that provision for the unplanned encourages the creative exploration of existing materials and the unexpected or uncertain in contrast with more traditional research, which is a succession of linear, structured and planned processes (2013, pp. 85–86). Likewise, in *Go Ugly Early*, digital ethicist Annette N. Markham (2005), writing on innovative qualitative methods for social research, drew on a number of scholars to argue for the use of disparate but related threads of information as an essential part of the analytic process (pp. 814–85). This helps to open up space for reflexivity for both author and reader, and to question assumed patterns of sensemaking (p. 815). My reliance on scholars who hold conflicting perspectives speaks to my pragmatic approach to method, as these diverse views help us to explore different aspects of what may be fundamentally the same social phenomenon.

I consulted authors from a number of traditions to make sense of my experience: they came to my attention as a function of my inquiry and included, *inter alia*, Swedish management

scholar Mats Alvesson et al. (2009, 2011, 2012, 2018), sociologist and philosopher Pierre
Bourdieu (1977/2015, 1982/2003); Psychologist Svend Brinkmann (2012, 2014, 2017);
sociologist Ian Burkitt (1999, 2012, 2014); American pragmatist John Dewey (1891,
1916/1953, 1922/2017, 1929/1984, 1929/2015, 1934/2005, 1938, 1941); sociologist
Norbert Elias (1908/1978, 1983/1987, 1987/1991; Elias and Scotson, 1965/1994);
philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault (1975/1977, 1980, 1994/2000); German
philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/2013, 1976/1981); pragmatist G.H. Mead (1923,
1934/1967, 1938); British organisational theorists Chris Mowles (2015a, 2015b, 2017a,
2017b) and Ralph Stacey (2005, 2010, 2012a, 2012b); also, writing together (2016);
political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott (1985, 1990, 1998); and organisational
theorist Karl Weick (1995).

### Ethics

I did not need to negotiate access to my field of research as my inquiry encompassed my
own workplace experiences. Narrative methodology does require, however, that I address
the ethical implications of writing about people with whom I interact. In the context of
government, it also requires a consideration of the risks of disclosing confidential or
politically sensitive material.

Sociologist Marilys Guillemin and ethicist Lynn Gillam (2004) wrote about the ethics of
qualitative research practice, proposing two different elements: *procedural ethics* and *ethics
in practice.* They argued that reflexivity can help to understand both the nature of ethics in
qualitative research and how ethical practice in research can be achieved (p. 261).
Procedural ethics comprise approval from relevant authorities to undertake research
involving humans. I signed the standard application forms addressing issues of
confidentiality and the potential of harm, which were approved by an ethics committee. I
sought consent from anyone I quoted directly. My research precluded knowing in advance
who or what would be included, but I made it clear to colleagues that I was writing about
my work and practice and that prior to submitting the final thesis I would ensure the

anonymity of individuals. As a further precaution, because some aspects might be politically sensitive, I requested the maximum two-year embargo on publishing.

Ethics in practice, which Guillemin and Gillam (2004) also referred to as *microethics*, pertain to the day-to-day ethical issues arising in the process of research inquiry. These include considering the impact of the research on those identified in narratives and, as in my situation, determining how political sensitivities be handled to avoid harm on publication. Addressing these issues is context-dependent and requires continuous awareness of the inquiry's ethical implications, recognising when ethical issues come into play and being able to think through and properly address them.

Qualitative researcher Carolyn Ellis (2007) added a third component to the consideration of ethics, *relational ethics,* which requires us to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds and to "deal with the reality and practice of changing relationships with our research participants over time" (p. 4). She suggested that this requires us to "honor our relational responsibilities yet present our lives in a complex and truthful way for readers" (p. 14). She advised an approach to research she described as fulfilling a "caregiving" function both for participants and researcher, by which she means listening to and engaging in others' stories (p. 26).

In addition to my own awareness regarding the ethical considerations of my inquiry, the full community of DMan inquirers, including my learning set, regularly reflected on and discussed ethical issues posed by our work. This reflexive process led to ongoing critical scrutiny and interpretation of the interpersonal and ethical aspects of the inquiry, both with respect to my research method, but also to the context of my and others' participation and actions. In terms of relational ethics, I was significantly challenged by my narrative in project 2 and in the first account in project 4, where I experienced the most difficulty in seeing (and writing) the narratives in a way that honoured my relationship with colleagues and avoided them from being vilified or portrayed in a negative light. I cannot claim to have done so perfectly. However, I can say that the constant processes of challenge and iteration are illustrated in the obvious evolution of how these actors were portrayed by me.

Finally, this research often leads to a process of the renegotiation of identities caused by the critical reflection involved. This can be affirming and exciting, but it is also potentially a source of anxiety and, in respecting the caregiving function identified by Ellis (2007, p. 26), it is addressed in the DMan by a joint exploration of relevant issues within the group in community and in learning sets.

Review and Reflections on Projects One through Four

In the following sections, I review each project and take a further reflective and reflexive turn in my exploration of the movement of my thought. As clarified in my section on methodology (thesis p. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**), I understand reflexivity as a *third-order process* (versus reflection, which allows us distance from our involvement) that involves reflecting about what and how we are doing, what we are thinking about what is going on, and the sense that we make of it (Mowles, 2015a, pp. 60–61). I did not revise my projects, which enables an authentic view of the evolution of my thinking through the linear (chronological) process of my inquiry. The projects appear as they were first written, aside from stylistic changes and revisions made to anonymise individuals.

In particular, I did not start out knowing that I would write about *trust*. I had anticipated that my inquiry into managing in complexity would focus on concepts of cooperation and competition. Yet in tracing the development of my thinking through the four projects, I note that my initial individualistic perspective has evolved to a greater social understanding of how patterns of trust in relating affect our relationships and our work to make meaning together. In turn, this has led me to a more nuanced understanding of the concepts of *right* and *wrong*.

### Project One—A Rational and Individualistic Approach to Life

My first project explores the development of my assumptions and ways of thinking, or thought styles, and how they have been socialised throughout my life, career, education and reading, setting the stage for a better understanding of the perspective I bring to my inquiry.

I noted my assumption that there is a *right* way to do things and a *right* answer to any question and see this as originating with feelings of being relegated to second best after the birth of my sisters. I learned that having the right answers and succeeding at school was the surest route to the approval and acceptance I thought I needed to regain my status in the

family. This thinking was reinforced socially throughout my education in science, business and law, and continued into my working life.

I also took a very individualistic approach to life, focusing on me and my achievements— and whether I was right or wrong—more than seeing what was going on for others. This became evident in Project 1, where I explored my experience in leading local and national planning exercises with a not-for-profit organisation (thesis p. 27). My local work was considered a significant achievement, while reactions to my efforts nationally ranged from disregard to blatant derision. I could not understand my success in one case but not the other and concluded that there had to be a right way to manage change, and that better planning or implementation would have made the difference. This view was still evident in my reflections on Project 1, in which I persisted in thinking that we were right in the challenges we had identified.

This project marked the beginning of my exploration of the social dynamics and inherently political nature of our working together. I drew on the work of the German born process sociologist Norbert Elias (1908/1978), who suggested that power is a characteristic of all relationships as it reflects the functional interdependence between people (p. 74), which he described as "webs of interdependence or figurations" (p. 15). Our failure to engage colleagues nationally paid no attention to social interdependencies and power relations and was probably perceived as a threat to their identity and status. I also suggested that we had taken insufficient account of what American pragmatist George Herbert Mead (1934/1967) described as the *generalised other*. He defines this as the generalisation of the attitudes of the social community or group within which an individual or group is located, which is the "determining factor into the individual's thinking" (pp. 152–56). We had also disregarded the habitual social customs and ways of thinking of individuals and groups that the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977/2015) referred to as *habitu*s (pp. 78–87; Stacey and Mowles, 2016, p. 430). Instead, our work had openly raised issues that American political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott (1990) described as "hidden transcripts," or

matters that are only to be discussed privately, as compared with "public transcripts," those things considered acceptable to be said aloud (p. 4).

This literature helped me to understand better the key differences between the two experiences. My relationships within the national project were neither as longstanding nor as close as those I enjoyed in my local community. We had excluded key individuals from conversations. The organisations in the national network were highly diverse in their size, complexity and sophistication, and our conclusions resonated differently—if at all—across the country. My colleagues and I were so focused on the *to do* part of the work that we neglected to consider how it would be experienced by our colleagues. Our efforts were likely experienced as anxiety creating and perhaps negating.

A similar approach can be seen in the budget narrative (thesis p. 36) where I spoke up at a senior management meeting to protest decisions that negatively affected my region's budget. I had marshalled all the rational arguments but neglected again to consider the social and political contexts. Although my comments were received politely, I soon learned that this meeting was an inappropriate place to raise these concerns. The Deputy had already made a decision and my intervention was probably experienced as a challenge to his authority. This meeting was intended to manage our collective anxieties (including those of the Deputy) and to create a sense of *we-ness* and trust that together we had a plan to address our financial issues—all of which my intervention disrupted. My ignorance was heightened by my inability to gauge body language or other social clues, as I was alone in attending the meeting by telephone, while others were in the room or present via videoconference. It was for me what I later refer to in Project 3 (thesis p. 107) as a *thin conversation*. Furthermore, I was not yet a known quantity and lacked the accumulated prestige that Bourdieu (1982/2003) called "symbolic capital" (p. 241) required to challenge the established order of things. While I assumed that the *right* answer would win the day, I was wrong and in consequence, I—and, by implication, my region—were considered out of line.

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*Reflections on Project 1.*

The certainty of having the right answer makes us feel safe in a complex and often-unsafe world. Even when we do not like what is happening, we believe that we know what is going on and what we can or cannot do about it. In his aptly titled book *Quest for Certainty*, Dewey (1929/1984) suggested that it is "a quest for a peace which is assured, an object which is unqualified by risk and the shadow of fear which action casts" (p. 7). My Project 1 exploration challenged my idealisation of right and wrong. I also began to notice my tendency to rush to do things and to make judgements quickly rather than being reflexive and realised how often this has caused disruption in groups to which I have belonged.

The need to be right or to have the right answer also begs the question of how one can know whether something *is* right. In a complex world, which is paradoxically stable and unstable, predictable and unpredictable, what is right is always contingent on the judgement-maker's perspective and temporality. Additionally, in a highly social world, the individualistic determination in our meaning making of what is right or not right must inevitably consider what is *right for us* as we need to continue to work together. An individualistic assertion of being right, in contrast, is itself a declaration of dominant position and superior status, which may negate others' identities.

I began to understand that an important aspect of collective meaning making is not the answer we arrive at, but also how we work together. We are at the same time forming and being formed by our interactions with each other (Elias, 1987/1991, p. 316) and, in the resulting ebb and flow of our power relations (in which who needs whom more is in constant flux), our collective efforts to make meaning affect our relationships, mutual understandings and identities, individually and as a group. This shapes whether we feel that we can trust each other, which means that our future ability to work together is continually evolving.

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I also note significant differences between my two narratives about these not-for-profit exercises from the perspective of the relations of trust that developed. Both had high potential for creating anxiety, but the nature of the relationships and interactions with colleagues was different. It was not a question of who was right. In the local exercise, we pursued a way of working together to explore mutual issues, which enabled us to stay in relation despite our anxieties. In retrospect, this process of meaning making allowed us to get to know and understand each other's perspectives; a pattern of *trusting* relationships emerged, which persisted after the formal exercise ended. In the interweaving of our interactions, we—as interdependent groups and individuals—could make better sense of what was going on and thus continue to stay in relation to explore sensitive issues. In terms that emerged from Project 4 (thesis p. 127), we were able to find a way to feel *safe* in the *unsafeness* that confronted us.[36]

Looking ahead to Project 2, I anticipated writing about power, politics and leadership as my research question. In what I see now as beginning to question my assumption that there is always a right answer, I also proposed to inquire into how the issue of certainty factored in my practice.

### Project Two—Reflections on Power Relations and Symbolic Capital

Project 2 focuses on a narrative about what my regional colleagues and I felt was an erroneous analysis of data by headquarters staff, triggered by questions raised in the media. Despite substantive objections from my staff that have in-depth knowledge of the region, this data was publicly adopted as *truth* and used as the basis for policy decisions. My account traces the story's development and describes my unsuccessful efforts to raise our

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[36] This is not to suggest that these patterns were necessarily durable. Relationships are continually evolving and may or may not tend in a direction we consider an improvement. Elias (1908/1978) described the ebb and flow of the civilising process over the ages, drawing our attention to the common assumption that conditions will continue to improve (pp. 158–74).

concerns, as well as my perception that these efforts had the direct consequence of us being viewed as uncooperative and not corporate. I detail the interdependencies between headquarters and regional colleagues, how we needed to stay in relation to work together and, in some cases, how we depended on our headquarters colleagues for financial allocation decisions. I illustrate the higher status enjoyed by headquarters colleagues based on their location, reputation, academic credentials, roles, relationships with key decision-makers, and their participation in policy development work, which is valued more highly than our service delivery role.

In my analysis of this narrative, I drew on Dewey (1929/2015) and Bourdieu (1982/2003), who both wrote about how we interpret experience. Dewey suggested, "the ways in which we believe and expect have a tremendous effect upon what we believe and expect" (p. 14), while Bourdieu drew similar conclusions, pointing to "scientific mythologies," which he suggested produced their own verification (p. 226). In this case, the analysis of data by our headquarters colleagues accorded with popular beliefs about our regions' workforce. For someone who believes there is a *right* answer, this experience was infuriating and triggered my suspicion that data or numbers have a social context and are not as objective as they are often considered.

I also explored this narrative from the perspective of power to gain a more social understanding of what was going on and how that affected how we had worked together. I drew on the works of three scholars: Elias (1908/1978, 1987/1991), who took a relational view on power, arguing that it reflects our interdependencies and need for each other (1978, p. 74; Stacey and Mowles, 2016, p. 402); French philosopher Michel Foucault and his work on power relations (McHoul and Grace, 2007, p. 26; Foucault, 1980, p. 93; 1975/1977, p. 27) and what he calls "discourses" or historically specific relations between disciplines and disciplinary practices (McHoul and Grace, 2007, p. 26); and Bourdieu (1982/2003), who identified various forms of capital, including economic, cultural and symbolic, through which power relations are actualised (Thompson, ed. in Bourdieu, 1982/2003, p. 14).

### *Reflections on Project 2.*

I now see in this narrative the beginning of my inquiry into trust, which I had not noticed during its writing, and how it is socially formed and refracted through the histories and experiences of those involved. Individuals' reputations, credentials, roles, rhetorical abilities and proximity (figuratively and literally) to decision-makers all affected the outcome. We are socially formed and informed, and this affected who was seen as more or less trustworthy in the experience of difference. This narrative is also an example of how we trust people like ourselves over those we see as different from us (Sztompka, 2009, 79–81). Sociologist Barbara Misztal (1996) drawing on Hardin attributes this propensity to it being easier for us to predict the behaviour of those who are most like ourselves (p. 134). Those who shared both location of work plus policy roles with decision makers were more easily trusted. In Project Four, I discuss how trust patterns enable and constrain our work to make meaning, and this narrative provides an example of the latter. My exploration in this project also bolstered my developing view that the way we work together will affect how we *will* work together. In this case, the way we were working together served to confirm or challenge our expectations and how we recognised each other, affecting our future ways of interacting.

Returning to my narrative in Project 2, I noted how easily the numbers generated by our headquarters colleagues were accepted, displacing and discounting our region's practical knowledge (Scott, 1988, p. 313). This negatively affected my team and me and our relationships with headquarters colleagues. This impact was felt both in terms of our reputation (e.g., the difficult ministerial briefing I describe in the section starting p. 45), and in our ongoing sense of frustration and loss of trust in these colleagues, whom we experienced as disrespectful and dismissive of us. I also observed a decline in my confidence and a subsequent surge in self-censorship, which Bourdieu (2003, pp. 19–20, 77) considered a typical outcome of such situations. I contributed less and less to the understanding of what was happening on the ground. I see this now because of doubting

my abilities and losing trust in myself, and of what others might be thinking about me. If this was going on for me, I can assume it was also going on for others.

It is my view that the *habitus* of headquarters colleagues, their shared perspectives and trust in numbers made it difficult for them to accept any challenge to their data, despite our practical knowledge and obvious errors in their analysis. Sheila and Dirk represented the discourse of econometric analysis, considered in the public service to be fundamental to evidence-based public policy and, by definition, trustworthy. I saw how Charles's interventions—my other headquarters colleague, who shared my concerns about the analysis—were more readily accepted because he had access to further data and analysis. He had numbers and, thus, in their eyes could provide a useful contribution and be a trusted partner in the discussion.

In Project 3, I write about the nature of sensemaking in our working together and how such an exercise is often anxiety creating. The narrative in Project 2 was certainly that. Timelines were tight and, once the Minister had publicly used the numbers, it was impossible for the department to challenge them. Industry reacted aggressively to what they saw as a mischaracterisation of their employment practices and media stories fanned the flames with their stories of the apparently thousands of workers abusing the system; it was a challenging time for everyone involved. Once the numbers were released, I believe that Sheila had little option but to defend her team's work; the loss of identity and status after providing poor advice to a minister would have been significant for everyone. In such a high-anxiety situation, I believe that the absence of trusting relationships between colleagues in the region and headquarters made it natural and perhaps even necessary for the latter to close ranks. The importance of protecting the confidence and trust held by our political masters in the department's competence in economic policy and analysis was fundamental.

Lastly, I want to draw attention to the double bind or irreconcilable demands that I faced. To be trusted, I had to defend the work of the department and collude in continuing efforts to justify numbers that I was quite certain were significantly and problematically

overstated. To be trusted, I had to state publicly that I had confidence in numbers that I had good reason to doubt.

At this point, my inquiry focused on power relations and their impact. I closed out Project 2 with a note that I wanted to consider issues of governance, accountability and identity and how their interplay affected power relations. I notice that I was still unable to let go of the frustration that we had been right, and they had been wrong. In many ways, I still felt *acted upon* and did not see how my and others' actions both formed and were formed by our interactions. I still believed there was a *right* way to approach such a problem and, if we had proper governance and accountability, we would be better able to do a good job.

I point to the irony of this experience, in a further reflexive turn. I always believed that I would be accepted and included if I was right. In this case, I have since been proven right and my headquarters colleagues have been shown to be wrong. Yet, they are still the ones in the department's inner circle, while I continue to feel excluded. Old habits die hard and I still feel anxiety at the prospect of not being right, but I am now beginning to explore a world in which right and wrong are not binary options. In Project 3, this transition in my thinking continues as I start to pay attention to what may be going on in interactions with colleagues. And it all started with one word: *conversations*.

### Project Three—A Focus on Conversations

In my third project, I explore an unwelcome surprise affecting one of our in-person service delivery sites, when we learned that our new landlord was not renewing our lease. This quickly became a high profile and political issue, receiving attention from my boss and the Minister's Office (MINO). Project 3 tracks the development and ultimate resolution of this narrative and how it progressed from an immediate adoption of *us and them* thinking to a more helpful reflection on the conversations and interactions (or absence thereof) that may have led to this surprise.

Initially, I thought the project offered less to my inquiry; however, I now notice a further movement of thought away from what is *right,* and abstract generalisations such as *governance* and *accountability*, to a more granular perspective on interactions between colleagues and stakeholders. This evolved into a consideration of the paradoxical and mutually constitutive enabling and constraining factors affecting such interactions and, in turn, my interest in trust.

I considered the literature on the issue of surprise and how, in a continually evolving and complex world, prediction and control is impossible and, thus, surprises (McDaniel and Driebe, 2005, 275-6) or disruption of expectations (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014 p. 67) are a fundamental and inevitable part of our reality. Indeed, they can provoke us to pay attention to what is going on; "ambiguous, equivocal or confusing issues or events" (Brown et al., 2015, p. 266), contrary to expectations (Filbee-Dexter et al., 2017, p. 2-3), are often a "cue" to inquiry (Weick, 1995, p. 3). This echoes the work of Dewey (1912, p. 117) and Heidigger (1962, p. 107) as summarised by Christian Gonner (2018), who suggested:

> … when unexpected things happen while we are routinely engaged in practice, the habitual activity is interrupted. These disturbances then incite individuals to think about what they do and how they can find new ways to overcome the felt disruption from their practice. (p. 132)

It was a turning point for me when one of my Director Generals remarked that we had not been having the necessary *conversations*, the right people had not been involved, we were insufficiently intentional about managing accommodations and, therefore, we were not positioned to react quickly when circumstances changed. While, in retrospect, I note the challenges of determining what conversations are necessary or who the right people are, his comment prompted me to reflect on conversations.

I drew on pragmatist G.H. Mead's (1934/1967) description of communication as a "conversation of gestures" (pp. 14, 63, 253–54) through which, in our ongoing temporal social processes, we see ourselves as others see us, as we "gesture and call out a response in ourselves and in the other person at the same time" (Mowles, 2015b, p. 250). I reflected on how gesture and response behaviours are similar to interactions described by organisational theorists Stacey and Mowles (2016) in their work on complex responsive processes of relating. I also turned to organisational theorist Patricia Shaw (2004), who proposed "ensemble improvisation" as a way of thinking about how individuals and groups improvise the next step in how to go on together in an ever-evolving world (pp. 42–43). I contrasted this view with the evidence-based approach discussed in Project 2 (thesis p. 56) that signals that we are on top of things, and the scripted and often virtual meetings and templates that typify our interactions, allowing insufficient space for mindful participation, exploration and reflection (Suchman, 2011, pp. S43–S44). I also considered the work of Karl Weick (1995), who introduced the term "sensemaking" to organisational studies in the 1970s, proposing it as the process of making sense individually and in groups (pp. 4–6).

In Project 3, I suggested that the reasoning and perception of individuals (and groups) may be affected by what information is available to or accepted by them (thesis p. 101) described by Shaw (2002) as "systematic discourse" or codification of activities within a practice or discipline that can make "aspects of our experience … rationally *invisible* to us" (p. 97). I also referred to literature describing how these differences can affect what individuals or groups pay attention to or care about in the process of meaning making (Foucault, 1975/1977, 1980; McHoul and Grace, 2007; Townley, 2008; Mercier and

Sperver, 2017). I now recognise this as being too focused on the cognitive; instead, I think that we each bring to the process of making meaning our individual histories, capabilities, emotions and experiences that affect how we react. Rather than descending into blame games or discussions of who is right or wrong, the development of trusting relationships needed to engage in the process of making meaning with our colleagues at Public Works allowed us to arrive at a mutual understanding of our constraints, which enabled us to figure out how we could best go on together. This realisation continued the movement of my thought away from a binary right-and-wrong approach towards a more social understanding of interactions as I began to consider the impact of the context and nature of interpersonal relations.

### *Reflections on Project 3.*

This narrative illustrates some of the ways in which we sought to deal with our anxieties, including our reversion to *us and them* or self- and other-blaming behaviours, our immediate questioning of our partners' processes on the assumption they should have prevented the situation, and the suggestion that the right conversations would have circumvented it.

This project confirms for me that the way we work together affects the way we *will* work together. There are no atomistic problems to solve, but rather breakdowns, misunderstandings and relationships to manage—and the need for us to make sense of the reality that what is going on is *ongoing*. Participants come and go and we are always negotiating how we can work together. Are our interests the same? Can I rely on you—and you on me? What has our experience been? What may be different now? In Project 3, I describe the concept of *buffering conversations* to refer to the frequently one-on-one informal conversations between participants that explain or soften interventions in formal meetings. I now see these interactions as important in negotiating, repairing or maintaining relationships and expectations as we continually negotiate our understanding of whether we can trust each other.

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In my project, I also reflected on *thin and thick* conversational processes.[37] I used the term *thin* to describe synoptic, closed-down, static and exclusionary processes such as the use of templates, rigid separation of actions along the lines of roles and responsibilities, and heavily scripted controlled and/or virtually held meetings where exploration is limited in terms of what one can discuss. *Thick* refers to exploratory, dynamic, opening-up and inclusive conversational processes. While both may generate understanding, I suggest that *thin* processes may make it more difficult to understand the emotional and social aspects of an interaction, thus challenging the possibility of experiencing greater trust in another. In the budget meeting described in Project 1 (thesis p. 36), I was not in the room with my colleagues and was unable to read their body language or other non-verbal reactions to my comments, which made it challenging to understand and react to how my intervention was being received. In situations such as this, we miss important information and interactions that help us to understand what is going on, which increases the likelihood of further surprises and anxiety and strengthens patterns of distrust of the other and trust in the familiar.

While I continued to refer to *sensemaking* in both Projects 3 and 4, I now prefer the term *meaning making*, as the former evokes for me a more cognitive approach and my thinking has evolved to realise the impossibility of separating out the rational or cognitive from the emotional or affective (thesis p. 133). Additionally, I suggest that *sensemaking* overstates the likelihood of agreement, instead of the "good enough holding" that Stacey and Mowles (2016, p. 357) have adopted from psychoanalysis, suggesting that if we can:

> … contain rather than submit to or avoid the anxiety, then insight and creativity
> may be generated by, and accompany, the anxiety of learning. (p. 133)

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[37] I adopted these terms from social anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), who coined them in the context of his ethnographic work, in turn relying on British philosopher Gilbert Ryle.

I concluded my Project 3 exploration by suggesting that Project 4 would focus on a narrative related to collective sensemaking, in particular, to the staff engagement process that our department has implemented. Instead, the narratives provoked me to examine more carefully one aspect of how individuals and groups determine how, if and when to engage in collective meaning making—the phenomenon of *trust*.

### Project Four—An Inquiry into Trust

In Project Four, I began to think about trust and its importance in our work to make meaning. I did not start there. I intended to explore sensemaking and the nature of conversations in organisations. I wrote about two narratives that particularly puzzled me. The first involved a meeting of my boss and both headquarters and regional ADMs to consider quantitative measures of the productivity of service delivery personnel in the regions. The second occurred with my senior management team regionally, when we became embroiled in a difficult conversation on equity hiring. Both meetings took place in person and included a consideration of numbers. Both evoked significant anxiety and emotional responses for me (and, I believe, for others). In the first, I attempted to raise concerns about numbers produced by my headquarters colleague to measure our operational productivity and was met with immediate pushback from my boss. For reasons pertaining to my relationship with him, my own history and our individual and shared experiences, I immediately backed down and spent the rest of the meeting trying to negotiate myself back into line with my colleagues. In the second meeting, one of my Director Generals raised a concern about equity hires, stressing our obligation as public servants to hire based on merit. Another colleague, who is African Nova Scotian, initially objected to the suggestion that equity hiring results in less-qualified employees, but she soon suggested that the conversation might be too difficult to continue. Despite my own high levels of anxiety and concern about how the conversation might go, I felt that we could—and should—explore what was going on for all of us, because we had sufficient trust for one another and cared for and valued each other's perspectives.

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My reflections on the first narrative initially focused on my feelings of anger, isolation and shame, in both how colleagues had reacted and how I felt unable to intervene. I felt that I had been *right* and disrespected because our region's perspective was so easily dismissed. On further reflection, I wondered why I had not been able to engage, given the undeniable issues with the numbers and the high stakes they represented for all of us. I felt that I was at fault—that had I only presented my perspective more effectively, they would have listened. Then I realised that this rational response failed to recognise that I had not felt safe enough to continue my intervention, fearing that I would not be seen as part of the team. Despite my conviction that the numbers were misleading, I suspected that insisting on that would cost me my inclusion in the group. The difference between these narratives was trust, whether I trusted my colleagues and myself to engage safely in an emotionally charged, meaning making process. This realisation led me to pursue my inquiry from a perspective on trust.

Reflecting on my first narrative, I recognised that my lack of trust was particularised in my history and experiences with my boss, department and the public service. I also see how my intervention could have made my colleagues feel unsafe as I challenged their numbers—and, in consequence, their status and identity as the experts responsible for their production. This was a significant issue: if I did not respect their expertise, how could I be trusted? Moreover, my own uncertainty and lack of confidence meant that I was unable to trust myself to respond appropriately. If I did not trust my own abilities to argue my case, then why would others consider me trustworthy? In the second narrative, while we were not necessarily in a *safe* place, I felt safe in the *unsafeness* of the difficult conversation. Yes, there was risk involved, but I felt that we could safely have the conversation because I trusted the ability of the group.

In Project 4, I argue that an inevitable outcome of the desire of those working in bureaucratic environments to ensure that only properly objective factors are considered, has been the adoption of quantitative means of measurement to remove subjective considerations that would compromise appropriate, objective and "rationally organized

action" (Weber, 1922/1978, p. 987). I drew on philosopher Hans Gadamer (1960/2013, p. 312) and historian Jerry Muller (2018, p. 6), who warned of the potentially distorting effects of statistics or numbers, as well as James Scott (1998, pp. 313–16) and science historian Theodore Porter (1995, p. 195), who suggested that they often displace practical judgment, which is essential in a complex environment. I note the paradoxical nature of our relationship with numbers. While they inform our understanding of what is going on, particularly in large-scale operations, they can also discount the value of practical expertise and impose a high psychological cost on employees (Porter, 1995, p. 77; Han, 2015, p. 31; Gadamer, 1976/1981, p. 15). This constrains our ability to explore different perspectives; potentially increasing the very anxiety, the numbers had been trusted to reduce.

The patterning of trust relationships that emerged to organise our experience in the first narrative privileged headquarters colleagues and their expertise in the production of these numbers, as it was assumed an evidence-based approach was required. In the evolving figurations of power (Elias, 1908/1978, p. 15), I felt that I had more need of my colleagues' good will than they had of mine. Furthermore, as I questioned the certainty provided by numbers—yet had not figured out the answer myself—I challenged others' expertise and identity without providing an acceptable alternative as we attempted individually and collectively to manage our anxieties.

Prior to further considering the phenomenon of trust, I revisited how the process of making meaning in groups generally arises because of a cue that disrupts our expectations (Weick, 1995, pp. 4–6). Often experienced as dysfunctional (McDaniel et al., 2003, p. 266), it is inherently conflictual and anxiety creating. I referred to Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, who drew on Gadamer to argue that engagement in meaning making is often resisted or rejected as it has the potential of altering our understanding of ourselves (Taylor in Malpas, Arnswald and Kertscher, ed., 2002, p. 295), which may challenge our identities and how we think about them.

Despite the literature surrounding trust, I found it challenging to define. Trust can be viewed as referring to individual expectations in interpersonal relations (Luhmann,

1979/2017, p. 43; Hardin, 2006, p. 31). I take a more social view of trust, but, as a reference point for my research, I adopt my understanding of the consensus that trust is a felt confidence that an individual and/or group will meet our expectations about a particular outcome.

I considered the work of those examining the phenomenon of trust from a sociological perspective (Cook, 2005; Latusek and Cook, 2012; Yamagishi, Cook and Watabe, 1998; Fukuyama, 1996; Putnam, 1993, 2000; Misztal, 1996, pp. 19, 97, 206–07; Sztompka, 2006, 4–5). Ultimately, I drew on the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey and Mowles, 2016; Stacey, 2018) and on the understanding of Elias that, in the interplay between the individual and the social, neither can exist without the other (1987/1991, pp. 153–237). I can see that my experiences were both highly social and generalised, involving the relationships, interactions and histories of and among all participants in the narrative, refracted through my own experiences and history. I suggest that trust is paradoxical, being both particularised and localised in the experience and actions of the individual at the same time, as it is inherently social.

Finally, I returned to the concept of *buffering conversations* from Project 3 and their importance in the development and maintenance of *trust*. In such conversations, we try to re-negotiate our relationships, increase our ability to be seen as a trustworthy partner and strengthen our patterns of trusting relationships with colleagues.

### Reflections on Project 4.

In an early stage of Project 4, my supervisor asked why I was allowing the experience to affect me so much; what was the risk for me in the narrative? I think I am most anxious about the prospect of being excluded—of not being approved and accepted, which goes back to my need to be *right* brought out in Project 1.

Since writing Project Four, I was exposed to the thinking of Hegelian philosophers Paul Ricoeur (1990) and Axel Honneth (1992/1995, 2000). In his book, *Oneself as Another*

Ricoeur extensively explores his proposition that selfhood implies otherness to the extent that selfhood and otherness cannot be separated; this echoes Elias's (1987/1991, p. 16) view of the relationship between the individual and society. Similarly, Honneth (2000) writes about the struggle to establish relations of mutual recognition as a precondition for self-realisation. In explaining his view of what constitutes a satisfying life, he draws on Hegel, suggesting that "abstract rights and morality" and an "ethical life" (p. 20) are social preconditions for the actualisation of "free will" (p. 23), or what he refers to as a "just social order" (p. 27). He views the first two conditions as insufficient in themselves, suggesting that they lead to "suffering from indeterminacy" (p. 50), which he defines as an "inner emptiness and incapacity to act" (p. 56) created when an individual relies exclusively on abstract rights and morality without considering the "norms, duties and rights" of the social relations around them (p. 57). He argues that a normative theory of social justice requires subjects to "be able to regard one another's freedom to be a pre-condition of their own individual self-realization" (p. 31). I now see how my focus on the *right* answer, my *right* to be heard and the *right* thing to do, alongside my inability to consider the perspective of the group, led me to co-create my experience of suffering from indeterminacy and so to silence myself. Thinking back to the first narrative, what hurt the most were my feelings of being alone and excluded, evident by the alacrity with which I sought to get back on board with the rest of the team. In a further reflexive turn, I realise that my rush to be *right*, to be heard and recognised as such has often proved to be anxiety creating and negating for others.

Because of exercising and developing reflexivity throughout these projects, I believe that I have a more nuanced understanding of the interactions in which I engage, as well as the paradoxical interplay between the individual and social, and the resulting patterning of narrative themes.

Sara Filbee                                                          September 2019

## Key Arguments

### Introduction to key arguments.

Before summarising my key arguments on trust relations, I will review how the theme of trust emerged in my inquiry, discuss the nature of my approach and how I understand the term 'trust' to set the context for my consideration of its role in meaning making.

### *The emergence of trust as an animating question*

The issue of trust emerged during my fourth project when I—both independently and with my learning set—puzzled over how and why two narratives in which I was engaged in meaning making turned out so differently. While both events involved face-to-face interactions and high emotions and anxiety for me (and for others), clearly there were significant differences. Specifically, in the first narrative I describe a meeting at headquarters in which I was not the boss; the second narrative focuses on an episode in which I was the senior person in the room. The words that resonated with me in these narratives were *respect*, *safety* and *trust*. Would my colleagues listen to me? Believe in me? Respect me? Give me the benefit of the doubt? And could I safely intervene despite being in what felt like a very 'unsafe' situation. From such reflection, discussion and debate, the theme of trust emerged as my animating research question. Early in the process my supervisor had advised me that once I found my animating question, it would seem like it was everywhere. Reflecting on my projects and my career, as well as my initial preoccupation with cooperation, competition and social capital that started the journey leading to this thesis, I can see that trust has always been an important issue for me.

### *The nature of my approach to trust*

Rather than pursuing a psychodynamic approach, I employ a social view of the understanding of trust as played out in the micro-social interactions within my workplace. In my methods section, I explain this focus on my workplace experience and reference scholarly work on microsocial processes, which includes the operation of power (see p. 145). There are psychological effects of trust/distrust that figure in my accounts, because these are part of the trigger or clue signifying that *trust* is in operation. However, in keeping with the orientation of the DMan programme, I draw on the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey and Mowles, 2016; Stacey, 2018) and on Elias's understanding that, in the interplay between the individual and the social, neither can exist without the other (1987/1991, pp. 153–237). There can be no inquiry into the psychological dynamics without considering the social: in our interdependence, we necessarily form and, in turn, are formed by the reactions and actions of others (Elias, 1987/1991, p. 316) in the ebb and flow of the patterning of our power relationships (Elias, 1970/1978, p. 131). In the words of Chris Mowles, who draws on Edward Said, Clifford Geertz and C. Wright Mills to examine what it means to be critical:

> The quest, then is to understand human behaviour and illuminate its moral significance, for the researcher and for the researched. As researchers we mobilise our humanity in order to understand what it means to be human….

> Thinking in a more detached way about our experience and noticing the paradox our own social forming helps us understand more deeply the social processes in which we are immersed can help us develop insights which matter to us, and may matter to others. (Mowles, 2019)

In addition, I have been interested principally in the way that trust operates in groups and affects processes of meaning making by supporting or undermining the influence of world views. My orientation has been towards power, influence and ideology, rather than psychological states, and I have drawn from my own experience to reflect on wider social

patterns of domination and resistance. While psychological states, even unconscious ones, are also in play, in privileging the sociological over the psychological I am starting from *outside in*. Our psychological states are shaped and influenced by our participation in groups.

### *The definition of trust*

The first challenge was to define the word *trust* and, as I outline in my fourth project (see p. 131**)**, this is no easy task, given that the word is used so many ways (Collard, 1989, p. 202; Hardin, 1999, p. 429; Cook, 2003, pp. 2–9). To ground my consideration, I referenced the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (2004**)** and reviewed the literature, in particular the work of Larue Tone Hosmer (1995, p. 381), who proposed that trust can be considered in five different contexts. Of these five, I focused on *individual expectations*, *interpersonal relationships* and *social structures*; *economic exchanges* and *ethical principles* were not germane to the situation I was trying to understand. I grouped together trust as individual expectations with trust in interpersonal relationships on the basis that my inquiry does not include inanimate objects or animals and, even when considering trust from an individual perspective, it is necessarily in relation with another individual.

While I have adopted a more social view of trust than others, I still found it necessary to split the paradox of the individualistic and social perspectives as a reference point for my understanding of the term. In defining it,I did not feel the need to pursue a personal or novel description. Based on my literature review, including Hosmer; I understand trust to be a felt confidence that an individual and/or group will meet our expectations about a particular outcome. While I acknowledge the connection between trust and distrust (you cannot have one without the other), my focus is on the former.

A number of elements are key to my understanding and discussion of trust. First, I understand trust to be situationally specific, in the sense that behavioural scientist Robert F. Hurley (2012) described: A trusts B in matter X, influenced by context C (p. 9). I (A) may trust my neighbour (B) to drive my car (X) in my local community, but not in the big city

(C), for example. The persons involved, both the person trusting and the trustee, what they are being trusted to do and the context are all important. This focus on context speaks to the particularised experience of an individual who trusts.

Second, I use the term *felt confidence* from my reading of sociologist Ian Burkitt (1999), arguing that it is impossible to separate out mind from body (pp. 2–12) and emotions from the cognitive or rational (2014, p. 21), meaning that there is no "neutral, non-personal, unemotional way of engaging with the world" (p. 21). Thus, trust cannot be considered as either solely cognitive/rational or emotional, but as both. Ralph Stacey (2005), drawing on the research of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, suggested that the rational and emotional are physiologically intertwined (p. 162), making it impossible to consider that one can be present without the other in affecting how we interact. I also adopt the approach of Barbara Misztal (1996, p. 125) and Niklaus Luhmann (1979/2017, pp. 31–32) that trust is fragile in nature. And I draw on the work of Piotr Sztompka (2006a, pp. 51–52, 69–77), Robert Putnam (1994, p. 172; 2000, p. 134) and Smith and Berg (1997, pp. 109, 119–20), who highlight the reciprocal nature of trust.

Building on this understanding of the term *trust*, I argue that trust is a complex, recursive, iterative and emergent patterning of human relating. Trust organises our experience of being together in the living present, which is paradoxical, being at once experienced individually and thus particularised, while being socially constructed and generalised. Trust arises between interdependent people trying to get things done together. I propose that patterns of trust relating both enable and constrain us in our work of meaning making, and I suggest that the use of quantitative methods in our meaning making is paradoxical in two ways. First, these methods are trusted as a source of objective information while being both socially determined and enabled by patterns of trust relating. Second, their use is potentially destructive of trusting relationships, which may, in turn, further strengthen our trust in and reliance on quantitative information in our work to make meaning together.

> **Argument 1: Trust is an emergent patterning of human relating organising our experience of being together in the living present, which is paradoxical, in that it is simultaneously experienced individually and thus particularised, and socially constructed and generalised, at the same time.**

My inquiry into trust emerged in Project 4 when I sought to understand why in one narrative, I was able to engage in a discussion on a sensitive topic, while in a prior narrative I had been unable to do so. As I have already noted, I propose we understand trust from a social perspective (Cook, 2005; Latusek and Cook, 2012; Yamagishi, Cook and Watabe, 1998; Fukuyama, 1996; Putnam, 1993, 2000; Hosmer, 1995, p. 388; Sztompka, 2006, p. 4; Misztal, 1996, pp. 206–07). In my narratives, my felt trust was highly particularised and localised in my own experience and actions, but was also inherently social in a complex, recursive and iterative patterning of relationships and actions. I am who I am because of the groups I have belonged to, and thus my very sense of self is tied up with my relationships with others. Elias (1987/1991) wrote extensively on this, suggesting that the individual and the social are inextricably intertwined, as "each individual person is really tied; he is tied by living in permanent functional dependence on other people, just as all others, directly or indirectly, are links in the chains which bind him" (p. 16).

Our actions, decisions and acted-upon emotions, however particular they feel to us, are thus socially formed as each of us forms and is formed by others (Elias, 1987/1991, p. 316) in the living present in which the "present both forms and is formed by the past and the future at the same time" (Stacey and Mowles, 2016, pp. 32–37). Ralph Stacey (2003) described the concept of the living present more fully:

> In the living present, expectations of the future greatly influence present reconstructions of the past, whilst those reconstructions are affecting expectations. Time in the present, therefore, has a circular structure. It is this circular interaction between future and past in the present that is perpetually creating the future as both continuity and potential transformation at the same time. (p. 10)

Thus, we act into the present on the basis of our history and past experiences, but also informed by our anticipation of the future. As we attempt to make sense of what is going on and how we will or will not act in response, we do so in the context of figurations of interdependent individuals (Elias, 1970/1978, p. 167) enabling and constraining each other in ongoing processes of inclusion and exclusion and configuring of power relations (Stacey and Mowles, 2016, pp. 402, 406). From the ebb and flow of these processes, themes of trust relating emerge that organise our experience of being together.

This is best illustrated in the two narratives I describe in Project 4. In the first narrative (thesis p. 112), my history with Robert and regional colleagues, our different roles and responsibilities and perceived expertise, the power dynamics and my fears of exclusion all led to the emergence of patterns of trust relating that did not make me feel that I could *safely* continue with my attempts to question the data. In contrast, in the second narrative (thesis p. 124), my past experiences with colleagues in the regional workplace, the differing power dynamics, our shared histories and understandings, combined to allow me to feel paradoxically safe in the *unsafeness* of the situation, and I was able to continue our conversation and exploration of difference.

In both narratives, we each brought different histories, experiences, capabilities, reputations and emotions into our interactions as we individually and collectively made determinations as to what was and was not right and whom we should believe and whom we could trust. We acted and reacted to each other's determinations and actions in an ever-evolving dance affected by the evolving figurations of power relations and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. In this dynamic, trust emerged as a complex, recursive and iterative patterning of themes organising our experience of being together in the living present, which was, paradoxical in that it is simultaneously individually experienced and particularised, and socially constructed and generalised, at the same time.

### Argument 2: Patterns of trust relating both enable and constrain us in our work of meaning making.

In the literature on sensemaking, what I now call *meaning making*, the role of trust is often idealised. It is assumed that the higher the trust, the more likely a group is to make productive meaning together. My research both supports and questions this assumption.

To set the context for this assertion, I consider how the work of meaning making is often experienced as anxiety creating. Mead (1934/1967) proposed that meaning arises in the social experience of the individual taking on the attitude of another (p. 89). Meaning making, rather than arriving at a correct or right understanding of each other, is negotiated through our interactions with each other that come together in the "fluctuating, tensile equilibrium" of shifting power relations (Elias, 1970/1978, p. 131). The complex and emergent nature of meaning making was captured well by Stacey (2005):

> Each individual is simultaneously evoking and provoking responses from others so that the particular personal organising themes emerging will depend as much on the others as on the individual concerned. Together they immediately constitute complex responsive processes of a recursive, reflexive, self-referential kind. And as they do so, themes emerge that organise their experience of being together out of which further themes continuously emerge. (p. 167)

In an idealised sense, meaning making is often seen as a coming together of the team, of the collective *we-identity*, as we seek to find a way to go on together in what can be rewarding and exciting work. As a result, we feel that we have instituted some form of agreed-on order to the puzzlement of our existence, which will allow us to solve the problem facing us. Dewey (1929/1984) suggested:

> A disciplined mind takes delight in the problematic, and cherishes it until a way out is found that approves itself upon examination …. The scientific attitude may almost be defined as that which is capable of enjoying the doubtful; scientific

> method is, in one aspect, a technique for making a productive use of doubt by converting it into operations of infinite inquiry. (p. 182)

Thus, the joy and delight in the questioning and the quest allows us to enjoy the doubtful, even to make productive use of it. At the same time, however, such processes can be anxiety provoking and thus destabilising. Our need to make meaning together generally arises in response to "ambiguous, equivocal or confusing issues or events" (Brown et al., 2015, p. 266) that have disrupted our expectations (Weick, 1995, pp. 4–6). Other scholars use the term *surprise*, defined as something that happens contrary to all expectations or anticipations (Filbee-Dexter et al., 2017, pp. 2–3). I suggest that this is a fundamental aspect of the world around us, because we cannot know what will happen in the future (McDaniel and Driege, 2005, p. 6). Such disruptions of our expectations are often not comfortable, because they challenge our assumptions about what *is*, our values and, often, our very sense of identity.

I described in my narratives how surprises were generally unwelcome in my workplace and that I felt I needed to reduce them to show that I was in control and on top of my work— this to avoid what Dewey (1929/1984) described as the "peril of evils" posed by our uncertainty (p. 7). I experienced breakdowns as anxiety creating as they disrupted my/our expectations of what was supposed to happen, making nonsense of my/our plans and hopes for success, with the attendant loss of certainty that we knew what was going on.

Elias (1983/1997) pointed to the possibility of what he called a "double bind" arising in such processes of breakdown, which are felt as dangerous and/or in which we are unable to control what is happening. He suggested that high emotion lessens our ability to assess realistically and react to what is going on, reducing our capacity to bring:

> …the critical process under control. In short, inability to control tends to go hand in hand with high emotivity of response, which keeps the chance of controlling the dangers of the process at a low level, which keeps at a high level the emotivity of response, and so forth. (p. 48).

Our engagement with difference in meaning making also necessarily involves conflict, as it emerges because of breakdowns through our encounters with differing expectations. Organisational consultant and theorist Robbert Masselink (2018), in his examination of the client/consultant relationship, argued that collaboration is a politics of affect in which "struggle and strife" (p. 54) inevitably emerge. He proposed that difference and dissent are necessary for collaboration, that otherwise there is collusion, which I understand as a lack of engagement with difference (p. 54). His views reflect Dewey's (1922/2017) take on the role of conflict, that "All action is an invasion of the future, of the unknown. Conflict and uncertainty are ultimate traits" (p. 8). We are thus in a difficult situation. We fear and try to avoid conflict to allow us to stay in relation with each other. However, conflict is an inevitable aspect of the processes of exploring and negotiating how we might go on together (Mowles, 2015a, p. 128), and we need to find ways to explore how we can stay in relation with each other to make sense of what is going on (Griffin and Stacey, 2005, p. 149).

Lastly, in my experience of the give and take of meaning making, I saw how my/our sense of who I/we were—and our values and ideologies or assumptions as to what we assumed to be right and true, both individually and collectively—were often challenged. In effect, we continually renegotiated our identities as we formed and, in turn, were formed by the reactions and actions of others (Elias, 1987/1991, p. 316) in the ebb and flow of the patterning of our power relationships (Elias, 1970/1978, p. 131). This change to our identities was also noted by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (in Malpas, Arnswald and Kertscher, ed., 2002), who suggested, "there can be no understanding the other without a changed understanding of self" (p. 295; also see Griffin and Stacey, 2005, p. 167). As suggested in my Project 4 reflections (thesis p. 184), Ricoeur (1990) wrote extensively in his book, *Oneself as Another,* that selfhood implies otherness to the extent that selfhood and otherness cannot be separated; a perspective that echoed Elias's view of the relationship between the individual and society (1987/1991, p. 16). Similarly, Honneth (2000) described the struggle for the establishment of relations of mutual recognition as a

precondition for the realisation of the self (p. 20). Our very sense of our self and, thus, our sense of each other is potentially challenged in our work to make meaning. This is never just personal; in the process, as my identity was being challenged, I was thinking of what others would think of me—and I imagine the same may have been happening for my colleagues.

The destabilising nature of the process of meaning making can be seen throughout my narratives. In all, some form of surprise or breakdown led to our need to understand collectively what had happened and what we needed to do about it. In my budget narrative in Project 1 we had a financial shortfall. In Project 2 we were reacting to a high profile and public release of erroneous data. In Project 3 we were concerned by a landlord's decision not to renew our lease. In the first narrative of Project 4 we were facing the prospect of being unable to meet our commitments to the department and to Parliament; and in the second narrative, we—as a group—were trying to figure out an emotionally charged issue, which could have damaged our otherwise strong relationships. In each of these narratives, we encountered conflict and experienced changes to our identities.

Given the potentially destabilising nature of meaning making, I claim that patterns of trust relating can both enable and constrain our collective exploration of difference that enables us to take our next steps together. However, I qualify this claim. Throughout my inquiry, I found myself taking a binary view, believing that one action or decision was better or worse than another, that we had done the right thing or made a poor decision and, as a result, we would have a better or worse result. I now see this as problematic in a complex world in which our view on what is the *good* or the *right* way inevitably depends on the temporality or perspective with which such judgments are made. What we call a triumph and a good decision on one day may be considered a debacle the next. What I think is a great idea may be exactly what someone else would immediately dismiss. Instead, Mead (1938) proposed that the question is not whether there is a right value or a wrong value at stake, but that "it is a question of finding the possibility of acting so as to take into account as far as possible all the values involved" (p. 465). This approach is directly contrary to the search for the

right answer, looking for rules or predictions (McDaniel et al., 2003, pp. 275–76) or what physicists Goldenfeld and Kadanoff (1999) termed "fundamental laws true for all time" (p. 89). I propose that we take a more pragmatic approach and see *right* as the best we can do in the circumstances in which we find ourselves today, to seek out a *good enough* step to take together *for now*, acknowledging that in the future "we may be facing a completely different set of problems" (Mowles, 2015a, p. 144).

If we understand that there is no right and no wrong, does anything go? Obviously, that is not a tenable position. I take as examples the two narratives in Project Four. In one case we were able to explore an issue while in the other, we were not. Taking a pragmatic approach such as suggested by Mowles (2015), I argue that our objective should be to seek out how we can stay in relation sufficiently to allow a collective exploration of different perspectives and concerns. In Dewey's (1929/1984) terms, we need to make "productive use of doubt" (p. 182) so that together we can figure out what to do.

I found the psychoanalytic concept of "good enough holding" proposed by Stacey and Mowles (2016) helpful in addressing this question, in which the concept is not located in a leader or consultant, but rather in the quality of conversational interaction (p. 357). They suggested that if "people can contain rather than submit to or avoid anxiety, then insight and creativity may be generated by, and accompany, the anxiety of learning" (p. 133). This does not deny the inevitability of conflict, but rather explores different ways we can be in conflict. In Project 4, I referred to Stacey and Mowles (2016), who drew on Groot (2005) to suggest two types of conflict: polarised, in which there is a winner and a loser; and explorative, in which individuals explore generalisations and negotiate different interpretations to make them particular, causing adjustments to themselves and to others (p. 370).

In our working together, rather than distinguishing between collaboration and competition, we should accept that both are at play at the same time. We need to find a way to engage in explorative conflict such that we are

> … able to live with the simultaneous excitement and anxiety of conversations that test the boundary of what they know. The "good enough holding" of anxiety is an essential condition for the fluid, spontaneous conversational dynamics that are the analogue of the edge of chaos. "Good enough holding" is a quality of the themes organising the experience of relating. When these take the form of trusting interaction, they are themselves then forms of 'good enough holding' that enable people to live with anxiety. (Stacey and Mowles, 2016, p. 357)

I believe that patterns of trust relating can enable our work to make meaning by supporting us to stay in relation with one another despite our anxieties and emotions, enhancing our ability to engage with productive doubt. Asking a question or offering information that might not be considered relevant or appropriate could be felt as making oneself vulnerable and at risk of exclusion. On the other hand, such interventions can also be a source of novelty and bring a perspective that others may miss. Where an individual doesn't feel safe to make such an intervention because they don't trust the others—particularly those who have more power chances than they do—it is reasonable to expect them to be unlikely to engage. This was seen in the different ways in which the two narratives in Project 4 developed. In the first, my anxieties led to me not feeling safe and effectively closing down my inquiry into difference. In the second, we were able to engage in conversation and negotiate a *good enough* account of phenomenon and our lived experiences, despite our high anxiety. As "novelty and innovation arise not from conformity and unity, but from engagement with difference" (Mowles, 2015b, p. 165), such a disincentive to raising different views can obstruct innovation and engagement.

This leads to the second half of my argument, that strong patterns of trust can also constrain individuals and groups in their work to make meaning. Where our *we-identities* and/or community ideals that Mead (1923) referred to as "cult values" (pp. 239, 246; also see Stacey and Mowles, 2016, pp. 390–93) are strongly held, patterns of trust relating can also lead to a failure to explore *productive doubt*. Instead, where encountered doubt challenges

our cult values and *we-identities*, engagement with difference does not occur, as we collude to preserve these values and identities and to manage our anxieties.

An excellent example of the negative effects of too much trust is what psychologist Irving Janis (1972; 1982) called "groupthink," a term he coined in his study of the Bay of Pigs and other high-profile disasters in American public policy to describe how contradictory views can be prevented from being expressed and evaluated. A factor that potentially leads to groupthink in organisations is a strong patterning of trusting relationships that, rather than assisting, prevents productive exploration of the issues at hand through a blind acceptance of *people like us* and their views. Contradictory perspectives, which challenge our *we-identities* and cult values, are not expressed and evaluated, as they might jeopardise relationships with colleagues and lead to exclusion. I suggest that the continued acceptance of the erroneous data in Project 2's narrative, as well as the first narrative in Project 4 (in which I ceased my questioning of the productivity numbers) both illustrate how trust can constrain us in our work of meaning making.

> **Argument 3: The use of quantitative methods in our meaning making is paradoxical in two ways: they are trusted as a source of objective information, despite being socially determined and enabled by patterns of trust relating; and their use is potentially destructive of trusting relationships in our work to make meaning together, which, in turn, further strengthens our trust in and reliance on such methods.**

I have described how the destabilising nature of meaning making often leads to a preoccupation with achieving a sense of control and objectivity that will demonstrate we have made the right decision. This approach is reminiscent of my need to have the right answer and gain approval and inclusion.

Management theorist Peter Drucker (1974), drawing, *inter alia,* on the works of mechanical engineer Frederick Taylor (1911), argued that a manager needs to establish yardsticks and measurements for sound decision-making. This approach has been adopted enthusiastically

by the Canadian public service, which prides itself on being evidence-based. In my experience, this is generally interpreted as relying on quantitative data. Targets and numerically expressed outcomes are assumed objective; they provide simple and direct evidence we can use to demonstrate that we are in control and on top of things. I suggest that this drive for quantification and resulting sense of control is a defence against the ever-prevalent anxiety of working in an uncertain, sensitive and high-risk environment.

I do not argue against the use of quantitative data or metrics. In fact, I suggest that, in a complex multi-specialist world, numbers can be functionally useful. They can provide a common language and can help to reduce anxiety, increasing our capacity to achieve mutual understanding and explore differences leading to increased engagement and innovation. They can also be a tool to make it *safe* for those with fewer power chances to bring up puzzling developments for collective exploration and problem solving.

I do, however, argue for a more nuanced and critical approach to quantitative methods and their use. There is a vast literature around the problems of quantitative analysis and its application in the social sciences and in meaning making, which I refer to only briefly to provide context for my argument. Historian Jerry Muller in *The Tyranny of Metrics* (2018) surveyed extensively the challenges and consequences of an unsophisticated reliance on metrics. Complexity theorist Nick Sarra (2005) discussed the implications of the rise of the "new managerialism" in the public sector (p. 195). He makes the case that continually being asked for evidence of practice is both oppressive, in that it disregards the complex and non-linear nature of human conduct, and spurious, as it inevitably excludes divergence to remain within the evidence-based paradigm, precluding the emergence of novelty and creativity (pp. 182–83).

Public administration scholar Camilla Stivers suggested in *Governance in Dark Times—Practical Philosophy for Public Service* (2008) that we need to move beyond thinking there is a right or best way to do work, as science seems to promise, and instead need to apply judgment and deliberation (p. 31). Drawing on Hannah Arendt, she suggested that rational, scientific and factual truth claims to be beyond argument are fundamentally coercive and

thus "fundamentally at odds with political life" (pp. 45–46). A similar perspective is found in the work of Ralph Stacey (2012), drawing on Edgar Schein's consideration of techniques of coercive persuasion, which he argues are used to "foster dependency and, by definition, block questioning and reflexive thinking" (p. 80). As an example of coercive persuasion, I note in the first narrative in Project 4 that my boss asserted that quantitative information was indisputable, making it very difficult for me to continue to question the numbers.

I focus my comments on the use of quantitative information, and how this relates to trust. Science historian Theodore Porter in *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (1995) declared that quantification is often demanded for its presumed objectivity or precision where there is an absence of trust (pp. 97, 100–01, 152). He suggested that relationships of trust take time and experience that may not be available in a bureaucracy (p. 194), so it is not surprising that in a bureaucratic world that promotes "evidence-based public management," we use quantitative information to assure the desired objectivity of evidence. He noted a move to almost universal quantification in social science and applied disciplines and a "push for rigor" in part as a result of the distrust of "unarticulated expert knowledge" and "suspicion of arbitrariness and discretion" that shape political culture (p. 199), arguing that this has led to a distrust in personal judgment (p. 200).

Building on Porter's work, I argue that the use of quantitative information in our meaning making is paradoxical. On one hand, it is trusted because it is considered objective and precise in comparison with other forms of knowledge. On the other hand, the quantitative information is itself socially formed and depends for its credibility, in the words of Porter, on "institutional or personal credibility even to produce impersonal numbers" (p. 214). Numbers or metrics do not emerge magically from the ether. As Dewey (1929/2008) suggested, we should not refer to data as "given," but as "taken," as they are:

> *selected* from … original subject-matter which gives the impetus to knowing; they
> are discriminated for a purpose:—that, namely, of affording signs or evidence to

> define and locate a problem, and thus give a clew (sic) to its resolution. (pp. 142–
> 43)

Arguably, numbers gain in persuasiveness based on their source and/or where they are published (i.e., if the source or publication is *trusted*). We need to know that an authority has blessed the numbers. Outside of this context, data cannot be credible and trusted for use in meaning making. They are thus socially formed and enabled by patterns of trust relating.

In Project Two (thesis p. 45), I illustrated how erroneous numbers were accepted and successfully defended from criticism both because they supported generally accepted social narratives and because of the symbolic capital of the experts who had prepared them. In Project Four (thesis p. 112), the numbers that indicated our apparent productivity problem were selected and calculated based on assumptions by headquarters colleagues. These experts were trusted to prepare the numbers; thus, the trust in numbers was actually a trust in the source of the numbers. Given this, one can argue that metrics, which are required and trusted because they are objective and precise, are, in fact, socially determined and accepted because of our trust in the experts who produce them. This is problematic; knowledge assumed to be objective is meant to be "knowledge that does not depend too much on the particular individuals who author it" (Porter, 1995, p. 229). This was precisely what underpinned the credibility conferred on the numbers in both my narratives.

The paradox of relying on quantitative methods goes further. I suggested that numbers are considered necessary because we lack trust in practical judgment and require objective evidence to help us manage our anxiety sufficiently to allow us to stay in relation with each other so we can productively explore our differences together. At the same time, numbers can increase anxiety for those whose practical knowledge is discounted, which in turn, may serve to *further reduce* our trust in such judgment. In Project Two where data was accepted despite our significant concerns, it was experienced as a disregard and discounting of the practical knowledge of regional employees. The disregard of (what I felt were) valid concerns —my practical knowledge of what was going on—left me feeling distrusted (and disrespected) and, in turn, I increasingly distrusted my colleagues at headquarters.

Likewise, in Project Four, while numbers were potentially helpful, in the first narrative they were all we had. I felt that my boss dismissed my concerns out of hand, and consequently sensed that he did not trust me. I believed that there was no consideration given to our regional experience or our knowledge of what was happening on the ground, nor that there might be issues with the numbers; as a consequence of my attempts to point this out I felt shamed and excluded. From my perspective, all the benefit of the doubt was accorded to the numbers—none of it to me.

This disregard of practical judgement in favour of quantitative measurement affects patterns of trust relating in our interactions and, in turn, our capacity to engage in exploring difference with each other. In Project 4, I noted the importance of reciprocity in trust (Sztompka, 2006, pp. 51–52, 69–67; Putnam, 1994, p. 172; 2000, p. 134), how if you do not trust me, I probably should not trust you. As I did not feel recognised and valued by my boss, I increasingly distrusted him. Note the negative self-reinforcing cycle—relying on metrics to the detriment of practical knowledge further reduces the likelihood that participants whose expertise is disregarded either will feel trusted or will trust others. This makes metrics increasingly the only common ground we have. In the absence of trust relations between those making meaning together, particularly in the high anxiety/high stakes world of politics, the siren song of numbers becomes almost irresistible with its promises of safety and certainty leading to our reduced capacity to explore productive doubt.

Contributions to Theory and Practice and Conclusion

### Contributions to theory.

This section summarises my contributions to theory arising from my inquiry into trust and meaning making.

1. I extend the examination of trust from a sociological perspective to considering it from the perspective of the body of knowledge known as complex responsive processes of relating, in which population-wide patterns emerge as the result of local interactions of individuals affected by power figurations, emotions and evaluative choices such as norms and values (Griffin, 2006; Mowles, 2015a, 2015b, 2017a, 2017b; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2005, 2010, 2012a, 2012b; Stacey and Griffin, 2005; Griffin and Stacey, 2005; Stacey and Mowles, 2016). In doing so I argue that trust is a complex, recursive, iterative and emergent patterning of human relating. It organises our experience being together in the living present and is paradoxical as it is simultaneously experienced individually and particularised, and socially constructed and generalised at the same time.

2. I also place the concept of trust within the context of the literature on meaning making, which I argue is negotiated through our interactions and, while often idealised, is at the same time potentially destabilising. I propose a nuanced approach, recognising patterns of trust relating can both enable and constrain us in supporting exploratory conversations in organisations that allow for an exploration of difference, novelty and negotiation of meaning in our working together. I propose that trust can provide a means of helping us stay in relation despite our anxieties, allowing us to make sense of what is going on and allowing for the possibility of mutual understanding and meaning making. Trust, however, can also be stultifying in its reinforcement of we-identities and cult values and thus distinctions in perception and understanding between groups, reducing their ability to engage in difference.

3. I contribute to understanding trust within a large, distributed, national public sector organisation where, because of distance and geography, face-to-face trusting relationships are difficult to build and maintain. My narratives are written from the perspective of a senior executive outside the headquarters operations of the department, which allows for a view on how trust both enables and constrains individuals in their collective attempts to make meaning together and highlights the complexity of this work. I believe that trusting relationships are particularly difficult to build and maintain in such an organisation given the paradoxical nature of Weberian bureaucracy. While the rules that order interactions in such a setting provide conditions for trust—and are considered necessary because they establish a mutual understanding of customary practices and a way to treat everyone equally—they are also dehumanising as, if no one is a special case, no one can be special. That we need rules to tell us how to behave proves that we cannot be trusted—or that others cannot be trusted. While theoretically designed to provide rules and ways in which we can trust each other, the nature of the bureaucracy suggests that we cannot be trusted. It also constitutes a dilemma for us in that while we need rules, we also need to interpret them. Sadly, confirmation that we have done so in an acceptable manner is often available only with hindsight, with potentially significant consequences for making what is later judged a wrong determination.

I, and others (Misztal, 1996, p. 141; Luhmann, 1979/2017, p. 31-2), have suggested that trust relations are fragile and more easily lost than built and maintained. The Weberian bureaucracy's paradoxical relationship with trust means, in my view, that trusting patterns in that context are even more fragile. They can also be more problematic in their ethical implications. As individuals are generally highly regulated in terms of what they can and cannot do for others, extreme care must be taken when entering into commitments to others, as the ability to honour them (and maintain trusting relations) may be constrained.

4. In Project Three, I introduced the concept of *buffering conversations*[38] to refer to the often one-on-one, informal conversations between participants that occur in less complex situations than formally organised meetings, in which participants are both enabled and constrained in ways that can prevent an intimate and nuanced sharing of perspectives.

Such conversations explain or soften interventions in past (or future) interactions, including formal meetings. They are often used to negotiate, repair or maintain relationships and expectations affecting trust patterns that may be weak or have been put at risk in an exploratory process, as well as to manage the inherent anxiety of meaning making. In virtual interactions or those highly dominated by templated exchanges, the ability to have such buffering interactions to support the relational impact of interventions may be limited. My research suggests the importance of these more informal interactions in repairing our identities and who we are in our processes of mutual recognition.

5. Finally, I have explored throughout my projects how the use of quantitative data in our work to make meaning together can be paradoxical. First, it is trusted as objective data, although it is socially determined and enabled by patterns of trust relating. Second, particularly in large distributed organisations, quantitative data, which can isolate and compare variables across different operations and work sites, is an important support to individuals trying to understand what is going on in their work together. This can help to reduce anxiety, increasing our capacity to achieve mutual understanding and explore differences leading to greater engagement and innovation. The use of quantitative data can, however, also result in a disregard and discounting of practical knowledge, which can increase anxiety and reduce felt trust, and impair our ability to explore and negotiate how

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[38] I note that in Projects 2 and 3 I referred to "water cooler" discussions, a term often heard in the workplace to describe informal conversations. I distinguish *buffering conversations* from these interactions as, while the latter may well include gossip, I see them as being more purposeful in terms of building and maintaining relationships.

we can go on together, further strengthening our trust and reliance on quantitative information.

### Contributions to practice.

Throughout my inquiry, I have traced a movement in my thought from a binary and individualistic, right and wrong approach, to a more nuanced view of the social nature of my interactions with others. This has led to changes in my approach to management that demonstrate my contribution to practice, some of which I summarise in this section.

1. In my synopsis, I revealed my concerns with the view that there is a *right* and a *wrong* way to resolve problems or issues. I suggest that successfully exploring any one challenge affects all others, both in terms of the outcomes of such problem-solving processes, but perhaps more importantly through the impact of such exercises on strengthening or weakening relationships of trust and distrust among individuals and groups as we form and are formed by our interactions. How we work together affects how we *will work* together in that how we deal with each other will affect our patterns of trust relating with each other in the future. Furthermore, as we work together in the living present, our experiences will affect how we anticipate our future interactions as well as how we make sense of past ones, refashioning our understanding of both.

This is particularly important if one accepts (as I do) the suggestion of Misztal (1996, p. 141) and Luhmann (1979/2017, p. 31-2), that trust is fragile, as we need to work together to negotiate "sometimes irreconcilable differences" (Sarra in Stacey and Griffin, 2005, p. 198) on an ongoing basis. In our reliance on others, our experience of being disappointed (or the breaking of trust) will likely outweigh any number of times that our expectations are met by the individual or group doing what we *trusted* them to do. Even one such experience introduces uncertainty into our ongoing interactions that did not previously exist. History has a long tail—memories of our experience in previous interactions linger, and any trust is a stitching with fine thread, easily broken and undone.

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This understanding of the fragility of trust and its impact on how we will work together has led to a change in my practice. I note an increase in my vigilance both as to what I can and cannot commit to, to not put myself in a position of violating trust expectations I cannot meet. I am more aware of the impact on others of my behaviour and words. I recently sent an email to employees that was badly received. A few individuals reached out to me and objected. In response, I sent out a second message taking full responsibility and apologising—owning up to my breach of the *way we work together* in our region and stating how proud I was of those who contacted me with their concerns. I realised how fragile was my being seen as trustworthy and knew that I needed to strongly and unequivocally demonstrate that they could maintain their confidence in me.[39]

2. I have a greater appreciation for the challenges of working virtually, which is often required in a large and distributed organisation. Given inevitable time and fiscal constraints, I take full advantage of face-to-face and other one-on-one opportunities to develop and maintain relationships that can support patterns of trust relating with colleagues.

One way that I have incorporated this into my practice is the addition of social events during union-management consultation meetings. Initially, the atmosphere of these meetings was tense and, while not overtly marked by conflict, featured careful and guarded conversations. I did not look forward to these meetings. Over the last three years, I started to focus on the social aspects of the way we work together and organised dinners the night before meetings. At first, it was challenging to get executives to attend. However, once it became understood and accepted as an expectation, more of them attended. Now if someone does not attend, they are careful to provide me with a solid reason for not doing so. The atmosphere of our meetings is more collegial, which I – at least in part - attribute to these dinners, allowing for a better discussion and exploration of difference.

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[39] I was later approached by many staff members who indicated that they appreciated my "eating humble pie," and that they respected me for doing so.

3. My reflections have also led to changes in the way that I conduct meetings. I am more relaxed about timelines in agendas and less inclined to cut off discussion. I am insistent on reserving open space in meeting agendas where participants are invited to raise any issues. In my interactions, both within the region and with colleagues in other regions and headquarters, I seek to develop a wider sense of the *generalised other* (Mead, 1934/1967, pp. 152–56). I do so to understand others' needs and motivations in an attempt, as much as possible, to consider all views involved when we make decisions as recommended by Mead (1938, p. 465) so that we can take our next steps together. I have also started to push back on meetings with excessive content that leave insufficient time for the group to explore jointly what they have heard and to manage anxieties that might be prompted by their interactions. In addition, I am learning how to draw attention to patterns I have noticed, so that we can consider them together, making explicit our perceptions and allowing us to be reflexive in our working together.

4. Mead used *cult values* to refer to social patterns present in actions as generalisations and/or idealisations (Stacey and Mowles, 2016, p. 365). An example is *evidence-based,* to which I have referred many times in my projects. Another is *trust*,[40] and I have argued against its idealization throughout this synopsis. I think of idealised or cult values as being something to which we aspire, that we *trust*. If we work in an evidence-based way, for example, we will be beyond reproach. Early in my tenure with the department, I recognised the performative nature of the deliberate naming of such values, in the sense that they

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[40] The acceptance of trust as a cult value is demonstrated by remarks that Baroness Onora O'Neill, a philosopher and crossbench member of the House of Lords, delivered at the BBC Reith Lectures in 2002. In opening her remarks, she drew on Arthur Waley's consideration of the teachings of Confucius to make the point of the importance of trust:

> Confucius told his disciple Tzu-kung that three things are needed for government: weapons, food and trust. If a ruler can't hold on to all three, he should give up the weapons first and the food next. Trust should be guarded to the end: without trust we cannot stand. (p. 3).

become engaged in the construction of reality (Ford, Harding and Learmonth, 2008, p. 33). Frustrated by funding challenges in our region, which predominantly affect our in-person service area[41], I started to use the words "urban, rural and remote" as a tag line to emphasise that we needed to think about the needs and issues of each of these modes of service delivery. I, of course, hoped that this would include costs. I was delightfully surprised by how this was taken up by my colleagues, and I recently heard the expression used by someone from the Treasury Board (a separate department that manages the public service). I believe that it was well received because it reinforced a patterning of consensus around a principle with which no one could argue and, if you will, it developed into a cult value we could all *trust*.

5. I advance a more pragmatic approach to the use of quantitative data in our work. Rather than using numbers as a source of certainty in interactions where we are trying to figure out what is going on, I propose an approach that uses numbers to support conversations about what participants are observing in their roles and experiences in the organisation, providing space for individuals to bring their practical knowledge into the conversation. This includes a conscious and continued understanding of the limitations of quantitative data. I have also (admittedly a little cynically) started to play the *numbers game* to use colleagues' trust in numbers to address the funding differential between regions. Recently, one of my headquarters colleagues had his staff calculate fixed costs as a percentage of budgets in each of the regions, showing that fixed costs constitute 85% of our budget, while only 50–60% of the budgets of the other three regions. We have been saying this for over ten years, but only when we had *numbers* did we have credibility.

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[41] As 47% of our region is rural which is costly to serve, our delivery model is inadequately funded by the way resources are allocated.

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### Conclusion

Following this research project, I plan to publish an article on the relationship of trust and meaning making in public sector organisations in *Canadian Government Executive*. I would like to write a book based on my thesis, to provide managers with a helpful perspective on the importance (and risks) of trust in meaning making. I have also started discussions with the Canadian School of Public Service and the Institute on Governance in Ottawa, Canada with the hope of influencing their curricula.

My inquiry has raised questions that I believe would benefit from further research. I have written about the challenges of bureaucracies in terms of colleagues' ability to build and maintain trust. I adapted Winston Churchill's famous statement on democracies to suggest that, while bureaucracies have significant challenges and downsides, they might well be better than all other available options. The genesis of Weber's (1922/1978) proposal that bureaucracies are the best form of organisation for managing problems of high complication and involving many different forms of expertise (p. 973) is not without merit. In the public service, the large scale and operation of non-linear relations (and amplification of small differences) means that it takes only one individual to create serious reputational and/or operational damage. We need a way of together managing the size and intricacies of an operation such as the Canadian Public Service, wherein increasingly citizens' expectations are that our services (which are extensive and cover a wide range of programmes and benefits) will be integrated, secure and efficient. Svend Brinkmann (2017), drawing on Dewey, described the problem as follows:

> When a society's size and complexity exceed what an individual can comprehend, there arises a need for societal tools that can reach into society's nooks and crannies, thematise significant value problems, and thereby ask questions that help us make reasonable common decisions. (p. 79)

A fundamental question requiring further examination is how we can temper the disadvantages of working within the context of large organisations and still deliver the

services expected of us and in the way, they are expected. Closely related to this investigation, we need further research on the impact of managerialism and the excessive dependence on quantitative information or metrics on our mental health and our ability to stay in relation with each other in organisations. This is particularly important in times of significant disruption, where it is evident that we need better ways for us to engage in the exploration of difference that leads to novelty and innovation.

The phenomenon of patterns of distrust would benefit from further inquiry. I suspect that the same processes I have argued for in terms of formation and breakdown of patterns of trust relating will prove equally relevant to distrust. If trust is as fragile as I (and others) have suggested, I anticipate that, once established, distrust may be harder to dispel. Both patterns of trust and distrust and their relation to anxiety are another worthwhile research area.

Finally, my reflections on trust patterning and meaning making increasingly lead me to consider the impact of a society that appears to value the individual and their aspirations over the collective. There is an old joke that asks the provocative question of why dogs lick their private parts. The answer, of course, is that they do it because they can. In an individualistic society in which it seems acceptable to do what one wants if one can, individuals are likely to focus more on their own needs and aspirations than those of others. It is hardly surprising that we increasingly hear concerns regarding loss of trust. In the second narrative in Project Four (thesis p. 124), I quoted Colleen, who suggested that "we are more alike than different," and yet frequently it is our differences that influence how we relate to each other, leading us to hold dear what is different about us and value less what unites us. In my experience, many of our approaches to working together are influenced by an individualistic perspective. Further research on the evolution of the dynamic of the individual and society and its impact on our working together is warranted.

I started this journey convinced that the working environment in the public service is extremely complex. That view has not changed. My original belief that there is an individualistic and a right or a wrong answer—or perhaps even an optimal balance between

competitive and cooperative behaviours—has evolved, leading me to a more nuanced view of how we work together. I have considered my practice from a perspective of patterns of trust relations and how they affect our work to make meaning together. While this is not where I thought my inquiry would take me, I do feel that I have come full circle, as T.S. Eliot (1942/2009) described in his poem *Little Gidding*:

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time. (p. 27)

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