Structural Contradiction and Sense-Making in the First-Line Manager Role

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is twofold. The first is substantive: to shed light on the structural conflicts and contradictions that run through first-line manager (FLM) roles where routine supervision has been supplemented by wider management responsibility for business performance and customer service and on how FLMs themselves interpret and handle these conflicts through the ways in which they construct their identity and enact their role. This paper presents an analysis of two case studies of FLMs in their organisational context which traces the relationship between the structural conditions that shape the way in which the FLM role is defined and the subjective meaning-construction that shapes how the role is interpreted and enacted, and, in so doing, draws upon both 'critical realist' and 'sense-making' perspectives. Thus the second aim of this paper is to offer some methodological reflections on the possibilities and limitations of using critical realism and sense-making as complementary analytical frameworks and the implication this has for the problem of paradigm commensurability. It is argued that critical realism and sense-making are complementary, rather than syncretic, and can be deployed in tandem to generate cumulative interpretations of different facets of a problem.

***Key Words*:** First-line Managers; Supervision; Critical Realism; Sense-making; Paradigm Commensurability.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is both substantive and methodological. On the one hand, it draws on an analysis of case study data on how the first-line manager (hereafter FLM) role is constituted and enacted in two organisations to shed light on whether and, if so, how a broadening of the role of FLM from that of supervisor to one of responsibility for managing unit performance and/or customer service has impacted on the way in which FLMs interpret, negotiate and enact their role. The analysis traces the dynamic relationship between the structural conditions shaping the way that the FLM is defined and the process of sense-making that shapes the way that the role is interpreted and enacted by FLMs themselves. In so doing, the analysis draws on both critical realist and sense-making perspectives. The methodological aim of this paper, therefore, is to explore the case for combining these two perspectives which have, hitherto, occupied rather different, not to say opposed, positions on the terrain of methodological paradigms and to consider whether their ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions render them irredeemably irreconcilable or pragmatically compatible.

The structure of this paper is as follows. It begins with a brief review of, first, the theoretical and methodological background, namely the key elements of the critical realist and sense-making perspectives and secondly, the substantive background to the reported study, namely the debate over how, if at all, the role of FLM has changed. The methodology and key findings of the study which form the empirical starting point of the analysis are then presented. From here, the paper seeks to develop an analysis in which critical realism and sense-making are deployed as complementary interpretive schema. The remainder of this paper considers the implications of this apparent interpretive eclecticism for the wider, abiding issue of paradigm commensurability. It argues that, if commensurability is couched in terms of the extent to which different perspectives can work in tandem, rather than having to be fused in a methodological melange – as being compatible, rather than syncretic – then critical realism and sense-making can be deployed in conjunction to generate cumulative and complementary, rather than alternative, interpretations of different facets of a problem.

THE CONCEPTUAL CONTEXT: CRITICAL REALISM AND SENSE-MAKING

As its various exponents (e.g. Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000; Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1998; Easton, 2000; Fleetwood, 2005; Mutch, 2005; Pratten, 2000; Reed, 2005; Sayer, 2000) make clear, critical realist analysis is tightly coupled to an explicit ontological and epistemological position. Reality is conceived as existing prior to, and independently of, its identification, apprehension in the form of knowledge and mode of investigation. It posits a stratified ontology of separate domains which are non-reducible to each other but contingently related: the *real* domain of structures or generative mechanisms with causal powers, the *actual* domain of events to which these structures give rise and the *empirical* domain of experience. Real generative structures with causal powers and liabilities give rise, under specific conditions, to particular events which shape and condition experience, which events and experience, in turn, instantiate, reproduce and transform those structures. The domain of the real further divides into the material, ideal, artefactual and social, variously differentiated by how far their existence is independent of or predicated upon human beings and how far and in what ways they are conceptually mediated (Fleetwood, 2005).

Structure and agency are separate and non-reducible to each other, in that they have emergent properties – structures are more than aggregates of human actions, whilst agents' actions are more than manifestations of structure – but are mutually constitutive in that whilst structures pre-date and shape actions, actions reproduce and/or transform structures which, in turn, become the sedimented product of the interaction between past structures and actions. Structures comprise resources, positions, institutions and ideas which are activity-dependent, in that they are instantiated in actions or practices, and conceptually mediated, in that they are mediated by meanings but are more than the sum total of the interpretations and actions of agents. Agents have the emergent properties of reflexivity, interpretation and intention which render their actions more than mere instantiations of structures. Thus, structures exist through and are conceptually mediated by meanings and actions but are not reducible to those meanings and actions; actions are concept-dependent in that they are informed and shaped by meanings

and interpretations, but are not concept-determined in that they are not simply the product of those meanings and interpretations.

A pivotal concept in critical realism, linking structure and agency, is that of 'positions–practices' (Reed, 2000): the point where pre-existing and enduring structures with emergent properties and causal powers intersect with transient, reflective, purposive agents giving interpretation to their experience and intention to their actions. Occupants of pre-existing, structurally located positions engage in specific practices associated with those positions which are partly conditioned, partly chosen and which, in turn, partly reproduce and partly transform those positions. As Pratten expresses it:

> the causal effect of social structures on individuals is manifest in the interests, duties, resources, powers, constraints, rules, conventions and obligations built into or associated with such positions (Pratten 2000: 117).

Critical realist epistemology and method flow logically from this ontology in that the express purpose of critical realist analysis is to penetrate beyond surface events and experience to uncover the structures which, as generative mechanisms, give rise to them by both constraining and enabling what is possible. In so doing, it offers a generative, rather than successionist, substantive, rather than correlational, and conditional and contingent, rather than deterministic, explanation of these events and experiences in terms of the contingent tendencies, rather than invariant laws, produced by multiple generative mechanisms operating in an open system and mediated by context and meanings. To effect this, critical realism employs a 'transcendental method' of abduction, conceptual reframing of observable events and experiences, and retroduction, construing the conditions which must be necessary and sufficient for the observable event and experience to occur – that is, positing the question: 'What, if it existed, would account for this phenomenon?' (Reed, 2005: 1631).

Within that broad methodological strategy, however, critical realism utilises a plurality of research methods, collecting quantitative data for 'extensive' investigation of the prevalence and distribution

of a phenomenon and qualitative data for the 'intensive' investigation of its substantive causality, a blend of data driven by the focus, nature and purpose of the enquiry rather than by methodological preference (Sayer, 2000).

In contrast, sense-making (Weick, 1995, 2001) is distinguished more by its object of enquiry and by methodological bricolage, the opportunistic deployment of a variety of investigative methods, than by a prescriptive methodology or explicit epistemology and, in particular, ontology. Sense-making is the ongoing accomplishment through which people create their situations and actions and attempt to make them rational and accountable to themselves and to others (Allard-Poesi, 2005: 171). Thus, the focus of sense-making analysis is upon events, experience and interactions and its concern is to analyse *how* 'the unknown is structured' and situations and actions are made rationally accountable – how dissonant experience arising from ambiguous events is rendered both 'sensible and sensable' (Weick, 1995: 4) by actors purposefully and pragmatically drawing upon linguistic resources to place that experience into an interpretive framework of categories and labels: as Weick expresses it, 'converting the world of experience into an intelligible world' (2001: 9). According to this perspective, information overload, increased complexity or instability of experience or 'problems' in the form of disparities between intentions and reality create 'shocks' to the flow of experience in the form of ambiguity (an excess of competing interpretations) or uncertainty (insufficient interpretation); in short, the individual actor either cannot decide what is going on or does not know what is going on. This prompts individual actors to engage in a sense-making process of attempting to place inchoate experience into a framework of known categories and labels by bracketing experiential cues, linking them to existing vocabularies – in short, putting experience into words and categories that make sense – and then revising these interpretations in the light of new experiences. In so doing, they may, according to Weick (2001), draw on a range of alternative 'vocabularies', including societal/cultural 'ideologies' and/or organisational 'third-order vocabularies' such as work-related 'paradigms', 'theories of action' concerned with coping, and 'stories' that filter and organise experience into 'plots' and 'outcomes'. This process of labelling and so

temporarily 'fixing' the nature of experience occurs continuously, retrospectively, selectively and discursively, and the result is a temporary, contingent, plausible account or representation of this experience. Thus:

> … sense-making involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalise what people are doing (Weick, 2001: 460).

This process has four interrelated characteristics. First, environments are not passively experienced but actively 'enacted' – through sense-making, individuals create an environment that is sensible and can be responded to in known ways.

> When people engage in acts of sense-making, it is more precise to think of them as accomplishing reality rather than discovering it (Weick, 2001: 460).

Secondly, problems are not so much identified as 'set', in that diffusely problematic situations are coagulated into specific 'problems' by virtue of the aspects of the situation that are attended to and the conceptual framework into which they are placed. Thirdly, responses to these problems are rationalised in that they are retrospectively justified through the construction of a plausible story that accounts for outcomes. Finally, sense-making involves the attempt to construct or maintain a positive, consistent, competent identity or sense of self. Actors make sense of their situation in ways that sustain a favourable personal and social identity:

> [W]hat the situation will have meant to me is dictated by the identity I adopt in dealing with it (Weick, 1995: 24).

Organisations, according to Weick, are the prime site for sense-making because of their inherent ambiguity and uncertainty as open systems and their susceptibility to continuous negotiation among a multiplicity of actors. In particular, they are the location for continuous interplay between two types of meaning: the 'generic subjective', the shared or imposed scripted meanings that are crystallised in

rules, procedures and customary practices, and the 'inter-subjective', fluid and temporarily agreed meanings that are negotiated through interaction. The former prevail in situations of continuity, routine and control; the latter in situations of change, innovation and autonomy. Whilst generic routines and habituated actions shape inter-subjective negotiated meanings by furnishing the linguistic resources out of which they are constructed, they are, in turn, re-affirmed, reproduced or subtly changed by them.

Prima facie, therefore, critical realism and sense-making offer very different ways of conceptualising and investigating social phenomena, with different concepts and vocabularies, research programmes and adherents. What is central to the issue of commensurability is whether this merely reflects methodological preference prompted by the pragmatic need to choose from among alternative perspectives or indicates a fundamental incompatibility, stemming from opposed ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. One way to explore this problem is performatively: to examine whether the two perspectives can be used in combination in the conduct of a particular investigation.

THE FLM ROLE – A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER OR MORE OF THE SAME?

The traditional supervisory role of the FLM focused primarily on routine planning, scheduling and monitoring of work and dealing with unforeseen staffing, equipment and workflow problems (for a summary see, for example, Fletcher, 1969; Dunkerley, 1975; Kerr et al., 1986) – in short, direct control of the production system (Thurley and Wirdenius, 1973). Further, insofar as a critical function of the role was to translate paper plans into operational reality (Child and Partridge, 1982) the FLM stood at the intersection between broad strategic intent and specific operational implementation, between the abstractions of the 'system' and the complex technicalities of operations, and between the divergent interests and expectations of senior managers and members of the work group. Recent workplace studies and more focused studies of industrial supervisors have suggested that, despite changes in rhetoric and aspiration, this traditional picture has not altered substantially (Cully et al., 1999; Delbridge and Lowe, 1997; Gallie et al.,

1998; Lowe, 1992, 1993; Lowe et al., 2000; Rose et al., 1987; Storey, 1994).

In contrast, there have been persistent claims in the mainstream management literature that with empowerment of work teams, delayering of middle management and decentralisation of decision-making, the FLM role is either a residual one of 'team coordinator', facilitating the work of teams that supervise themselves, or an enhanced one of 'business unit manager', with responsibility for both the operations and performance of organisational unit (see, for example, Atkinson, 1997; Ballin, 1993; Bowman, 1999; Dixon, 1993; Duffield, 1992; Dunaine, 1993; FitzSimons, 1999; Hankins and Kleiner, 1995; Humphrey and Stokes, 2000; Katzenbach and Smith, 1993; Kim and Mauborgne, 1997; Lebediker, 1995; McManus, 1995; Pearce, 1992; Peters, 1989; Schlesinger and Klein, 1987; Smiley and Westbrook, 1975; Van Auken, 1992; Walton, 1985; Waterman, 1988; Wellins et al., 1991; Weiss, 1998; Wickens, 1987).

Evidence from a recent survey[1] of the way in which the FLM role is defined in 135 organisations shows both continuity at the core and change at the margins of the FLM role (Hales, 2003, 2005). A common responsibility for routine supervision and the translation of strategy into operations has been *extended* to include 'softer' elements of team leadership, *more sharply framed* by a focus on performance management and, to varying degrees, *supplemented* by responsibility for stewardship, operational management and, more exceptionally, business management of a unit, rather than simply a work group. This has had the effect of both perpetuating the traditional conflicts of supervision and introducing new contradictions into the role. In addition to the conflicts *within* the supervisory role revolving around the disparity between accountability for smooth work operations, effective performance and limited authority and involvement in decisions relating to the resources and methods that determine operational fluidity and performance, there is now potential for conflict *between* the supervisory role and wider managerial roles, in the form of conflicts between supervisory control and facilitative leadership, between supervision of processes and management of operational performance, and between direct supervisory immersion in operational routines and more detached business management of an organisational subunit. However, whilst the survey

evidence shows the potential for ambiguity and conflict in the FLM role, there remains the question of how and how far this is realised in practice and how FLMs themselves experience, interpret and handle this conflict.

THE STUDY

These questions were addressed in two case studies, the purpose of which was to investigate, in detail, the characteristics of different types of FLM role and, crucially, how these roles were enacted and undertaken by FLMs themselves. The survey had shown variations around and extensions of the common supervisory core of the role, creating four discernible types: 'Supervisors Only', 'Performance Managers', 'Client/Customer Service Managers' and 'Budget Holders'. The two case studies reported in this paper examined FLMs in a public sector casework organisation (INDORG) whose role characteristics has been shown by the survey to be those of 'Performance Managers', and FLMs in a retail fashion business (CHIC) whose role characteristics had been shown by the survey to be those of 'Customer Service Managers'.[2]

A 'mixed methods' approach to data collection was adopted, both because different kinds of data were required from different sources and because the use of mixed methods permitted triangulation of the data. Data on the role expectations of the members of the FLMs' role set and on the FLMs' perceptions and interpretations of the role were collected through tape-recorded focus interviews which sought to identify, elaborate and gauge the strength of expectations. Data on FLMs' work activities and their understanding and perception of these were collected through informal observation of FLMs at work and concurrent informal discussion with them, both of which were recorded in field notes. Data on the activities and internal structure of the organisations and the more factual elements of the job were collected through documentary evidence (websites, organisation charts, job descriptions, operating manuals), supplemented by interviews with senior managers. Specifically, in INDORG sixteen focus interviews of one hour were conducted with each of the three senior managers, each FLM and 50 per cent of subordinates and 7 days of observation/work shadowing was carried out. In CHIC fifteen focus interviews of one hour were

conducted with each of the three senior managers, all FLMs and 50 per cent of subordinates, together with 8 days of observation/work shadowing.

THE FLM ROLE IN THE CASE ORGANISATIONS

CHIC

CHIC is a British-owned fashion business, founded in 1974 by its three directors, concerned with design, production, wholesale and, since 1999, retail, of up-market women's clothing. At the time of the research, the retail arm of the business comprised one store and four 'concessions' (where the company rent retail space in a large department store) and employed approximately 100 people: twenty in design and administration, and eighty in distribution and sales. Since then, there was rapid expansion to two stores and thirty-six department store concessions in the UK and Republic of Ireland by May 2003. The CHIC brand, targeted at affluent women in their thirties and forties with 'money to invest' in their appearance but a need for guidance on how to achieve this, emphasises classic design, contemporary style, colour and 'fabric interest', coupled with one-to-one 'bespoke' service. 70 per cent of CHIC's sales come through a VIP list of loyal customers for whom special previews, collection launches and personal shopping evenings are staged.

The company is centralised, with all decisions relating to product design, production, pricing, marketing and merchandising taken at head office. Uniform standards relating to presentation/display of merchandise, customer service and staff appearance and behaviour are imposed top-down, as are operating procedures, including those built into point-of-sale technology, relating to store opening/closing and maintenance, till operation, handling cash, stock monitoring and replenishment, deliveries and staffing. Retail outlets have fixed budgets, imposed by head office, for all running costs, of which staffing costs are of central importance.

FLMs in CHIC are the retail or concession managers of each retail outlet, reporting to two senior managers at head office, responsible, respectively, for HR/personnel and merchandising. Apart from one, all are female graduates in their late twenties/early thirties, with previous fashion retail experience. They are responsible

for promoting sales through 'bespoke' customer service and managing store operating costs, particularly staffing costs. However, since all aspects of store operation are decided centrally, they have limited autonomy and authority.

Apart from the FLMs, each outlet has a staff of five, all women: four 'sales consultants', full- and part-time, and one senior sales consultant/assistant manager who deputises for the FLM. However, in the department stores, there is, in practice, often a pooling of staff among the different concessions. A key element of the work of sales staff is to promote the brand by wearing items from the CHIC collection at VIP events, for which they obtain a clothing allowance.

INDORG

At the time of the research, INDORG was an independent public body, with a budget of £4.5 million and employing 90 people, concerned with supervision and review of approximately 17,000 investigative cases involving members of the public and other government departments.[3] In return for an increase in its budget, INDORG was under pressure to deliver timely, but satisfactory, processing and resolution of cases. By agreement with stakeholder organisations, INDORG was committed to meeting specific time targets for particular types of case. The organisation comprised a chair, a senior management team of three (one line and two staff), five FLMs and 40 caseworkers, together with a number of independent 'associates' who liaised with those outside the organisation.

Caseworkers, who were graduates with professional qualifications and mainly women, were organised into teams of eight, each responsible for particular types of casework. Each team was headed by an FLM, referred to either as 'team-leader' or by their administrative job grade. FLMs were mostly graduates, men and women aged between 36 and 45 years, and were broadly responsible for supervising and managing the performance of caseworkers. In addition, each FLM was responsible for an aspect of 'stewardship', such as premises, equipment and specialist training, relating to the whole casework operation. The role of the associates was to act as the public face of INDORG, liaising with the relevant stakeholders and, therefore, to sign-off and take public responsibility for casework outcomes.

A Critical Realist Account of the FLM Role in CHIC and INDORG

The conditions that constrain and facilitate the FLM role in these organisations may be analysed through a critical realist perspective. What is presented here is the result of this analysis, an account in which the analytic sequence of retroduction (from events and experience to structures) is reversed to show how the role of FLM is shaped by both its immediate organisational context and the wider context in which the organisation is located (from underlying structure to immediate experience). The context of both case organisations is a market (or quasi-market) in which a prevailing economic logic of efficiency is articulated through the demands of important external actors – in CHIC, pressure from business owners for profitability, in INDORG, pressure from the government for 'value for money'. These external demands to 'perform' economically are translated and transmitted within the organisation as performance targets specifying what is to be achieved and operating procedures specifying how, reinforced by senior management expectations that targets are met, procedures adhered to and that managers manage in a certain way. In this latter respect, senior manager expectations draw upon a wider discourse of 'enterprise', 'performance' and 'targets' in an attempt to 'make up' the work identity of, or shape the subjectivity of, FLMs in the organisation as managers who can, or should, 'make a difference' (du Gay 1994; Miller and O'Leary, 1987).

In CHIC required levels of profitability, brand image and service standards set by the directors are translated into store performance targets and budgets and embodied in service and merchandising standards, operating procedures and in-store technology. These structural constraints are echoed in senior managers' general discourse and specific expectations, expressed routinely and informally as well as more formally through appraisals and store visits, that FLMs manage the store as 'their business' and that they promote the brand by managing staff behaviour and appearance and the standard and style of service offered. Through these formal and informal articulations, senior managers attempt to cast CHIC store managers as 'enterprising' business people who are personally responsible and accountable for the sales performance of 'their'

store and whose role is to market and promote the brand by personifying it themselves and by shaping the attitudes and self-identity of sales staff so that they also 'live the brand'.

In INDORG the structural constraints take the form of casework completion targets and procedures for processing cases, both determined by senior managers in response to government demands for an efficient, effective and accountable service and civil service pay and staffing regulations, both determined by wider national agreements between government and trade unions. These are echoed in senior managers' general discourse and specific expectations that FLMs ensure that a given number of cases are completed in a given time, and that, to achieve this, they closely monitor individual caseworker performance and take steps to intervene and remedy underperformance. Through these formally and informally articulated expectations, senior managers in INDORG attempt to cast casework team leaders as 'performance managers', personally responsible and accountable for levels of casework completion, and whose role is to identify individual (not systemic) reasons for under-performance and intervene actively to find ways of improving individual performances.

The combination of the demands of the wider socio-economic context, expressed through key external stakeholders and amplified by senior managers, and the constraints of internal rules and the distribution of resources together form the structural framework in and through which FLMs themselves are managed. However, as well as being managed, FLMs also manage: stores, casework and, crucially, staff. This process, too, is subject to institutional constraints, embodied in formal rules and expressed through informal expectations. The key institutional constraint that impinges on this process is the employment relationship and how this, in turn, shapes the interests and expectations of staff as employees. It is manifested in pressure on the FLM 'from below' to maintain a stable work environment where levels of effort are predictable, work offers some intrinsic satisfaction and there is scope to 'do a good job'. In CHIC, the 'sales consultants' expect regular predictable work and to be given the skills, autonomy and support to sell effectively. They expect the FLM to manage the store as a *workplace*, rather than as a business. In INDORG, caseworkers want time to produce good

quality casework reports and look to the FLM to defend them against pressure to prioritise volume of casework over quality, to manage the team as a team rather than as a collection of variably performing individuals and to help the team to balance work and home life and to develop personally.

A problematic structural relationship with customers/clients complicates the picture in both organisations. Both organisations have customers or clients who are also the arbiters of the effectiveness of work performance and with whom FLMs interact directly. In that sense, FLMs in both organisations are also 'managed' by and have, in turn, to attempt to manage, their customers/clients. In CHIC, customers are relatively affluent women in their thirties and forties with 'money to invest' in their appearance and a need for guidance and tailored advice on how to achieve this. By expecting high quality, distinctive, available merchandise, a relaxed, up-market setting and attentive service and advice from credible sales staff, they reinforce organisational expectations that the store and the staff exude 'the brand'. In INDORG, independent 'associates' are the internal clients of caseworkers and, because they are the public face of the organisation, are keen to ensure that cases are resolved effectively in ways that satisfy external parties and can be defended publicly. In so doing, they support the caseworkers' emphasis on the quality of casework, rather than senior line managers' emphasis on the volume of casework completions.

Thus, the conflicts surrounding the role of FLM in these two organisations are not the contingent outcomes of particular organisational circumstances or individual actions. Rather, they are the effect of the structural properties of organisations shaped by their institutional context to be configured in such a way as to direct and monitor work behaviour in the context of an employment relationship and in pursuit of externally conditioned economic goals. Conflict, therefore, is intrinsic to the 'position–practice' (Reed, 2000) of FLM, even though it is instantiated in and experienced by FLMs as specific dissonances between organisational targets and constraints and in the divergent expectations of senior managers, staff and clients in their respective attempts to 'make up' (du Gay et al., 1994) FLMs as managers who can 'make a difference', in various ways, to work performance.

A Sense-Making Account of FLM Role Enactment in CHIC and INDORG

The way in which FLMs themselves handle these conflicts can be analysed by examining how they negotiate the subjective dimension of the position–practice of FLM through a process of 'sense-making'. Viewed from the sense-making perspective, the role of the FLM in CHIC and INDORG is an amalgam of ambiguous, competing general 'recipes' (Weick, 1995), expressed in divergent expectations, which FLMs have to translate, through various forms of improvisation, into specific actions. FLMs in CHIC and INDORG handle the structural contradictions and conflicting expectations surrounding their role through the way in which they make sense of the situation that they face, construct an identity as someone who is 'managing' and enact the organisation in the light of that identity. Ambiguities in the role prompt FLMs to negotiate an interpretation of that experience through sense-making, linking experiential cues to known vocabularies that invoke 'the organisation', its 'environment' and 'work'. The effect of this is to distil a problematic situation into specific 'problems'. FLMs rationalise the actions they take in response to these 'problems' by constructing an identity or favourable sense of self as someone *managing* to do that job efficiently, consistently and able to 'cope' with the problems of the role, and by weaving a plausible story of 'how the organisation works' and 'what the job is all about'. The result is the construction of a negotiated account of their role that is plausible, acceptable and couched in shared vocabulary. This account serves as a broad cause map, or a sense of 'how things work', on which actions may be grounded. In doing so, they enact 'the organisation' in a way that affirms their identity as 'managers', managing in a particular way. Further, by acting in ways that assume 'how things work', FLMs partly determine that things *do* work like that and their actions become, in part, self-fulfilling.

In CHIC, FLMs distil the diffuse contradictions of the role into the specific 'problem' of being accountable for the business performance of the store, which they are unable to determine, since the style, quality, pricing and merchandising of 'collections' is decided and imposed by head office and the level of sales is determined by the number of customers enticed into the store by merchandising

and by corporate advertising. Central to the FLMs' response to this contradiction is to reject the imputed identity of autonomous 'business manager' or 'entrepreneur' and to construct the alternative identity of diligent *employee*, conforming to company procedures, identifying with the brand, trying to ensure that the sales consultants do the same and reporting the performance that results from this. Thus, they enact CHIC as their *employer*, not 'their' business. This sense of being in the company but not of it influences their perceptions and enactment of a number of specific aspects of the role.

Firstly, they enact performance management more in terms of *reporting* performance, through various trading reports, 'best seller' reports and competitor reports, than in terms of managing performance. They are aware of performance targets but regard meeting these as more a matter of luck – the happy consequence of how they manage store operations – than of business interventions on their part. Secondly, therefore, they emphasise process over outcomes by emphasising the importance of managing stores *how* head office requires, rather than managing the stores in ways that would meet or exceed performance targets. In managing staff, for example, this means keeping staff busy, setting an example in terms of appearance and personal deportment and using corrective coaching to ensure that the sales consultants deal with customers in the 'proper' way by adhering to company procedures and standards. It also means juggling rotas and day-to-day staffing levels so that staff costs, the only performance variable that they can manipulate, are balanced with staff needs for predictable work commitments.

Application of company procedures and standards is tempered by an awareness of the expectations of the 'sales consultants' for predictable hours, to be given the knowledge and information to sell effectively and to be allowed to do their job without interference. Consequently, FLMs avoid highly interventionist supervision and manage by exception rather than constantly monitoring and directing what sales staff are doing. Thus they *negotiate* a modus operandi of the store that subtly balances formal compliance with procedures with selective informal attention to staff needs.

FLMs in INDORG distil the diffuse conflicts and ambiguities in their role into the problem of 'pressure' – meeting targets whilst having little control over staff resources, workflow contingencies,

the volume of work or the complexity of cases that determine work performance. They resolve this by defining themselves as conformist administrators, doing what they *have* to do, without falling foul of procedures and without antagonising senior managers, caseworkers or associates, rather than as interventionist managers. They enact the organisation as one in which the propriety and procedure necessitated by the wider impact of the organisation's work clashes with speed of response prompted by the need to demonstrate 'value for money'. Within the performance management regime, this means 'coping' and 'complying' – manipulating the scheduling and allocation of casework projects and then reporting on that performance through the collation of statistics. They juggle casework by encouraging the relatively rapid completion of straightforward cases at the expense of larger, more complex ones and by covering for staff absences. Equally, they avoid involvement in technical work that they imperfectly understand and avoid confronting the issue of underperformance by individual caseworkers. By adhering to procedures and simply reporting performance, they also avoid the issue of representing caseworker concerns to senior management. In short, the tactic they adopt on the basis of this sense-making process is one of diluting and negotiating the implementation of policy and downplaying any role as mouthpiece for the two groups, staff and senior managers, whom they connect. This buys a 'quiet life' but only temporarily and at the price of satisfying neither group, and creating more 'pressure' in the future. Consequently, FLMs spend a high proportion of their time interacting with each other, constructing a shared siege mentality in which senior managers are seen as imposing 'unrealistic' targets and caseworkers are seen as insisting on 'unreasonable' thoroughness.

DISCUSSION

The case studies analysed here have shown that FLMs may find themselves in an inherently contradictory and ambiguous position, beset by competing, not to say conflicting, expectations and a disparity between accountability for performance outcomes and an incapacity and lack of authority to determine these outcomes. They manage these contradictions and conflicts through an improvised sense-making process in which they construct a particular 'managing'

(coping) identity and enact both their role and the 'organisation' through plausible accounts of 'what the job involves' and 'how the organisation works' in such a way as to affirm their identity as someone managing *that* role in *that* organisation.

Faced with the uncertainties and insecurities generated by a structurally contradictory role where the contradictions are articulated in the competing expectations of others, FLMs deploy sense-making to construct a fragile 'managing' identity which both enables them to cope and, paradoxically, limits their capacity to do so. However, *pace* Collinson (2003) this is less a response to insecurity engendered by wider social forces, such as the emphasis on 'achievement' or the tension between autonomy and interdependence in employment or, *pace* Kondo (1990), the tensions arising from inter-role conflict and 'multiple selves', more a specific situational response to *intra*-role conflict, expressed in the demands of the job. It is 'identity work' within the 'multi-discursive settings in which managers try to manoeuvre' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1176), in that the terrain on which competing expectations and FLMs' interpretations clash is one of competing discourse – in INDORG between efficiency/operational performance and effectiveness/work quality, and in CHIC between enterprise and employment, brand identity and personal autonomy, and performance and procedures. Identity work for FLMs was, in effect, an attempt to incorporate and reconcile these discourses in a sense of self which is only partly successful in resolving these contradictions.

A number of practical and methodological implications flow from this analysis.

Practical Implications: Addressing the Contradictions in the FLM Role

To take the practical first, it is evident that the FLM role, in at least some organisations, continues to be constituted in such a way that it retains all the conflicts and ambiguities associated with the traditional supervisor role: the competing expectations from above and below, now complicated by additional client/customer expectations; the requirement to translate paper plans and policy into operational realities; and the dissonance between accountability and lack of authority or involvement in decision-making. At one level, there

may be little that organisations can do to change or ameliorate this, since such conflicts and ambiguities are endemic to a role that stands at the 'frontier of control' – the point at which the immediate direction, monitoring and control of labour is attempted – in any task-discontinuous, employing organisation operating within a market or quasi-market. For the contradictory and problematic FLM role to disappear would require radical organisational transformation in the form of the abandonment of hierarchical control, individual supervisory responsibility and vertical accountability. The evidence, at least in the UK, is to the contrary – both the principle of direct supervision and the *role* (if not necessarily the name) of supervisor remain (Cully et al., 1999; Delbridge and Lowe, 1993; Gallie et al., 1998; Hales, 2005; Mason, 2000; Lowe, 1992, 1993; Lowe et al., 2000).

In the absence of such radical organisational change, all that remains is for organisations to prepare and/or compensate the holders of these positions in more appropriate ways. The findings of recent workplace studies (Cully et al., 1999; Gallie et al., 1998) and the survey stage of the study reported here, as well as the case studies, indicate, however, that organisations do not invest adequate training and development in the role. In 30 per cent of organisations, FLMs receive no management training, particularly formal management training leading to a recognised award, either prior to taking up their position or, indeed, subsequently (Hales, 2003). FLMs who are graduates may be familiar with the individual components of the job but may be ill-prepared for the practical dilemmas and conflicts of the job and may be more likely to be groomed for progression to middle management once in post, a post out of which they may seek to be promoted at the earliest opportunity. Alternatively, other FLMs have drifted into the role by virtue of being the senior professional or technician in a team and are equally ill-equipped for the transition from professional/technical work to management and supervision. Whilst sense-making and improvisation are probably endemic in loosely defined roles that are primarily concerned with the manipulation of symbols and meanings, typified by managerial roles, there is no reason why these should become the *necessary* strategies for compensating for a lack of training and development.

The Cinderella status of the FLM role and its relative neglect in HR policy and practice comes at a cost, however. The FLM role is the point at which organisational strategy and policy become real in that abstract managerial intentions and aspirations are translated into operational realities in the form of concrete actions on the part of employees. What the case studies indicate, however, is the way in which FLM sense-making and coping with contradiction and ambiguity can deflect or dilute policy and strategy. In CHIC the attempt to drive sales through a combination of FLMs/store managers' local entrepreneurship and proactive management of sales staff to project the brand dissolves into the *reporting* of performance and keeping sales staff content by juggling rotas. In INDORG the attempt to drive casework throughput through interventionist performance management by FLMs/case team leaders dissipates into hands-off juggling of workloads and prioritising of cases on the basis of expediency rather than importance. Whilst senior managers might find the creative improvisations of FLMs faintly entertaining, they might be less amused by what, as a consequence, is happening to their planned strategies or carefully crafted policies. Neither recordkeeping nor juggling are the same as delivery.

Methodological Implications: Marrying Critical Realist and Sense-Making Analysis – Happy Match or Shotgun Wedding?

The foregoing analysis attempts to deploy a form of 'adaptive theory' (Layder, 1998), tracing the linkages between the 'lifeworld' of actors' experience and practices and a 'system' of institutions, resources and positions. It has proceeded according to the 'morphogenetic method' (Archer, 1995), entailing an analysis of the pre-existing structural context, the interaction of agents in that context and reproduction and transformation of the structural context as a consequence of these interactions. Implicit in this approach is the claim that combining critical realist and sense-making analysis is both feasible and valid and, obversely, a rejection of the view that they are incompatible perspectives, located within incommensurable paradigms. Given the conventional location of critical realism in the objectivist/structuralist paradigm and sense-making in the subjectivist/social constructionist paradigm, this claim requires

engagement and settling of accounts with the issue of paradigm incommensurability.

Paradigm incommensurability has been treated both as a practical one of research method and as a philosophical issue of methodology. For Lewis and Grimes (1999) the problem is one of the practical feasibility and utility of adopting multi-paradigm research. They argue that research can usefully draw upon different paradigms to *review* fields of enquiry and identify both the fundamental differences in domain assumptions and areas of similarity ('transition zones') of different paradigms, *research* fields of enquiry using alternative paradigmatic lenses to guide data collection, interpretation and analysis and *build theory* which accommodates different paradigms at a higher level of abstraction ('meta-theory'). Central to this is 'meta-triangulation': deliberately focusing on contentious areas of interest, collecting data that are amenable to multiple interpretation, applying different paradigmatic lenses to data analysis and building theory through meta-conjecture, a process of rich, complex iterative induction which enables multi-paradigm enquiry to 'overcome its unrealised theory-building potential' (Lewis and Grimes, 1999: 673). Their case is somewhat compromised, however, both by an uncertainty about whether they are advocating, as it were, 'co-existence' – *parallel* application of different perspectives – or 'rapprochement' – resolution of paradigmatic differences at a higher level of abstraction – and by their admission that a major stumbling block is whether researchers are prepared to acknowledge and work with alternative paradigms. In short, they duck the wider issue of whether paradigms represent irreconcilable, polarised positions on what constitutes objects of enquiry and how they may be apprehended or complementary perspectives on how objects of enquiry may be viewed.

For some (classically, Burrell and Morgan, 1979; but also Jackson and Carter, 1991, 1993) different paradigms occupy and speak of 'different worlds', with polarised ontologies, epistemologies and methods. Any apparent overlap suggested by a shared signifier (e.g. 'organisation') disguises profound disagreement over what is signified. Working within a particular paradigm is not a matter of contingent pragmatic choice but one of fundamental conviction about the nature of reality, in what sense it may be known

and how. Either social phenomena (e.g. organisations) are mind-independent entities that stand apart from the interpretations and experiences of those who are part of them or they are negotiated social constructions arising out of interaction in general and discursive practices in particular. Attendant epistemologies and research methods are similarly juxtaposed between empirical discovery, description, analysis and explanation of the real properties of social phenomena or understanding how and with what result social phenomena are interactively and discursively constructed. On this account, to attempt to work with approaches from both the objectivist and subjectivist paradigms is tantamount to holding, simultaneously, polar opposite views about reality and how it may be apprehended (Jackson and Carter, 1991). Equally, the tenets of each approach cannot be used to pronounce on the validity or appropriateness of the other since there is no common conceptual ground, nor can there be any over-arching rationality on which to adjudicate between the two approaches: there is no 'meta-theory'.

Alternatively, paradigms can be treated as alternative perspectives from which to view different social phenomena or aspects of them (Reed, 2005; Weaver and Gioa, 1994) Paradigms may differ in their focus, emphases and methods of enquiry but remain 'mutually intelligible' in that they share enough of a common project and common language to make communication and debate possible. To assume otherwise – that not only concepts but phenomena themselves are paradigm-specific – implies that there is no way of knowing that paradigms *are* contradictory (or how) and no way of deciding the aptness of a paradigm for examining the phenomena that it purports, uniquely, to examine (Weaver and Gioa, 1994). This not only creates the paradox of a claim that denies itself but also runs counter to practical experience of academic discourse. Rather, commensurability of paradigms in the sense of the possibility of communication between them is demonstrated in two ways. Firstly, in scientific practice, there is continuity rather than rupture among paradigms in that, in the course of 'normal science' (Kuhn, 1970), accumulations of disconfirmations that question the empirical, conceptual or explanatory limitations of a paradigm stimulate interest in other paradigms to remedy or compensate for these limitations. This paradigmatic transition could not happen if paradigms were

mutually unintelligible. Secondly, paradigms connect in that they are mediated by each other and defined relationally; paradigms are couched in terms of what others are not (Willmott, 1993). Finally, different paradigms share common ground and a basis for communication in so far as they conform to agreed forms of academic discourse (Reed, 2005; Weaver and Gioa, 1994).

The position taken here is that critical realism and sense-making are *compatible*, they can be used in conjunction with one another as complementary perspectives from which to view and understand different aspects of a social phenomenon rather than commensurate, in the sense of being dissolved into a transcendent meta-theory. Central to this complementarity is the contribution that they can make to understanding the dialectic relationship structure and agency. In viewing this relationship, critical realism focuses more sharply on the structural conditions which constrain and enable actions and interactions whilst the intricacies of those interactions are more fuzzily observed. Sense-making focuses on the detailed processes of actions and interactions, whilst the conditions within which these take place remain indistinct. Further, if the two approaches are deployed in this pragmatic way, rather than evoked ideologically to mark out territory, then there is no need to adjudicate between them; the issue is not which to use but how to use them both. Adjudicating between the two approaches is like adjudicating between two halves of a pair of scissors.

Furthermore, critical realism and sense-making are compatible, complementary perspectives if they are adopted without 'ontological exaggeration' (Fleetwood, 2005); that is, if notions that the social world is entirely mind-independent and unmediated by concepts or that it is entirely discursively constructed are abandoned in favour of one in which social structures are concept-dependent but not concept-determined and are reproduced *and* transformed by actions and where actions are constrained and enabled, but not determined, by pre-existing structural arrangements. Versions of critical realism which accept that social entities, such as organisations, are mediated by conceptual resources and cognitive/discursive practices open up space for sense-making as a way of analysing this *process* of conceptual and discursive mediation. Similarly, versions of sense-making which accept that there are pre-existing

social arrangements within which interaction takes place and about which sense has to be made open up space for critical realism as a way of analysing these structures.

Far from being compromised versions of the two perspectives, these non-exaggerated positions are consistent with their respective stated projects. Critical (cf. crude) realism accepts that real structures are instantiated in events and experiences which are made meaningful discursively but seeks to go beyond this to uncover underlying generative mechanisms which shape it; sense-making accepts that what is made is 'sense' of phenomena not the phenomena themselves.

Critical realism and sense-making represent, not implicit claims about the inviolability and ontological primacy of 'structure' or 'agency', but choices about which aspects of the dialectical structure–agency relationship are attended to. Certainly they differ over the *extent* to which they regard structures as mind-independent or socially constructed. For critical realism, structures have a real, substantive and obtrusive existence beyond the agents that occupy and interpret them, whereas for sense-making, structures are, to a greater extent, contingently negotiated social constructions enacted through interpretation.

However, to characterise sense-making as claiming that all social reality is an effect of language elides its more subtle claim that interaction and discourse draw upon pre-existing linguistic resources to frame and fix social reality in certain ways. To characterise critical realism as unaware of the paradox of claiming that reality is immune from discursive manipulation (Willmott, 2005) elides its more subtle claim that language mediates but does not constitute social reality. Both characterisations conflate discursive *claims* about the existence and character of the social world with either discursive performativity in actively constituting social reality – in short, that talk 'about' the social world effectively talks it into existence (Fleetwood, 2005) – or with discursive representationality in passively reflecting social reality – in short, that talk about the social world only mirrors its existence. Between these two extreme positions is one which insists that interaction and discourse frame and categorise but do not create social reality. If certain forms of discourse have greater sway – if social reality tends to

be conceived and framed in certain ways – this reflects the power of that discourse and those who deploy it and, as such, is relative, contingent and precarious. Social reality is temporarily, provisionally and contingently – not permanently, absolutely or universally – 'fixed' by these discourses.

At a more detailed level, there are three clear areas of implicit, if not explicit, complementarity between critical realism and sense-making. Firstly, both perspectives are sensitive to the dialectic between structure and agency in the shaping of actions within organisations and how these intersect in 'positions–practices' (Reed, 2000). What differentiates them is the relative emphasis that they give to positions or practices. Critical realism attends more to *positions* and how these are located in and shaped by wider organisational and socio-economic structures which operate as generative mechanisms. Sense-making, on the other hand, attends more to *practices* and how these are enacted by social actors as they attempt to make sense of their situation or position.

Obversely, each perspective pays relatively less attention to the other facet of positions–practices. Critical realism tends to be relatively silent on how expected practices associated with positions play out in practice, whilst sense-making is relatively silent on what generates the situations that social actors must make sense of. In that sense, each perspective tends to treat one aspect of positions–practices as more 'real'. In the critical realist account, positions are relatively concrete outcomes of the causal powers of institutional structures, whereas practices, in the form of duties, responsibilities and interests that attach to them, are more contingent. In the sense-making account, interpretive practices and their action consequences are more concrete, whereas positions and the wider institutional context are more contingent and are, in part, the enacted outcomes of these practices.

Thus, critical realism and sense-making are distinguished by the different priorities and explanatory weight which they give to structure/positions and practices/agency rather than by rejection of structure or agency per se. Critical realism focuses more on how positions pre-date and shape practices (Archer, 1998) whereas sense-making focuses more on how agent actions/practices 'enact' positions (Weick, 1995). Yet, in doing so, both, implicitly at least,

accept a seamless dynamic interrelation between constraining structures and meaningful, enacted practices, choosing to concentrate analysis on one or the other. This represents less a 'privileging' of structure or agency and more a pragmatic choice of focus of enquiry. Nor does it represent acceptance of a crude dualism between structure and agency where social institutions and human agents are ontologically exclusive but rather sees structure and agency as two components of a heuristic device for rendering the complex, interconnected, dynamic social world more amenable to understanding.

Both perspectives implicitly accept that something lies 'beyond' their chosen purview – the empirical realm of everyday experience for critical realism and the institutional realm for sense-making. In critical realism, recognition of concrete actions and practices, how these only contingently and loosely flow from the positions to which they attach and how they are open to choice and interpretation, is central to the concept of 'causal powers' in two ways. In a general sense, the concept of causal powers recognises open-endedness and contingency in that it proposes that the generative mechanisms of structures produce *tendencies* which, only under specific conditions, result in concrete events (Sayer, 2000). Because of this, critical realism tends to focus on the link between 'real' structures and 'actual' events, how the former give rise to the latter and how the latter reproduce and transform the former. Further, critical realism recognises that agents themselves have causal powers as sentient human beings, including, crucially, reflexivity and intention derived from the capacity to imbue experience with meaning and, therefore, that practices are concept-dependent. What critical realism is less concerned with is the way in which consciousness shapes practices; whilst it accepts that the practices associated with particular structural positions are shaped by negotiated meanings in the form of interpretations and intentions, it regards *how* meanings shape practices as lying outside its purview. Conversely, sense-making recognises the pre-existence of structures and institutions in the concept of the 'generic subjective' – shared meanings which have, over time, crystallised into rules, procedures and customary practices. It therefore accepts that part of what agents seek to render 'sensible and sensable' are

the structures and institutions in which they are located and that, in doing so, they draw upon *shared* vocabularies and categories, but regards the origins of these structures and institutions per se and how these constrain and enable actions as falling outside its concerns.

Rules illustrate how the two approaches apply steady gaze and peripheral vision to different aspects of the structure–agency dynamic. For critical realism, rules are socially real, patterned entities which can exist independently of their identification but which are nonetheless dependent, for their reproduction, on human activity, in which they are conceptually apprehended and mediated: rules are the pre-existing *objects* of subsequent meaning-construction. For sense-making, rules are the 'generic subjective' (Weick, 1995) resources on which actors draw in responding to routine unambiguous situations and in so doing, reproduce them: rules are one of the *tools* of meaning-construction. Thus although the two approaches share similar conceptions of the nature of rules, they differ over what they take as given and what they treat as problematic and worthy of investigation: critical realism, like sense-making, accepts that rules are subject to conceptual mediation but, unlike sense-making, pays little attention to detailed analysis of how they are interpretively deployed and transformed, whereas sense-making, like critical realism, accepts the existence of pre-existing rules but, unlike critical realism, pays little attention to the detailed analysis of how they are shaped institutionally.

A second major characteristic which both perspectives share is a rejection of both structural determinism and reductionism. Critical realism does not reduce practices and actions to manifestations of structural imperatives or agents to the structural positions which they occupy; sense-making does not reduce institutions to aggregates of interaction and general recipes to aggregates of negotiated meaning. Indeed, shorn of terminological differences, there are clear parallels between the critical realist position that structures have 'causal powers' that may or may not be realised in manifest effects and the sense-making view of organisations as loosely coupled systems in which there is an indeterminate relationship between generic 'recipes' and specific 'actions'. Both recognise, therefore, that what should or might be expected to flow from

particular organisational arrangements or institutional contexts does not necessarily do so. Social actors are not 'cultural dopes', mere 'bearers of structures' nor creatures of the organisation. Both approaches also recognise that agents, in their actions, reproduce and transform but also draw upon rules and resources embedded in social structures. Actions are not simply isolated, local, random improvisations but are shaped by broader institutional scripts and are informed by shared vocabularies that pre-exist in particular sets of agents. Equally, institutions and positions, whilst not reducible to the particular actions and practices of agents, are only instantiated in and reproduced by the actions and practices of agents through those actions and practices.

Where the two perspectives differ is in the relative emphasis that they give, respectively, to rules as expressions of power or rules as linguistic conventions. Critical realism emphasises rules as crystallisations of the obligations that flow from real disparities of power within patterned relationships, whereas sense-making emphasises rules as vocabularies of motive and categories of action. Critical realism focuses on the *causal powers* of positions which flow from unequal, socially distributed resources to which such positions give access, whereas sense-making focuses on the different *interpretive and improvisational powers* which flow from access to different vocabularies or differential access to shared vocabularies.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of how FLMs interpret and enact their role has shown how, despite (or, indeed, because of) changes in the breadth of responsibility of their role, FLMs continue to occupy a structurally ambiguous and contradictory position which they attempt to manage through a sense-making process in which they construct a precarious 'coping' identity and enact their situation as one which affirms that identity, a process which partially resolves and partially reproduces that ambiguity. A fully rounded account of how the FLM role is constituted, interpreted and enacted needed, it was argued, to investigate the dynamic between structure and agency. Combining critical realist and sense-making as complementary perspectives was one way of doing this. This, in turn, suggested a more general

compatibility between the two perspectives as practical analytical devices, rather than their fundamental incommensurability, a compatibility which was demonstrated by an analysis of the areas of conceptual overlap. Finally, at a practical level, whilst the way in which the conflicts and ambiguities of the role are handled by FLMs themselves may enable them to cope with that situation, it also has consequences for the implementation of organisational policy and strategy. Recording or juggling performance is not the same as delivering performance.

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2 Both 'CHIC' and 'INDORG' are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the two organisations.

3 Shortly after completion of the research INDORG was re-organised and re-launched as an independent commission, although its essential brief remained the same.

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