# *What do managers know? Wisdom and manager identity in later career*

# Abstract

In this article we focus on the knowing of experienced middle managers in later career and make a two-fold contribution to management learning research. Firstly, we critically examine the construct of wisdom as a way of deepening understanding of such managers’ knowing and we respond calls to provide empirical evidence of the manifestations of wisdom in contemporary management practice. Secondly, we assess the managers’ engagement with wisdom as a resource for identity-work. Management is increasingly conceptualised as an identity project and we examine how managers deployed wisdom as a discursive identity resource. We show how wisdom was used to counter currently favoured normative narratives of evidence based management and the associated subject position of the omniscient and rational, but never quite adequate, manager. We reveal how narratives of wisdom were drawn upon in constructing distinctive, valued and preferred managerial subjectivities sustainable in later career. Finally, we propose implications for management learning and manager education.

## Keywords

Wisdom, Identity, Identity-work; Older managers

# Introduction

Inquiry into what managers know is of importance for enhancing the understanding and the practice of management learning. The nature of what is known or what is to be known, that is, the nature of the product of learning, influences the type of learning process that is likely to be effective. In this article we make a two-fold contribution to management learning research. Firstly, we critically examine the construct of wisdom as a way of deepening understanding of experienced, later career, managers’ knowing and we respond to the call to provide empirical evidence of the manifestations of wisdom in contemporary management practice (McKenna *et al*., 2013). Secondly, we assess experienced middle managers’ engagement with wisdom as a resource for identity-work. Management is increasingly conceptualised as an identity project (Warhurst, 2016) and we examine how managers deployed wisdom as a discursive identity resource. We show how wisdom was used to counter currently favoured normative narratives of evidence-based management and the associated subject position of the omniscient and rational, but never quite adequate, manager. We reveal how narratives of wisdom were drawn upon in constructing more distinctive, valued and preferred manager subjectivities that were sustainable in later career.

On the basis of the steady growth of academic management research, evidence-based-management has come to be widely advocated (Rousseau, 2006; Morrell and Learmonth, 2015). In turn, the ‘conventional wisdom’ of management and other forms of managerial knowing are denigrated in the light of the ‘hard facts’ generated by the management research (Pfeffer and Sutton: 2006: 13). Fuelled on hard facts, manager education, such as MBA provision, has become the largest area of in-service education for universities (Hay, 2014). However, Rennstam and Ashcraft (2013: 11) note an increase in ‘knowledge scepticism’ and critiques of the contributions of formal knowledge and the associated emphasis on technical rationality, in management practice are long-standing (see Eraut, 1994; Gherardi, 2000; Laine, *et al*., 2016). For example, Lave (1997) notes that formal knowledge amounted to knowledge *of* practice rather than knowledge *for* practice. Gosling and Mintzberg’s (2006: 419) widely cited critique of management education similarly draws attention to much formal management knowledge amounting to ‘abstractions and generalisations out of context’ that had ‘little practical utility’. It is argued that managers are thus left ill equipped to deal with the now prevalent ‘uncertain, challenging and ever unfolding situations’ (Mackay *et al*., 2014: 425).

Such observations do not imply that less knowledge is needed but, rather, that *more than* knowledge is needed in managers’ practice (McKenna and Rooney, 2009). Certain scholars have come to argue that wisdom is that *more*, representing a different kind of knowing for managers, enabling them to question assumptions and to do things differently (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2011). These arguments have been strengthened in recent years by publications examining the wisdom for management within eastern philosophies and within religions and spiritual systems (see for example, Muyzenberg, 2014). Thus ‘wisdom has begun to enjoy a revival as a subject of scholarly concern’ (Nonaka *et al*., 2014: 367) and a literature has emerged that examines the practical wisdom of management (Prusak, 2013). Managers themselves are captivated by the potential of wisdom. For instance, perennially the most popular self-help text with managers, Stephen Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, explicitly grounds its prescriptions for the good life and good leadership upon tenants of wisdom derived from the Christianity. Our findings show that later career managers’ accounts of their practice were typically narrated to highlight the wisdom of their actions. In our quest to understand this phenomenon we turned to the notion of identity.

Post-structuralist, social constructionist theorisations of identity are gaining traction for understanding manager behaviour and learning (Hay, 2014; Warhurst, 2016). Such theorisations adopt anti-essentialist positions, regarding identity not as ascribed but, rather, as requiring ‘constant and relentless achievement’ through contested negotiations with others (Knights and Clarke, 2014: 335). Reedy (2008: 67) notes that by contrast to well-established professions, managers ‘struggle to find a secure identity’ from their work. The formal knowledge base of management is readily accessible and constantly evolving. Managers are thereby exposed to challenge from reporting staff, directors and diverse external stakeholders who all believe that they know better and readily blame managers for organisational underperformance. Middle managers who are in the later stages of their careers are likely to suffer further ontological insecurity. The advance of equalities legislation has abolished statutory retirement ages. However, it has been found that managers aged in their 50s firstly, conceive themselves as being in a final phase of their working lives and secondly, experience anxiety from younger, invariably degree qualified, managers progressing careers and overtaking them in seniority (Warhurst and Black, 2015). As Jammaers *et al*. (2016) find in the case of discourses of disability, so too with discourses of age, for all but the most senior managers such discourses typically provide only negative symbolic representations. Such representations are of decline and departure and construct marginalised and subordinate, less valued, occupational subject positions (Fleischmann *et al*., 2015). Achieving and sustaining a positive and preferred identity involves identity-work to resist such discourses and their associated subject positions (Laine *et al*., 2016) and to engage with other, more supportive, discourses.

Our key contention in this article is that later career middle managers strive to overcome the ontological insecurities arising from the dominating, disciplining discourse of formal management knowledge through engaging with alternative, more exclusive and personal, discourses of knowing. Such managers, as we will show, might choose to make-sense of themselves to themselves and to others, through appropriating the discursive resource of wisdom. A subordinated middle manager might thus, through conversational-action, re-author herself using narratives of wisdom in accounting for her practice. The manager might thereby establish an alternative, preferred, prestige and more readily defendable sense of occupational self in later career. Thus, the research question addressed in this article is to examine how experienced managers deploy narratives of wisdom in maintaining a preferred and positive sense-of-self in later career.

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, the meaning of wisdom in the context of management is analysed to establish an outline framework of manager-wisdom. Secondly, the social-constructionist conceptualisation of identity is elaborated in understanding the use of wisdom as a discursive resource for identity construction. Thirdly, the empirical methodology used in eliciting accounts of managers’ practice is examined. Fourthly, the findings of the empirical study are analysed to show the deployment of wisdom narratives in experienced managers’ identity-work. Theoretical conclusions are then drawn providing new insights into what managers know and why. Finally, the implications of these conclusions for managerial learning are considered.

# Understanding wisdom and identity in management

Defining wisdom remains a key and continually captivating activity in its study such that Kessler and Bailey (2007: xviii) note, ‘wisdom is among the most profound and complex concepts in our vernacular’ and concluded that, ‘there are as many dictionary definitions of wisdom as there are dictionaries’. This complexity can be explained in a number of ways. Firstly, the meaning space of wisdom is evolving such that wisdom means different things to different people in different places at different times (Trowbridge, 2005). Secondly, diverse disciplinary lenses have been used to examine wisdom (Prusak, 2013). Thirdly, the study of wisdom has been entwined for millennia with religious and spiritual thinking and with faith (Lenssen, Cornuel and Kakabadse, 2014). Even restricting the examination of wisdom to the domain of management, prompts Nonaka *et al*. (2014: 375) to reflect on ‘wrestling with the elusiveness of wisdom’. The preferred definition within this article builds from the position that wisdom should be understood as a process rather than a tangible, measurable, product. That is, wisdom is understood as know-how rather than know-that (Maxwell, 2013) or as ‘something that people do rather than something that people have’ (Rennstam and Ashcraft, 2013: 3). Therefore, while wisdom can be construed as requiring the accumulation of a breadth and depth *of* knowledge, it is best understood as a quality or capability *with* knowledge. Wisdom involves the judicious selection and sensitive application or adaptation of knowledge (McKenna and Rooney, 2007).

The following account, written to encapsulate the essence of what wisdom might mean in management, was prompted by the experiences of our respondent Rob. Rob had commented in her interview with us on advice she had received from a Buddhist monk about what she described as the *madness of management* in an area of the organisation for which she had just been given responsibility, an area she referred to as *the asylum*. The account (figure one) holistically synthesises themes from the secular cannon of Western thinking about wisdom, drawing largely from Aristotle’s seminal *Nicomachean Ethics* and upon his notion of *phronesis* or practical wisdom.

- INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE -

A number of structural typologies of wisdom have been proposed (see Sternberg, 2005). From these typologies five distinct commonly identified attributes can be discerned. We have labelled these attributes as follows: values informed practice; intuition and judgment; broader perspectives giving a bigger picture; meta-understanding - living with uncertainty and learning from life; socially and contextually informed action.

As noted, the significance of wisdom for managers can be usefully understood through the lens of identity. Reflecting the individualisation thesis (Reedy *et al*., 2016), traditional notions of identity as ascribed and fixed have been overshadowed in recent years by understandings of selfhood as requiring ‘constant and relentless achievement’ (Knights and Clarke, 2014: 337). Subject positions are achieved through stories about the self, told as soliloquies or in interaction with others (Brown and Coupland, 2015: 2). Language is thus taken not as representative but as constitutive of self-hood and identities are constructed through the use of discursive practices (Bell and King, 2010). Discursive practices, involving, for example, the use of a distinctive style of language associated with a profession, are woven into stories, or narratives. Therefore, an individual’s identity is found in conversational action, that is, in the reflexive capacity to ‘keep a particular narrative going’ (Giddens, 1991: 54; see also, Brown and Coupland; Reedy, 2008).

Achieved identities are insecure and fragile being subject to diverse threats and assaults (Collinson, 2003; Knights and Clarke, 2014; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). Firstly, identities are explicitly threatened by the judgments of others (Brown and Coupland, 2015). Identities are inevitably disciplined and distorted by power relations (Brown and Lewis, 2011) and managers’ identities are particularly precarious being vulnerable to constant hierarchical surveillance and performance judgements. Secondly, identities are pervasively and perniciously threatened in more implicit ways through the imposition or unwary assimilation of sanctioned, idealised, discourses. Laine *et al*. (2016), drawing upon a Foucauldian understanding of discourse and power, note how organisational discourses typically serve to constitute subordinated subjectivities. Whereas an authentically honest managerial self might be characterised by uncertainty and anxiety (Hay, 2014), pervasive cultural scripts in organisations such as success, achievement and progress (Knights and Clarke, 2015) prompt managers in particular to adopt inauthentic subjectivities (Reedy, 2009).

To mitigate or counter ontological discomfort and to sustain a positive, coherent sense-of-self requires a process of identity-work (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Older middle managers might particularly need to engage with this process. The managerial role is unlikely to be as strong a source of identity for those in the middle compared to those in either junior or senior managerial roles. Moreover, age in employment is typically associated with decline and detrimental subjectivities (Warhurst and Black, 2015). As organisations draw upon the ever-increasing supply of graduates, middle managers aged in their 50s have a keen sense of being readily replaceable commodities (Warhurst and Black, 2015).

While, identities are, as noted, framed within relations of power (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), elite workers undoubtedly have some agency to author preferred selves through their identity-work (Warhurst, 2011). Various typologies of identity-work strategies are proposed (McInnes and Corlett, 2012) and certain of these strategies have traction for understanding managers’ claims to wisdom. Thus, identity-work is undertaken as a strategy to resist imposed subject positions (Collinson, 2003) and to create preferred, aspired or elite subjectivities (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). This latter identity-work strategy involves individuals striving to achieve the promise of a self that is ‘higher, better, nobler’ and more authentic than their current way of being (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009: 362).

A preferred identity can be effectively secured by acquiring scarce symbolic or discursive resources (Knight and Clarke, 2014). We argue that claims to wisdom provide middle managers with just such a scarce resource that can be employed opportunistically in compensating for identity threats. Engaging with wisdom provides a means for maintaining a distinct, positive and elite, or at least, exclusive, identity narrative in later career.

# Research methodology

The empirical findings that follow derive from an in-depth study of the accounts of managerial work provided by experienced middle managers over the age of 50. A broadly narrative inquiry approach was adopted whereby stories were elicited. That ‘people seek to accomplish things when they talk or when they write’ (Bryman and Bell, 2007: 536), so the analysis focused on interpreting the meaning of narratives within participants’ stories, that is, the analysis focussed on why what was said was said.

A purposive approach to sampling was adopted. Subsequent to institutional ethical approval, participants were recruited from among experienced middle manager graduates of a university’s executive MBA programme. Graduates were purposively sought from this group who met the criteria of having ten or more years of management experience and who were over the age of 50. Of the total of sixty-two graduates approached, twenty-two agreed to participate in the study and a full dataset was collected from nineteen. All participants had responsibilities for the delivery of products or services within budget, for non-routine operational matters and also for strategy formulation and business development. Slightly more than half were employed by public sector / not-for-profit organizations and slightly less than half were women.

Visual elicitation techniques were used to enable participants to express themselves beyond words and to facilitate deeper reflection and richer narratives (Black and Warhurst, 2015: 108). Participants were requested to produce three visuals to explain *what you do and how you are as a manager.* The visuals requested were: a time-line depicting career trajectories over the past five years; a social-network diagram of interactions in work; an image or montage of images depicting managerial self-perceptions. In-depth interviews then followed with the participants being asked to discuss their visuals. Detailed stories were engendered obviating the need for the prepared interview schedule and a data corpus of over 250,000 words was transcribed.

Within these stories, we analysed participants’ discursive practices. Narratives of wisdom were discerned from our initial readings and searching for such narratives was not pre-determined. Our subsequent engagement with the managerial wisdom literature sensitised us to distinct types of wisdom narrative and informed the second round of analysis. The decision to then focus on the uses of such narratives as a resource for identity-work was taken during our further analysis of the data as we recognised how identity theorising could unlock the underlying meaning of the narratives. To ensure that these analytical processes were rigorous the two researchers independently undertook multiple readings of the transcripts and sought to arrive at a consensus regarding both the derivation of codes and the application of codes to the managers’ accounts.

In particular, it is acknowledged that identities are a ‘discursive accomplishment, co-constructed with the researcher in interview settings’ (Toyoki and Brown, 2014: 720). Participants are likely to provide the sort of account that it is thought either the researcher wants to hear or that will enable the participant to be seen in a good light. Therefore, researcher reflexivity was important as both of the researchers were known to the participants as tutors on the MBA degree which all had completed. This influence is discussed where relevant in what follows. Moreover, researchers inevitably study phenomena of personal interest and the first author of this research is himself a later career (academic) manager. Reflexive dialogue between the researchers (Corlett, 2013) resulted in a circumspect account of age at work.

# Attributes of wisdom in managers’ accounts of practice

The findings that now follow take the form of vignettes. The vignettes are compiled from five managers’ accounts of particular episodes in their managerial practice but exemplify narrative themes widely evident in all managers’ accounts. These five managers were, of course, all aged over 50 and all had more than ten years of management experience. All were in larger organisations, in middle management roles reporting directly to directors or chief executives and held both strategic planning and delivery responsibilities. Jim worked for a petrochemical company, Martin for a distribution company, Di for a city council’s adult social-care division, Tom for a housing association and Denise for a health-care insurance company. While the managers’ vignettes serve to illustrate the meaning of wisdom in contemporary management, the vignettes are particularly revelatory about the uses of wisdom as an identity resource in later career.

# Evidence of wisdom in managers’ accounts of practice

# *Values informed practice*

Within the overall definition established earlier that wisdom should be construed as a process, specifically as know-how rather than know-that, the first attribute of wisdom within our framework is *values informed practice* which is interpreted as the judicious, values based, application of knowledge. In the following vignette, Jim is seen positioning himself as a manager whose practice is founded upon personal, ethical, values.

**Jim’s vignette:** “*I spent a couple of years as his* [director] *firefighter; whenever there were problems somewhere I was the guy who went in and sorted them out. And I loved it, partly I supposes because it made me feel quite important and it was only some time afterwards that I realised that that company produced monsters and I had become a monster as I simply did all the things that the business needed … my role was closing sites or going to do due diligence on sites. People were referred to as assets and I treated people like they were just numbers on a page … we had a programme of performance review that meant the weakest 10% of the company was removed every 3 years and I did that and that never cost me a moment’s sleep and I thought nothing about that, I just did it. And now 15 years later I look back at that time and think, ‘what on earth were you doing, what could you have possibly been thinking?’ It is only now I am older that I have the good grace to feel bad about it. That was the blackest part of my career and yet I was rewarded for it and that makes me feel worse. I’d sat with my mentor and told him all my concerns and he didn’t agree with me, he said, ‘it’s just business’. Well actually no, it isn’t ‘just business’, it can’t be ‘just business’. Now, I would challenge it. Although I think by and large most of the decisions were the right choices they were definitely done the wrong way and I think that we could have helped some of those people rather than just discard them.*”

Through such painful reflection, Jim clearly positioned himself as someone who had turned himself around into a moral manager. Aligning with traditional expectations of what it is to be a manager (Welch, 2002), Jim had seen himself as a heroic fire fighter, working rationally to further the interests of the business through ensuring efficiency and economy. With experience though, Jim presented himself as being a manager who had become a better, more ethical, manager, a manager who now put effectiveness before efficiency and people before profit. Moreover, Jim set himself apart from more typical managers such as his formal mentor, depicting himself as the sort of manager who would challenge authority, standing up for what was morally right.

# *Intuition and judgment*

The second framework attribute of wisdom, intuition, refers to a sense of what will work and why in the messy and complex situations that managers typically face (Antonacopoulou, 2010). Martin’s vignette details his negotiations with staff-representatives and illustrates how he attempted to differentiate himself from the bureaucratic managers at the centre of his organisation by emphasising his reliance on personal intuition. Martin presented himself as the sort of manager who got results that counted through bypassing organisational rules and procedures.

**Martin’s vignette:** *“Industrial relations here are difficult. We are phasing out this plant over a number of years but they* [trade-unions] *know the company needs the product for the time being at least so our negotiations have been sharpened. We needed to get these people on board. I have been the middleman between the unions and the company senior-management and I’ve been trying to arrive at an appropriate level of incentive for them to stay. There have been lots of different little things to sort out. They demanded a cash retention bonus for staying during the closure process. This wasn’t a surprise to me. I said, ‘yes I agree with you, couldn’t agree more in fact, let’s have a think about that’. I thought there should be an appropriate level of retention bonus. I’ve done these things before and I think I have a good feel for the real world and I realised that there were lots of delaying and disrupting tactics that the unions could bring in. So, in the end I sat down with the site director and said; ‘we’ve got to get this sorted out, what do you think?’ And he said, ‘what do you think’, and I said, ‘I think they’re going to ask for, and I plucked this figure out of the air, £750 a month, but they’re probably going to accept £500’. He went ‘okay’, took that up to his boss and he came back and he went, ‘yeah, the Chief says OK: 500 it is’. So I then set up another meeting with the union and although we had the usual to and fro and we put certain parameters in around the retention bonus, to be honest, I was on the nail with my figure. Our offer was accepted.”*

Through his use of phrases such as ‘*it wasn’t a surprise to me*’, ‘*good feel for the real world*’, ‘*I plucked this figure out of the air*’ and ‘*I was on the nail with my figure*’, and through positioning himself in opposition to his technocratic director, Martin portrayed himself as the cool, shrewd, intuitive player in the hard game of industrial relations. Martin was keen to show how he operated subjectively and how he won not through the laborious, rational, evidence-based and balanced process of decision making as depicted in management texts, but, rather, through quick but sound personal judgement grounded in experience.

# *Broader perspective giving a bigger picture*

The third attribute of wisdom in our framework is the *adoption of* *broader perspectives*, whereby diverse points of view are considered resulting in seeing a bigger picture, the ‘wood from the trees’, and taking a long view (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014). Through this attribute of wisdom, the wise are able to prioritise ‘the fundamental matters of the human condition’ (Baltes *et al*., 1995: 158) and ‘live a fulfilled and worthwhile life as a whole’ (Mele, 2010: 641). In the vignette below, Di is seen locating herself as the sort of manager who is wise in being able to take such a longer view and to see both the parts and the whole of a problem. Di is also seen acknowledging that there’s more to life than work.

**Di’s vignette:** “*The way we’re structured is we’ve got the Director and myself and then underneath us Divisional-Managers. The Divisional-Managers are responsible for teams of assessment and care management social workers. But what I found was that although the DMs were all excellent managers operationally, and could project-manage effectively, the day-to-day operation of their business was stopping them from delivering any new initiatives, from working strategically, and they couldn’t seem to pull themselves away from the operational management or they would do for a time but then get dragged back in when there was some ‘crisis’ going on which inevitably there almost always is in our business. What I saw we need to do was to separate out the ‘business as usual’ part of what we do from the ‘transformational’ that is, that part of what we do which would transform the lives of our clients. I felt that this was the only way we would survive long term and avoid being hived-off* [contracted out] *and without running ourselves into the ground. So I took them all out for a retreat and I said, ‘look we’ve got a lot of challenges here and before we leave this retreat, we need to find two to three things that would make a big difference in our service, to the way we work and, as well, and importantly, to enable us to get our lives back’. It was a really hard day actually … at the end of it we came back with probably 6 or 7 flip charts full of ideas that I showed to the director and said, ‘we want to turn these into projects … some might take 3 months but some of them are long term – 12 to 18 months. If we could implement them it would make such a change, it would be a big step change in how we do things here’. I got the go-ahead and have seconded 3 of the DMs to work with me on making these projects happen. One day soon we might even be able to finish work when we leave the office in the evening.”*

Di thus positioned herself as an educative, manager who enabled her reporting managers to take a longer-term, more strategic, perspective. Di was proud to be teaching her managers to see the bigger picture of what the ‘*business’* of social work was ultimately about; that is, ‘*transforming the lives of clients*’. Similarly, in this vignette we see Di presenting herself as someone who can re-frame problems so as to facilitate solutions (Sternberg, 2005). Di also depicted herself as a supportive manager, protecting her managers from being ‘*run into the ground*’ and thus enabling them to ‘*finish work when we leave the office*’.

# *Meta-understanding: living with uncertainty and learning from life*

‘Wisdom goes hand in hand with increasing doubt and uncertainty’ (Sternberg, 2005: 9) and the fourth attribute of wisdom in our framework is labelled *meta-understanding: living with uncertainty and learning from life*. The wise demonstrate humility, accepting that much is uncertain, unknown and possibly unknowable (McKenna and Rooney, 2009). It might be assumed that experienced managers in their 50s would depict themselves confidently as knowledgeable gurus and derive a sense of security in the workplace from such positioning. Certain manager-participants expressed resignation about the limits of their knowledge such as an IT services manager who reflected, ‘*I’m living my managerial life backwards. I started knowing everything and I’ve ended up knowing so little*’. Knowing that so little is known provides, perhaps, more security than knowing itself, providing a basis for depicting the self, as participants generally did, as willing life-long learners.

In the vignette below Tom who had recently been appointed to a prominent business development position in a Housing Association based in part upon decades of relevant experience, is nonetheless seen adopting a circumspect subject position as someone with much still to learn.

**Tom’s vignette**: “*I was thinking this is going to be a really big, big job, you know, a massive challenge. And these sort of self-doubts were troubling me when I took this job last year, and I seriously worried whether I was up for it. I was thinking ‘are you guys sure you’ve appointed the right fella for this job?’ I am, though, a lot more prepared to ask the simple and seemingly daft question these days. You know, I think, perhaps when you’re younger you’re a bit ‘well, if I ask that question, I’m gonna look as though I’m a bit out of my depth’ and I think maybe there’s – as you do get older you’re probably a bit wiser and less afraid of making a fool of yourself in some ways, and actually, you do find that when you ask those questions, there’s a couple of looks around the room saying, ‘oh, I’m glad he asked that question’. I’ve sat down with sort of big heads of development companies, and I’ve said, ‘give me the Janet and John version’ because it’s kind of a way for you to properly understand the issues and to learn rather than just bluffing and also of very quickly getting yourself into a position that you understand what their perspective is too. This can then be for the benefit of some of the projects and initiatives that I’m dealing with and this simple questioning builds up effective of relationships and partnerships that our work now depends upon.”*

Tom’s reflections that ‘*I seriously worried whether I was up for it*’, his concern that he wasn’t ‘*the right fella for this job*’ and his unease at being ‘*out of my depth*’ were countered by his seeming acceptance of the limits of his knowledge and by his assertions that he countered these deficiencies by learning from senior colleagues. In relation to the latter, Tom asserted that he understood ‘*their perspective too*’ and attempted to make sense of the operation of partner companies. Tom can thus be seen defining himself using a discourse aligned with McKenna and Rooney’s (2008) notion that wisdom involves ‘ontological acuity’, a process of understanding relations of power within organisations and an appreciation of the way knowledge privileges certain views and occludes others. Tom appeared to gain some security from aligning himself with US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld’s famous dictum of knowing that there are ‘unknown unknowns … things we don't know we don't know’.

# *Socially and contextually informed action*

The final framework attribute of wisdom is *socially and contextually informed action*. Thus, the wise understand people, their goals, values and interests (Sternberg, 2005). Social and contextual specificity is appreciated and the wise recognise that ‘individuals by themselves are weak carriers of wisdom’ (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000: 132). A strong narrative theme in Denise’s account was of knowing being socially distributed.

**Denise’s vignette:** *“I do think I manage all my work relationships, a bit more consciously than some people do … you become aware of the different types of people and you try to manage to get the best out of them. What I’ve done as I’ve got older … it’s the relationships that matter most in work in getting things done* [eleven-minute gap in transcript] *I felt challenged* [in this new role] *there wasn’t the hierarchy that you get in a big corporate business, there wasn’t the deference so the managers reporting to me were very vocal and engaged and gave their ideas, so it wasn’t a case of tell and they did, it was more collaborative. And I was kind of I suppose a bit more used to telling the team what to do. Here it isn’t as if we’ve got managers for this that and the other and every resource known to mankind, it is much more a case of, who knows what and who’s going to do what. So* [earlier in my career] *I would orchestrate pieces of work and bring in the right resources to do them and the team would pretty much follow directions. Here it is much more collaborative and we are all equals at the table in terms of pitching our ideas in … I’ve found this to be a great learning point because it has impressed upon me in a very strong way how you get a really good result with people who are allowed to contribute to the way in which a piece of work is going to get done and how pieces of the jigsaw within individuals’ heads fit in … so it is a case of me saying ‘that sounds like it will work let’s go for it’ and keeping it under review; so it is a very different way of working.”*

Denise emphasised the ‘*very different way of working*’ in her new organisation compared to her previous organisations, with her new organisation being ‘*non-hierarchical*’ with no ‘*deference*’ such that reporting staff were regarded as ‘*equals*’ to managers. Denise thus positioned herself as a manager who was aligning with the previous attribute of wisdom, a learner who had ‘seen the light’ and been able to change her ways despite decades of managing differently. Denise was also keen to be seen as an orchestrator of interconnections. Denise was telling us, and perhaps herself too, that she was now a ‘*collaborative’* manager who fitted together ‘*pieces of the jigsaw*’ resulting in better solutions than those achieved using her previous heroic, singlehanded, approach. Moreover, Denise phrased her account, as so many participants did, to emphasise how she differed from the general, task focussed, managerial norm by recognising that ‘*it’s the relationships that matter most in work*’. Denise was thus keen to show how she achieved results by ‘*getting the best*’ out of people. The preferred subjectivity of Denise, and others, was as a people person, aligning the self as a manager with contemporary notions of distributed and servant leadership. Such subject positioning was perhaps enabled by participants’ location as middle managers, a location which many accepted as being as far as they would now progress.

# Discussion and conclusions

In this article we set out to examine how managers deploy narratives of wisdom in maintaining a preferred and positive sense-of-self in later career both for themselves and for their audience. As we will show shortly, our results can inform management learning interventions. Initially, our empirical findings enable us to advance certain theoretical conclusions pertaining to wisdom and to identity in later career. Evidence-based management, that is management grounded in hard facts or what is regarded as proper (Eraut, 1994) research based knowledge, has been advocated for a decade or more. Criticism of this modernist, technocratic orthodoxy combined with a growth in knowledge scepticism (Rennstam and Ashcraft, 2013) has prompted interest in managerial wisdom. A gap was, though, noted in the empirical evidence of wisdom in managers’ practice (see, McKenna *et al*., 2013).

On the basis of our definition of wisdom developed earlier (figure one) and the framework of attributes of managerial wisdom distilled from the literatures, extensive unprompted narratives of wisdom have been revealed in manager-participants’ accounts. We do not suggest that the claims to wisdom within the managers’ accounts reflect objective realities. Nonetheless, both the managers’ emphasis on wisdom and their uses of wisdom are of theoretical significance.

Our results support two theoretical refinements to understanding managers’ knowing. Firstly, aligning with research showing that management decision-making is typically based on alternative ways of knowing (Crowder, 2013; Laine *et al*, 2016), our findings challenge the dominant, hegemonic, discourses of evidence-based management, of management as a scientific practice founded on proven knowledge. Secondly, the prominence given to interconnectedness suggests the need to embrace within the understanding of wisdom the insights of practice theorists such as Gherardi (2000). Such theorising postulates that knowing in practice is less an individual possession and more a socially and situationally distributed process. This refinement in understanding managers’ wisdom challenges the existence of universal managerial truths and prioritises understanding organisational power-relations and the ability to secure action within networks of constraint and opportunity.

The more far-reaching conclusion and the key contribution to theory that we make on the basis of our findings lies in understanding the uses of narratives of wisdom in the dynamic processes of managers’ identity re-construction in later career. Within our social constructionist understanding, identity requires constant and relentless achievement (Knights and Clarke, 2014). A sense-of-self is achieved through narrative, that is, through recounting stories about ourselves to ourselves and to others. As Reedy (2008) notes, within their stories managers are both positioned and defined by discursive resources. The power constellations and micro-politics of organisations require managers to adopt normalised subject positions such as being efficient and analytical (Watson, 2009). These expected subjectivities are both subjugating and inauthentic and are sources of insecurity and anxiety (Hay, 2014; Laine *et al*., 2016).

Managers also, though, have a degree of agency to construct a secure and desired self through their own reflexive positioning in relation to available discursive resources. Through reflexive identity-work such insecurities can be rejected, resisted, mitigated or even be re-framed as opportunities for constructing a more unassailable sense of managerial self as when, for example, the participant managers claimed acceptance of their limitations. It might be expected that MBA educated managers such as our participants would particularly leverage the favourable subject positions afforded by their MBAs in constructing managerial selves as knowledgeable, scientific thinkers. Laine *et al*. (2016: 517) note that such management discourses are ‘impregnated with power’ and productive of particular performative subjectivities. While idealised images and expectations (Knights and Clarke, 2014) of the appropriate manager propagated through typical MBA programmes might be seductive, experienced managers may be sceptical, aware that such subjectivities simply reinforce organisational preferences for how ‘good’ managers *should* be. Moreover, we noted earlier Knights and Clarke’s (2014: 20) assertion that identity can best ‘be secured by acquiring scarce … symbolic resources’. In view of the now ready availability and exponential growth of formal management knowledge such knowledge has, perhaps, lost currency as an identity resource. Moreover, appropriating such knowledge passively and uncritically as often intended merely implies a disciplined, compliant, constrained and commodified managerial self.

Whereas Laine *et al*. (2016: 518) find senior managers coping ‘with their anxiety by increasing their mastery of analysis and … standardised knowledge’, our manager-participants rejected this route to a secure sense-of-self. This rejection might be understood in terms of disillusionment (Jarventi-Thesleff and Tienari, 2016) that, as evident in our findings, the manager can never know enough. Crowder’s (2013) work thus finds that senior managers eschew elaborate, analytical approaches to making even the most strategic of decisions, preferring instead to use cognitive heuristics grounded in personal, practice, knowledge. By contrast to defining the self through all too readily available, hegemonic, narratives of universal, scientific managerial knowledge, Clarke, Brown and Hope-Hailey (2009: 325) find managers author ‘acceptable versions of their selves’ through counter narratives. These counter narratives are composed of alternative discursive resources such as professionalism that are not easily marshalled by organisations. As a scarce, and as yet not wholly commodified, symbolic resource, wisdom provides a route to narrating an alternative less vulnerable, even secure, positive and preferred managerial identity. Defining the managerial self through narratives of wisdom can be of particular value in later career, as an individuation process (Reedy *et al*., 2016) enabling the differentiation of an advantaged self from inferiorized others (Koveshnikov *et al*., 2016). A self of continued value and as worthy still of recognition can thus be crafted. Moreover, a self seen as wise might compensate for a fundamental lack in life (Driver, 2013). In the case of middle managers the particular lack lies in a failure to reach the ‘top table’ and to fulfil early career promise or remnant ambitions.

In the absence of reflexive engagement, defining the self through narratives of wisdom might amount to just as much of a Foucauldian technology-of-the-self as defining the self through discourses of scientific management knowledge. Managers lured through false consciousness into defining themselves uncritically in a particular, fixed, way, creating a ‘fantasy of the self’ (Driver, 2013: 409) are vulnerable to identity-regulating control and inauthenticity regardless of the selected narrative (Reedy, 2008). The rise of wisdom in managerial consciousness through the popularising of discourses of mindfulness, sustainability, servant leadership, spirituality in management and so on, offers an idealised, ready-made and desirable managerial identity (Reedy *et al*., 2016) of particular appeal to later career managers wishing to position themselves, in the words of one of our participants, as ‘*the wise old owl in this operation*’. However, the pursuit of such idealised identity projects represents a self-defeating, elusive and unattainable fantasy of achievement (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009) ultimately resulting in a sense of falseness and insecurity (Knights and Clarke, 2014). Alvesson (2010: 198) thus notes how insecurities are simply reinforced by ‘attachment to a particular sense-of-self’. Without critical reflexivity, true agency in identity is thus illusory. It is only a matter of time before the individual once again experiences existential anxiety and a sense of falseness and failure for not being the person that they could be. Wisdom might ultimately be about accepting ontological insecurity, eschewing ideal future selves as unattainable and mindfully accepting the need to cultivate, as Romantic poet John Keat’s famously noted, a ‘negative capability’. That is, a state of ‘being in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’.

A number of implications for management learning emerge from these theoretical conclusions. Before proceeding to delineate these implications, we acknowledge the limitations of our inquiry. Firstly, we accept that alternative readings of our data are possible. Inevitably, we have privileged certain aspects, namely the constructs of wisdom and identity, over others as these constructs provided traction on the data with particular relevance to management learning. Secondly, as was noted, people seek to accomplish things when they talk. The accounts could have been performances, impression management, staged for us as researchers who were manager-educators. Participants may thus have been keen to emphasise how little they were influenced by the knowledge bases of their MBA and how they defined themselves, instead, in terms of their own, hard won, experienced based, wisdom. Nonetheless, our research adopted an open approach, inviting general accounts of managerial practice in later career and the data generation was, as detailed, extended over a period of time. Therefore, we are confident that authentic accounts of management practice in later career have been generated wherein narratives of wisdom were clearly evident and were deployed for purposes other than the research itself.

Our two key theoretical contributions suggest two implications for management learning and specifically for the design of manager education. Firstly, while we do not suggest that wisdom can either be taught in a classroom or, even, cultivated through induced experiential learning, we do suggest that managers be made aware of the diverse types of knowledge and knowing that contribute to effective managerial practice. Educators might work with managers in ‘problematising established canonical forms of doing and representing management’ (Willmott, 2006: 36). In particular, the established emphasis on individualised knowing and learning needs balancing with a greater awareness of interconnectedness, socially distributed knowing (Laine *et al*., 2016) and collective, participatory, learning (Warhurst, 2006). Secondly, this research has revealed the considerable effort expended on agentically constructing a positive and distinctive sense of managerial self. This conclusion suggests an emphasis on cultivating reflexivity in manager education (Corlett, 2013). Through the insights provided by psychoanalytical thinking, managers can be enabled to recognise how their subjectivities are typically either passively determined by prevailing organisational discourses or by unrealistic, elusive and illusory, desires arising from idealised images of who the manager could and should be. Reflexively transcending determinism through the re-narration of subject positions to construct sustainable managerial selves might thus become the ultimate goal of manager education.

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