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Who is ‘the middle manager’?

Abstract

Middle managers occupy a central position in organizational hierarchies, where they are responsible for implementing senior management plans by ensuring junior staff fulfil their roles. However, explorations of the identity of the middle manager offer contradictory insights. This paper develops a theory of the identity of the middle manager using a theoretical framework offered by the philosopher Judith Butler and empirical material from focus groups of middle managers discussing their work. We use personal pronoun analysis to analyse the identity work they undertake while talking between themselves. We suggest that middle managers move between contradictory subject positions that both conform with and resist normative managerial identities, and we also illuminate how those moves are invoked. The theory we offer is that middle managers are both controlled and controllers, and resisted and resisters. We conclude that rather than being slotted into organizational hierarchies middle managers constitute those hierarchies.

Introduction

Middle managers maintain a central position in organizational hierarchies, are responsible for implementing senior management strategies, and exercise control over junior staff. However, available evidence on who the middle manager ‘is’, or how they are ‘becoming’ (Thomas and Linstead, 2002), is contradictory. This paper aims to contribute to understanding of middle managerial identity through exploring the

identity work they undertake when talking to each other. We use the theoretical framework offered by Judith Butler's theories of identity constitution, in particular her development of Althusser's (1971) model of interpellation, and analyse focus group conversations involving middle managers discussing their work of implementing a strategy. They drew on three discourses, that we call the rational/managerialist, critical/managerialist, and critical/resistant, and that involve both control and resistance. Using personal pronoun analysis to explore their discussions, we illuminate the subtle and nuanced ways in which they move between the various subject positions governed by each discourse, and show how complex and contradictory is middle managerial identity. That is, their identities emerge from their being subjects and objects of control *and* subjects and objects of resistance. This leads us to suggest that rather than being located in a central position in organizational hierarchies, the middle manager performatively constitutes those hierarchies. We begin by outlining the literature that discusses middle management.

Who is the Middle Manager? Current perspectives

Middle management is defined as a position in organizational hierarchies 'between the operating core and the apex' (Mintzberg, 1989:98) whose occupants are 'responsible for a particular business unit at [this] intermediate level of the corporate hierarchy' (Uyterhoeven, 1972:136) that comprises 'all those below the top level strategic management and above first-level supervision' (Dopson et al, 1992:40). There is thus a consensus in definition. However, discussions about the function of middle management lack such agreement: a body of literature states what they *should* do; empirical studies show what they *actually* do; and a third group of authors are concerned about the effect of the role on the people who occupy it.

Firstly, there is a body of literature that is replete with prescriptive statements of what middle managers *should* do (for example, Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992) and the skills they must possess in order to carry out their function of receiving and then deploying strategic plans (Fenton-O’Creivy, 1998). They should be expert problem solvers (Delmestri and Walgenbach, 2005) who ensure radical changes are successfully implemented (Huy, 2001), notably through ‘managing the emotional states of their employees’ (Huy, 2002:32; see also Currie and Procter, 2001; Clegg and McAuley, 2005). Human resource management tasks *per se* are not prioritised by middle managers (Hope-Hailey *et al*, 1997; Hall and Torrington, 1998), although a large body of critical literature implies that it is they who are responsible for identifying ever more subtle ways of controlling how junior staff work. It is argued that they use both direct control mechanisms (Braverman, 1974) and increasingly subtle means of control such as manipulation of identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) and personal relations (Costa, 2012); and governing by expectation (Tengblad, 2002), mandating that work should be enjoyable (Fleming and Sturdy, 2010), or using training to prescribe normative identity processes (Andersson, 2012).

However, secondly, although much remains unknown about the strategic role of middle managers (Balogun and Johnson, 2005:1574), research contradicts presumptions of what they *should* do. They appear to be ‘more than passive linking pins, transmitting senior manager instructions unquestioningly down the organization’. That is, they ‘are critical mediators that knowledgably connect the operational core with the upper echelons in a way that shapes strategic direction’ (Rouleau and Balogun, 2007:4; see also Dutton *et al*, 1997; Mintzberg, 1989; Nonaka, 1988; Rouleau and Balogun, 2006). They edit and make sense of strategic plans in ways not intended by senior management (Balogun, 2006; Giroux, 2006), such that ‘top-down

intended change [becomes] an emergent and unpredictable process' (Balogun and Johnson, 2005:2). It is not strategy documents that influence how middle managers work but 'lateral and largely informal everyday conversational and social practices[,...] storytelling and gossip' (Balogun, 2006:41, see also Kotter, 1982), in which multiple and contradictory perspectives of the same incident are generated (Sillince and Mueller, 2007) so that the 'meaning of the top-down initiatives emerges bottom-up' (Balogun, 2006:43).

Middle managers not only re-interpret strategic plans but they may, like junior staff, actively resist implementation and 'reject, re-label, twist, turn or otherwise reshape the fashions they confront' (McCabe, 2011:185f), or indeed resist the importing of new ideas (Watson, 1994; 2001). They may express enthusiasm about change processes while covering up 'profound anxieties' (Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 2003:1171), so that they merely comply with changes rather than promoting them enthusiastically (Jackall, 1988). Thus what middle managers *should* do and what they *can* or *do* do may be very different things (Johnson et al, 2003). However, recent studies (Courpasson et al, 2012; Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007) suggest a far more agentic aspect to the middle managerial role than previously identified. We return to these studies later in the paper.

Finally, authors who have explored middle managerial working lives show that their ambiguous position as a buffer between senior managers and staff (McConville and Holden, 1999) may subject them to a debilitating precariousness and vulnerability (Sims, 2003). The role was argued to be subject to much change in the closing decades of the last century: down-sizing and business process re-engineering contributed to career insecurity and proletarianization (Scarbrough and Burrell, 1996; Rabin, 1999), and middle managers' jobs became increasingly routinized (Redman et

al, 1997), their autonomy reduced, and direct and indirect forms of control over them increased (Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 2003). Concern about the emotional pain experienced during these change processes (Ford and Harding, 2003) was echoed more recently by concerns about their work/life balance (Ford and Collinson, 2011), in a context in which organizations ‘increasingly colonize .. all the spaces in the [middle] manager’s life[,] with identity as partner and parent subsumed under the “greedy” discourses of management and organization’ (Thomas and Linstead, 2002:88). However, Tengblad’s (2006) warning of the necessity of understanding continuity as well as change in managerial work is well-founded – down-sizing and other changes did not dismantle organizational hierarchies and middle managers continue to have a pivotal role in liaising between senior management and junior staff.

It is therefore impossible to find answers to the question ‘who is the middle manager?’ in existing literature. On the one hand they can be seen to be vital and loyal lynch-pins between senior management and junior staff; on the other hand, they obstruct the implementation of change and are a problem to be addressed. Some argue that they have a well-established and somewhat powerful position in organizational hierarchies as controllers of junior staff; others argue that they form a cadre that is increasingly subordinated and controlled. A small body of research into *middle* (not senior) managerial identities supports the more negative view of their position. Watson (1994, 1996, 2008) found middle managers oppressed by senior management, unable to sustain their ethical beliefs, and suffering from ‘personal insecurity, basic human fragility and ordinary human angst’ (1996:339). Public sector managers fare little better: while seeking stability during organizational change they were ‘losing the plot’ because of questioning about their worth, and uncertainty about their work and organizational position (Thomas and Linstead, 2002; 2005a).

Given these contradictory accounts, aiming to find a definitive answer to the question ‘who is the middle manager?’ would be foolhardy. Rather, our aim is to explore the identity work undertaken by middle managers as they discuss between themselves their work of translating strategy into practice, so as to contribute to understanding of middle managerial identities. We turn now to the empirical study we undertook.

The study: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and method

Managers in England’s NHS are responsible for implementing the many changes imposed by government and the Department of Health on a service that is perhaps ‘a political football’ (Nuffield Trust, 2007). The empirical material we use here comes from a study of the implementation of one such strategy, talent management, required by the Department of Health in 2004 (Clake and Winkler, 2006). Our aim was to explore the work of identity constitution that proceeded as middle managers talked about implementing that strategy. Details of participants and methods are given below.

The epistemological location of this study is poststructuralist and its theoretical home is identity theory. There is a vast literature on organizational identities, too great to summarise here (see Alvesson et al, 2008, Ybema et al, 2009 and Kenny et al, 2011, for recent overviews of the field) located within a range of theoretical perspectives. The concept of fixed identities and of the unified, humanist subject is largely eschewed (Alvesson et al, 2008; Watson, 2008; Ybema et al, 2008) and identity is understood as fluid and malleable (Kreiner et al, 1996); fleeting and fragmentary (Bendle et al, 2002); multiple and contextual (Alvesson, 2000; Ford, 2006); constantly negotiated and renegotiated and always in the process of becoming (Ashforth, 1998; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Watson, 2008). A poststructuralist approach recognises the influence of power on self-making (Delbridge and Ezzamel, 2005: 607). Power, in

this perspective, is both constraining and enabling. Identities, subjectivities, selves and subject positions are made available within discourses that both subjectify (give identity) and subject (constrain and control that identity) (Butler, 1997b). In this frame, identities are seen as fragmented and fractured, multiply-constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions, and in a constant process of change and transformation (Ashforth, 1988; Gioia et al, 2000; Hall, 1996). Importantly, identities are constituted within circulating discourses so analysis of subjects' talk facilitates understanding of how discourses 'speak through' subjects and facilitate their identities.

Of particular influence in this study is Butler's appropriation and development of Althusser's (1971) model of interpellation that famously outlined a scene in which a police officer hails a passer-by: 'hey you there'. The passer-by, in turning to answer the call, constitutes an identity, in this specific case that of law-breaker. Butler, as with poststructural theorists more generally, deconstructs the concept of the unitary, humanist subject. Her work is particularly important in that it offers a practical poststructural politics for combating processes through which individuals are rendered abject through difference or otherness. Her stance is summarised thus: 'the idea of the unitary subject serves a form of power that must be challenged and undone, [it] signif[ies] a style of masculinism that effaces sexual difference and enacts mastery over the domain of life. ... [E]thical and political responsibility emerges only when a sovereign and unitary subject can be effectively challenged and ... the fissuring of the subject, or its constituting 'difference', proves central for a politics that challenges both property and sovereignty in specific ways' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013:ix).

Both Althusser and Butler argue there must already have been a self that turns in response to the officer's hail. Althusser's (1971) account is that ideology, through interpellation, transforms individuals into subjects. He uses the notion of a temporal succession so as to make his arguments clear (there is a call, the person turns, and in turning becomes a subject) but argues these things happen without succession because ideology and the interpellation of subjects are one and the same thing. However, Althusser holds that there is a distinction between individuals and subjects, in that the individual must be interpellated as a supposedly free subject in order to accept his/her subjection. This is remarkably similar to Butler's (1997b) observation that power subjects and subjectifies; the distinction between Althusser and Butler is that where Althusser argues that it is capitalism that subjects and subjectifies, Butler's position is that it is discourse. Where Althusser's Marxism might seek a revolution to bring about political change, Butler seeks changes in the discourses and the frames through which we know and understand the world. Butler (1992), like Althusser (1971) distinguishes between the individual or the self and the subject: she however clarifies the distinction. The self is a holding term, a place-holder possessing the potential to become numerous subjects through taking up a variety of subject positions. For the purpose of this paper, the place-holding 'I' is a body from which the self is called into subject positions that give identity; that is, identities that are ek-static to or outside of the body from which I pronounce that I am 'I'. By ek-static is meant 'one that is outside itself, not self-identical, differentiated from the start. It is the self over here who considers its reflection over there, but it is equally over there, reflected, and reflecting. ... [The self] is ... transformed through its encounter with alterity, not in order to return to itself, but to become a self it never was' (Butler, 2004:148).

Interpellation, or ‘naming’ in Butler’s reading is, as in Althusser’s (1971) reading, not a single occurrence. Where for Althusser (1971) it is ideology that always-already interpellates the subject, for Butler there is a ‘continuous and uninterrupted process to which we are subjected, an on-going subjection (*assujettissement*) that is the very operation of interpellation, that continually repeated action of discourse by which subjects are formed in subjugation’ (Butler, 1997a:27). So, there need not be a *voice* that makes the call: the call circulates within discourses (Butler, 1990; 1993). There need (to continue with Althusser’s example) be no police officer – any opaque, indirect reference that relates to law-keeping may do interpellative duty. In Butler’s terms, the call is re-iterated, over and over, through discourse, and positions the recipient in subject positions that are somewhat ek-static to, outside and separate from, the place-holding self. Butler’s development of Althusser’s model helps us explore the performative effect of being called a (middle) manager. What identity, what subject is produced when someone is hailed by their manager thus: ‘hey you, you middle manager’?

The methodology of this study is a qualitative, interview-based, single case study containing multiple mini-cases (Yin, 1984). As such it seeks to develop theory rather than a capacity for prediction (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Silverman, 2006; Creswell, 2008). The method had two stages: interviews with the senior management teams of 34 of the 37 constituent organizations of one of the National Health Service’s then ten Strategic Health Authorities, and focus group discussions with middle managers in six of these organizations. This paper analyses the focus group discussions. Fieldwork took place between February and May 2010. We chose (randomly) six of the 34 participating organizations in which to conduct focus group discussions with

managers involved in implementing the strategy. The organizations were responsible for choosing participants. Details of participants are given in Table One:

INSERT TABLE ONE HERE

The focus group protocol explored how this particular strategy was translated into practice through asking how ‘talent’ was defined, identified and developed. Discussions lasted 60-90 minutes, were recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis: method and findings

Our theoretical perspective required data analysis methods that would facilitate exploration of the on-going work of identity formation. This required two stages: a data reduction stage that identified how participants talked about strategy implementation; and in-depth analysis of that talk to explore how middle managerial identities were constituted.

The first stage of data analysis involved reducing the material to a number of discourses through template analysis, which is designed to be used within a variety of epistemological perspectives including poststructuralist (King, 2012). We developed the initial template after individually analysing one transcript using the *a priori* themes from the discussion protocol: defining, identifying and developing ‘talent’. We worked together to develop and refine the initial template and to use it across all six transcripts. This stage suggested participants used three over-arching but contradictory discourses when talking about their job of implementing strategy. The first is what we call a rational/managerialist discourse that constitutes middle managers as responsible for implementing senior management’s requirements. In contrast, the other discourses resist that role: the critical/managerialist critiques senior

management, while critical/resistant is more broadly resistant to the requirements of the job. Table 2 provides representative quotes from each of these discourses.

INSERT TABLE TWO HERE

Our next task was an analysis of how the language used within each discourse performatively constitutes middle managerial identities. Personal pronoun analysis (Harding, 2008) facilitates intensive analysis of the moment-by-moment talk that constitutes subjects and subjectivities. Harding's model, based on ideas from phenomenology (notably Heidegger), Saussurian linguistics and Freudian psychoanalytical theory, explores how self/other-references - 'I', 'me', 'you' as first person singular, 'you' as second person singular or plural, the first person plurals 'we' and 'us' - signify the speaker's occupation of different subject positions and the constitution of the self within those positions. Given the theoretical location of this work within Butler's theories of identity constitution, we developed this approach to explore how personal pronouns signify the interpellative calls that constitute identities and subjectivities. Through much experimentation with examples of talk from all the focus groups, we developed Harding's (2008) framework so as to facilitate exploration of interpellation into identities in speakers' talk. A glossary of the nomenclature follows in Table 3. At first reading this may seem complex, but the terms and their meaning will become clearer when they are applied in the next section. However, the foundational principle is that when people refer to themselves in the first person as 'you' they are distancing themselves from themselves by using what is a second person pronoun. This is a signal that the speaker has moved into a subject position that is somewhat ek-static to the 'I'. Thus we can distinguish between 'self' and the identities constituted within, through and between subject positions.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Space limits discussion to two ‘worked examples’ chosen to represent the tenor and content of all the discussions.

Constituting middle managerial identities through talking about work

Conforming with managerial norms: the Rational/Managerialist discourse

For much of the time participants discussed implementing strategy as if it were a straightforward process originating with senior managers’ orders. They were unquestioning of their roles when using this, the rational/managerialist discourse that informs much management theorising (Tengblad, 2012). Personal pronoun analysis illuminated how, within this discourse, managerial identity (the you) is distinguished from the ‘I’ but is merged with that of the organization. We illustrate this with an in-depth analysis of an extract from Focus Group B, whose members had all been identified as talented, starting 14 minutes into the recording when participants were discussing their careers:

Female One: ... I don’t have a management background at all apart from managing clinically erm but obviously somewhere the talents you have are recognised that’s a good thing t, you know that that makes you feel valued and it is nice to get involved in other things and I’m involved in something now that if you’d have asked me 5-6 years ago you’re gonna be doing this I’d have said what are you talking about you know? And I think that makes this (pause) you know better it makes it exciting and makes it fresh it keeps it fresh.

This statement contains the following personal pronouns:

A	<i>I don’t have a management background at all apart from managing clinically</i>	i1 – the place-holding self
B	<i>Erm but</i>	Hesitation – new theory emerging
C	<i>Obviously somewhere the talents you have are recognised that’s a good thing t, you know that that makes you feel valued and it is nice to get</i>	y1 – first person ‘you’ separate from the placeholding i1, possesses

	<i>involved in other things</i>	talents. 'You know' (y3): seeks support from those present – everyone knows this. y1 – feels valued
D	<i>and I'm involved in something now that</i>	i1 – The placeholder self
E	<i>if you'd have asked me 5-6 years ago</i>	y2: you persons here today 'Asked' – slip of the tongue. Me – the I's theory about who it is.
F	<i>you're gonna be doing this I'd have said</i>	y1 – the self addressed by a second person 'you' in an imagined conversation. i1 – placeholder self.
G	<i>what are you talking about you know?</i>	y2 – the second person in this imagined conversation. y3 – 'you know' seeking agreement from the group.
H	<i>And I think that makes this.</i>	i2 – the placeholder in the act of theorising about itself.
J	<i>(pause) you know better it makes it exciting and makes it fresh it keeps it fresh</i>	Pause – time for thought and theorising. y3 – seeking agreement from the group. But the theory that is developed is unclear: what is this 'it' that is fresh and exciting?

The first person singular 'I', the place-holding i1 that is separate from the subject positions available, appears in lines A, D, F and H: in the form of an earlier self that is not qualified for its job (line A); a later self that is doing the job (line D); a past version of the self that is in dialogue with an imagined other (line F); and finally a thinking I (i2) developing a theory (line H). There are two over-arching versions of the 'you' present: the second person 'you' (y2) addressed by the speaker (lines E and G) who here seems to have powers of seeing into the future; and the first person 'you' (y1) (line C). Recall that referring to the self as 'you' signifies that the speaker is constituting an identity within a subject position: here we see that the self that purportedly possesses talents is different from the place-holding i1. There are two

pivotal parts in this speech. The first is in line C, where the interpellative call, from a ‘somewhere’ is mentioned. The second is the conditional ‘if’ followed by a ‘me’ in line E - here we see the theory of itself that the I develops. In other words, a past self remembers an interpellative call and looks to a future self, one different from what would have been anticipated without that call: the speaker has become something she never expected to be. There are two pauses for thought, each leading to positive statements: The first (line B) signals a turn away from the self-critical I of the first statement; the second (line J) leads to a somewhat disconnected train of thought filled with positive descriptors about the job.

So, we see in this short speech an act of recognition that sets in train the constitution of a managerial identity. Thus: a clinician walks down a corridor, is called, turns in response and in turning becomes a manager. Although she talks about this in positive terms, her use of personal pronouns illuminates how she somehow separates herself (the place-holding I) from her managerial subject position.

This first speaker was immediately followed by a man who recounted a similar instance of interpellation:

1	<i>I (i2) think for me it feels kind of like you know(y3) you (y1)</i>
2	<i>can be confident that if you're (y1) doing your job and you are kind of</i>
3	<i>delivering on things it's almost like it feels like you get to a certain point and and</i>
4	<i>it's almost like you know (y3) you (y1) get a tap on the shoulder by the</i>
5	<i>organisation to say you know (y3) if if if opportunities are arising it's almost like</i>

6	<i>just it feels like the organisation is taking a view as to when you're (y1) ready for</i>
7	<i>that kind of next step kind of every step of the way really</i>

His opening 'I think' signals that he is developing a theory about himself offering a theory from the position of the place-holding self, but he then refers to himself throughout in the first person 'you' (y1) almost as if he is talking about a different person, so illustrating the distance between the thinking 'I' and his managerial subject position (the you, that is, the not-I). Like the first speaker he describes the scene of an interpellative call, here in the form of a tap on the shoulder made by a reified organization, but his account shows that the call continually recurs (whenever there is an opportunity). So we see in this account firstly a clear distinction between the 'I' and the managerial not-I, and secondly how the speaker is repeatedly the subject of the call that turns the I into the managerial not-I. Again, just as with the first speaker, this participant becomes inarticulate when describing his job: see the numerous hesitations and qualifications in this short speech: 'kind of' in lines one, two and six; 'like' in lines one, three (twice) and five; 'you know' features three times; there are three references to 'feels' (lines one, three and five). Such inarticulacy, seen numerous times when speakers use this discourse, indicates a troubling of the rationalist/managerialist discourse (Butler, 1990). That is, the discourse and the identities it constitutes are unstable. If so, the interpellative scene, repeated over and over, becomes: a person is walking down a corridor and turns in response to a call 'hey you, you manager'. In turning, that person responds 'who, me?' but finds themselves momentarily uncertain: who is the subject they should become in order to respond appropriately?

Intriguingly, the female manager who spoke next unwittingly put herself in the place of the interpellator, the person who will identify the talented worker.

1	<i>I (i1) was in a meeting yesterday and <u>our</u> (y2) conversation was</i>
2	<i>about who is out there who is ready for an opportunity to come and work in</i>
3	<i>those [projects] and so that discussion went round the table of you know (y3) who</i>
4	<i>do <u>we</u> (y4) know who's out there putting <u>their</u> head up above you know (y3) ready</i>
5	<i>for an opportunity to do some of that so there is the informal bit of you know <u>we</u> (y4)</i>
6	<i>do know that <u>people</u> are out there you're (y1) constantly you know(y3) talent</i>
7	<i>spotting because you're (y1) observing all the time aren't you (y3) those</i>
8	<i>. relationships that you're (y1) having when you're working with <u>people</u> and what <u>they're</u> doing</i>

Here we see that interpellation is a middle manager's task, so this speaker embodies the 'somewhere' and the 'tap on the shoulder' from the first two speakers' accounts. She fuses her identity with that of the organization: her strong opening place-holder 'I' swiftly disappears into a mass of plural pronouns – 'our' conversation'; 'who do we know'; 'we do know' – that signify individuality has been lost in the plurality that is 'the organization'. Similarly, 'the discussion went round the table' as if the discussion existed separately from the speakers, thereby nullifying individual agency. She seems to separate herself from the organization in lines 6-7 when she used the

first person singular version of the ‘you’ (y1) instead of ‘we’, but she does not refer to herself as ‘I’, so the organizational identity, of managerial talent spotter, continues to suffuse her identity as she talks about herself as manager. Note also the distinction between ‘in’ and ‘out’ – those who are ‘in’ are the interpellators of those who are ‘out there’. These references to ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ signal the spatial dimension of such recognition, further indicating that the managerial self who is ‘inside’ the organization has, it seems, the organization *within them* (Knights, 1997; Harding, 2007). This speaker thus illuminates what the previous speakers had intimated: the imbrication of the organization and the rationalist/managerialist self so that the distinction between organization and manager disappears.

The interpellative scene in this third speaker’s account is one where we stand in the position of Althusser’s police officer. We know nothing about that police officer save for his organizational identity. As manager, this speaker too has no identity separate from that of the organization she represents.

These three speakers encapsulate how participants constitute identity when speaking through a rational/managerialist discourse that accepts without question the middle manager’s task of translating strategy into practice. That is, they respond to an interpellative call by ‘the organization’. In turning, they move into a managerial subject position, a managerial not-I, that is ek-static to the place-holding I. This managerial ‘you’ is merged with the organization and so middle managerial identity is inseparable from the organization. But the rationalist/managerialist discourse is troubled, so middle managerial identity is somewhat uncertain, as we explore further below. We turn now to the other two discourses.

Resisting strategy implementation: critical/managerialist and critical/resistant

Participants drew on two discourses that resist the rational/managerialist identity. In one they were critical of senior managers but not their own role (critical/managerialist), and in the other they were critical of both their managers and their own role. We illuminate these discourses with an extract from Focus Group C that comprised three women and two men, all identified as talented. The sequence analysed here exemplifies not only the distinctions between the different discourses, but also how they emerge, are silenced, and re-emerge as the conversations progress. We join the focus group at a point where its members are responding to the interviewer's question of who, in this group, had been included in a list of talented managers. They switch firstly to critical/resistant discourse, and within a few minutes to critical/managerialist discourse. It will be seen that the style of speaking is very different from that within the rational/managerialist discourse. People make short statements, interrupt each other, use far fewer personal pronouns, and there is lots of laughter. This means that rather than analyse each speaker separately we now explore exchanges that invoke different discourses, and gain more insight into how interpellative calls work within language. A male manager starts the discussion:

M.1	<i>I (i1) don't know if I (I-name) am on the pool or not, I (i1) don't think so</i>	i1 is the agentive placeholder in the present moment. I-name is specific to this study: a person's name on a list that s/he equates with him/herself.
F. 1	<i>So we are not on</i>	First person plural – individual identity lost within that of the focus group
F. 2	<i>I (i1) am. I (i-name) am. And hence my comment earlier about it puts</i>	Although this would appear to be the agentive placeholder I, the speaker distances herself from her

	<p><i>you (y1) in a difficult position if someone says 'you (y1) are an aspiring director aren't you (y1)?'</i></p> <p><i>And this was a conversation at the meeting I (i1) was at wasn't it? Were you (y2) at that one? (To another female speaker who murmurs assent: mm) So I (i1) just nodded.</i></p>	<p>name on a list – the i-name.</p> <p>y1 – first person singular, a self separate and distinct from the placeholding I.</p> <p>i1 is the place-holding I, in which i1 is separated from the name on the list that would otherwise signify her.</p>
	<p><i>Laughter</i></p>	<p>Laughter presaging a critical comment</p>
F. 3	<p><i>I (i2) think organizationally there is the assumption that everybody wants to, you know, (y3) move up the ladder.</i></p>	<p>i2 is the (theorising) placeholder I developing a theory.</p> <p>You know: seeks or demands agreement from listeners.</p>

Here the first speaker makes a strong statement that asserts two versions of the 'I': i1 is the placeholding I considering another 'I', signified by a name on a list (i-name). The list catalogues those identified as talented and put forward for promotion: it is therefore of itself an interpellative actor. The second speaker attempts to unify the group (none of us are on the list). The third speaker has to correct her; but she distances herself from having been named – she makes it clear that as a member of the focus group (y1) her identity is separate and distinct from the name on the list. We are not told why being named puts her in a difficult position, but what is interesting is her resistance to the interpellative call (to be a talented manager) and the manner of her resistance. That is, she recalls herself in her managerial subject position (y1) as unable to speak – she could only nod. But the self in the focus group, referred to as I (i1) can discuss its discomfort. The change in personal pronoun use signals here that the speaker has moved out of the rational/managerialist discourse into one that can use language of resistance – what we refer to as the critical/resistant discourse. Empathetic laughter greets her statement and others move in to support her stance.

The interviewer then asked what it must be like to be regarded as untalented, to which the male speaker responded:

Male One	<i>That is the untalented pool (LAUGHTER)</i>
Female One	<i>It is very subjective isn't it. (Yes – another female speaker) Because at the meeting <u>we</u> were at and there was this list that the chief exec and the chair had pulled together (speaking very seriously to this point) and then (laughs) and he sort of went through it and <u>we</u> (lots of laughter, with the speaker briefly almost unable to continue for laughing) sort of <u>we</u> all went oooh noooo. (lots of laughter)</i>
Female Two	<i>How have you (O – the Other) got that one on there?</i>
Female One	<i>Yeah there are people</i>
Female Three	<i>So yes there are...it is very subjective isn't it</i>
Male One	<i>That is the problem isn't it. Who is making the rules up, who is talented or not?</i>

There are two major aspects in this short sequence that encapsulate the appearance of the critical/resistant voice throughout the transcripts. Firstly, there is no 'I' or 'you' here – it is all spoken in the third person. There is, significantly, the first person plural 'we', used by the first female speaker. The written word does not capture how she suddenly switched from speaking seriously into laughter that almost silences her. She uses 'we' to signify a group identity in which all share the same (critical) voice. Secondly, laughter precedes and accompanies the critical/resistant voice; this occurs throughout the focus group discussions. Research has shown that laughter in organizations has a subversive character (Westwood, 1994). It contests organizational power relations (Dwyer, 1991) and facilitates resistance (Collinson 2003; Learmonth,

2009; Gabriel, 1995). Here we see it in another role, that of enabling ways of speaking critically. We suggest laughter permits the group members to be disparaging of the demands placed upon them, but the individual ego disappears into a collective ‘we’ that shares responsibility for transgressing managerial norms. The organization that is imbricated within the identity of middle managers when using the rational/managerialist voice is here separate and distinct, as signalled by a ‘you’ that, we suggest, refers to the organization as a separate and distinct Other from which the speaker wishes some distance. Organizational identity is replaced by a group identity, one that is articulated through the critical/resistant discourse and which rebuffs that interpellative hail (hey you, you middle manager) and thus refuses the normative identity of middle manager.

There is little evidence of active resistance in this study: resistance is passive save for its agentic role in constituting an identity that contradicts the normative managerial identity. This is somewhat different from studies that have found middle managers actively challenging senior managers’ plans (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007; Courpasson et al, 2012), an issue we will explore below.

The third discourse and movement between discourses

As the laughter died down, speakers switched into a further critical discourse, one that shares organizational aims and objectives but is critical of how senior managers go about achieving those aims; we call this the critical/managerialist voice. In this quote the following identities are seen: iI (the agentic placeholder); i2 (the theorising self);

O (the anonymous organizational Other); Y1 (the managerial subject position); Y2 (those here present in the room).

A	<p><i>Female. That is why I (i1) said I (i1) found it very interesting ... Because actually there is maybe something to learn from having that conversation because they have clearly spotted something.</i></p>	<p>The introduction of i1, the agentive placeholder, signals a move out of the we-ness of the critical/resistant voice and back into rational/managerialist.</p>
B	<p><i>Man – yes but</i></p> <p><i>Female manager continues speaking Yes but they (O) only see...they (O) don't see the full picture.</i></p>	<p>She is interrupted by a brief statement that shows agreement (yes) and disagreement (but) which the speaker repeats (Yes but). This echo facilitates the switch to critical/managerialist voice: the 'Yes' accepts managerial norms, the 'but' questions them. Senior managers are an anonymous 'they', the Other. Such seemingly innocent words as 'yes but' call out to subjects who, in turning to them, adopt a different subject position in which they constitute a different identity.</p>
C	<p><i>Second female speaker: They (O) might just see a glimmer</i></p> <p><i>Male 2: But that is why it has to come from the line manager up doesn't it, rather</i></p> <p><i>Third female speaker: All they did is say here is an initial list. Right now it is over to you. (y1) You need to review that list, take people off if you don't agree, add people that aren't on that you think should be on at each level.</i></p>	<p>The critical/managerialist voice dominates the discussion for a short while as speakers explore how they think the strategy <i>should</i> be put into practice. Again, note the absence of the first person. The only pronoun used, by the third female speaker in this sequence, is the first person 'you' being given orders by senior management. The rational/managerialist voice speaks through the Y1, that is the managerial subject position, at this moment, in which a managerial self is given orders and thus interpellated as a middle manager.</p>
D	<p><i>Male 1: and I think (i2) we've queried calls from above in the past haven't we (y2)?</i></p> <p><i>Female 1: this is anonymous</i></p>	<p>The introduction of i2, the theorising self, followed by the first person plural that links the speakers as a group, now instigates a switch to the critical/managerialist discourse that speaks through the 'we' (y2 – those here present) and thus an anonymous perhaps protective group identity.</p> <p>But the re-introduction of the anonymity of the 'we' allows a speaker to make a joke that opens the door to return of the critical/resistant voice,</p>

<p><i>isn't it (laughter)</i></p> <p><i>Male 1: so I (i2) think there is big risk</i></p> <p><i>Interrupted by laughter</i></p> <p><i>Female 2: can you email when you've wiped that?</i></p> <p><i>Male 1: That bit around whether your (y1) face fits or not, flavour of the month,</i></p> <p><i>Female 3 whatever, those types</i></p> <p><i>Female 4 Oh yes there is a massive culture of that</i></p>	<p>one unleashed by laughter. In making a joke greeted by lots of laughter, this female speaker positions the group as rebels, allowing for more laughter and joking, but also statements that are highly critical of policies that, when speaking in rational/managerialist voice, they wholeheartedly upheld. At the same time, the male speaker starts to develop a theory (I think) that uses critical/managerialist voice (there is big risk in identifying the wrong people as talented). But 'risk' has a dual meaning (it is risky to identify the wrong people/criticise senior managers). The duality of meaning facilitates his switch to critical/resistant voice, as he introduces the 'face fits' discussion. Females continue speaking in the critical/resistant voice, but then there is a long silence that was interrupted by the interviewer wishing to move the discussion on.</p>
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The analysis in the right hand side of this table shows how personal pronouns can call subjects out of one subject position and into another, as can seemingly innocent, everyday phrases such as 'yes but', or words that can summon up two or more interpretations. We thus see in action Butler's theory (1997b) of interpellative calls circulating within discourses. Again we see how individual identity disappears into a collective identity: within the rational/managerialist discourse organization and managerial subject merge; within the more critical discourses the managerial subject separates itself from the organizational Other and merges with the group. In this second part of the data analysis, we have seen how swiftly and easily speakers move into and out of two discourses each of which is critical of, and resistant to, the rational/managerialist discourse. Participants now want to resist a senior managerial interpellative call that seems irresistible when in the presence (real or remembered) of senior managers. When none are present, laughter facilitates the ability to speak using discourses of resistance. We saw above that the rational/managerialist discourse

is fragile: here we see that it can be swiftly undermined by a joke, a word or a phrase. In summary, analysis of the critical/resistant and critical/managerialist discourses casts light on how interpellations operate within circulating discourses, in this case to constitute resistant identities.

The critical/managerialist discourse outlined here is accepting of organizational aims but questions senior managers' abilities in achieving those aims, whereas the critical/resistant discourse offers only passive resistance. There are hints that middle managers using these discourses may constitute an agentic identity that may sometimes be openly critical: the male speaker above states that they have queried managerial decisions in the past. We are told little about these occasions so do not know how major were the queries nor whether the decisions were changed. Kunda (1992:221) found similar movement between contradictory 'voices' in his study of a company that overtly set out to manage its culture. Managers evinced what he calls 'sociological ambivalence', that is, not only conforming with management's preferred 'ideology', but also struggling with it, such that they evinced 'an ambivalent, fluctuating, ironic self, at war with itself and with its internalized images of self and other' (op cit). They, like the managers in our study, resisted only passively. We can illuminate how speakers may move from passive resistance (speaking critically within the security of a group) to action through turning to the studies by Courpasson et al (2012) and Zoller and Fairhurst (2007) that illuminate ways in which middle managers organize active resistance when they feel driven to it, and then weaving together the findings of this study with theirs.

Courpasson et al (2012:81) studied how middle managers participate in what they call 'productive resistance', that is, a form of protest that develops outside of institutional channels and 'is concerned with concrete activities that aim to voice claims and

interests that are usually not taken into account by management decisions. Its goal is to foster the development of alternative managerial practices that are likely to benefit the organization as a whole'. They explored two examples of 'temporary enclaves' of managerial resistance, in each of which a leader emerged who was able to gather support such that the power relationships in the organizations were temporarily changed. Zoller and Fairhurst's (2007) task is specifically to explore the role of leadership in managerial resistance. In re-reading other studies, they argue that leadership is important in coalescing individual and covert resistance into powerful, albeit temporary, organizational coalitions that can speak truth to power. In our terms, the managers studied by Courpasson et al (2012) and Zoller and Fairhurst (2007) used the critical/managerialist discourse – they wished to challenge senior managers but not to change the entire system.

What can we learn from comparing the activism of those managers with the passive resistance we have seen in this study? Our research suggests that the potential for resistance may be present for much of the time *because it is an aspect of middle managerial identity*. However, it remains no more than a potential unless and until an issue arises, as in Courpasson et al's (2012) and Zoller and Fairhurst's (2007) studies, that so enrages or offends middle managers that leaders emerge who can turn passive or potential resistance into active (and productive) resistance. In the terms used in this study, passive resistance (that is, covert, unorganized and not leading to any action other than talk) becomes active through an interpellative call that summons a middle manager into a leadership position from which s/he can summon colleagues into an actively resistant role, what we might call actively critical/managerialist. Without such a leader, this study suggests, colleagues' interpellative call instigates an identity that finds enjoyment in each other's passively subversive company.

Discussion

Through drawing on Butler's distinction between the place-holding self and subjects within constitutive subject positions, we have seen that the place-holding self, the 'I', moves into and between various managerial subject positions each constituted within discourses (here, the rationalist/managerialist, critical/managerialist and critical/resistant). Middle managerial selves are constituted that are ek-static to the place-holding 'I', such that non-managerial identity can sometimes be seen to be very different from the identity within the managerial subject position. To say that middle managerial identity is mutative and heterogeneous is to say little that is new: the more critical literature on middle managerial identities concludes very similarly (Thomas and Linstead, 2002, 2005a; Watson, 1994; 1996). However, our analysis goes further than previous studies in developing understanding of the complexities and contradictions of movement between subject positions.

Through applying Butler's development of Althusser's model of interpellation, we have suggested that the rational/managerialist call from a senior managerial or organizational Other interpellates an identity that entails fusion between organization and manager. When the interpellating call is collegial, the place-holding self turns to occupy subject positions located within resistant discourses (two of which we identified in this study). Everyday language and interactions are imbued with interpellative calls: nouns and verbs may do interpellative duty, as may words with multiple or ambiguous meanings: if we can be said to swim in discourse then we swim in interpellation. When the call comes in the form of a joke or a sleight of words, speakers turn and in turning become critically resistant; if it comes in the form of a

strategy, speakers turn and become rationalist/managerialist. The same 'I' can espouse contradictory ideas as s/he moves between subject positions.

This takes us back to the question that motivated this study: what is the identity of the middle manager? Who is this subject that moves between subject positions that become available only because of the hierarchical space between senior management and junior staff? Current literature, as we discussed above, defines middle managers as those who occupy a particular part of the organizational hierarchy, in which they face upwards to senior management and downwards to junior staff. One of their tasks, numerous authors argue, is to ensure that junior staff fulfil organizational requirements: the middle manager must exercise control over junior staff. To be a middle manager is therefore to be a controller. However, this study has shown that the very rational/managerialist discourse that prescribes the norms of middle managerial actions (as controller) not only instigates the identity of middle manager as controller, it also governs and controls (aspects of) middle managerial identity. That is, the middle managerial subject is limited in the ways it can think, speak and act; middle managers are therefore controlled by the very discourse that gives them the power to exercise control over others. *Middle managers are therefore both controllers and controlled.* And at the same time middle managers (speaking within and through the critical/managerialist and critical/resistant discourse) in some ways resist those controls so are *resisters*. Furthermore, as controllers they face resistance from staff, so are *resisted*. *The middle manager is therefore at once controller, controlled, resister and resisted.* This is our answer to the question of who is the middle manager: the middle manager is a person whose identity moves between the subject positions of controller, controlled, resister and resisted. We turn now to theories of control and resistance to tease out the implications of this conclusion.

Conclusion: Middle managerial identity - controller, controlled, resister and resisted

Control and resistance are foundational concepts in critical approaches to management and organizations (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, Fleming and Spicer, 2008). The traditional understanding has been of a dominant, managerial power that faces resistance from a subordinate, worker power. Here control and resistance are seen as dichotomous, with each treated independently from the other. However, although contemporary formulations tend to retain the legacy of this binary model (Ashcraft, 2005:70), recent theories question such a distinct opposition (Collinson, 2005). Control and resistance have come to be understood as dialectical, that is, unstable categories that are ‘mutually implicative and coproductive’ (Mumby, 2005:21): each evoked by and implicated within the other. As Thomas and Davies (2005a:700) suggest, resistance reifies and produces that which is being resisted, through carving it out as a space for political contest and thus legitimizing it. Similarly, the position that one discrete group of actors practises control and another resistance has given way to an understanding that social actors engage in both (Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994). Thus ‘everyone who participates in discursive activity engages in control *and* resistance, sometimes simultaneously’ (Ashcraft, 2005:72), or, as Kondo (1990:224) describes it, subjects ‘consent, cope and resist at different levels of consciousness at a single point in time’. Poststructural theorists regard control and resistance as polysemic, shifting and unstable (Ashcraft, 2005). Resistance (to which we add, control) is understood to be constitutive of identity: it is ‘not only oppositional and a negative kicking back against the subjectivity offered but also a critical and ultimately generative reflexive process’ (Thomas and Davies, 2005:727, see also Knights, 1990). The same subject can therefore both resist and

reproduce dominant systems of control (Sottirin and Gottfried, 1999), such that middle managers' identities may be constituted within tactics of resistance to the strategies they are required to implement (Thomas and Davies, 2005a; 2005b).

What our study adds that is new to understanding both of control and resistance and middle managerial identity is the understanding that managerial identity work involves movement between subject positions in which they are subjects not only of control and resistance, but simultaneously become agents of control, subjects of control, objects of resistance and resisters to those very controls. To draw out the implications of this we need to break down 'control' and 'resistance' into their different aspects. That is: control (verb), control (noun), controller (subject), and controlled (object); and resist (verb), resistance (noun); resister (subject); and resisted (object). The controller enacts forms of control that constitute the controlled, who in acting against those controls become resister(s). In enacting forms of resistance, the resister constitutes the controller as the one who is resisted. Control not only evokes resistance but also constitutes the identity of the controller, who thus becomes governable (and hence controlled) by the very discourse of control. Finally, control induces not only practices of resistance, as dialectical theories argue, but also the identity of resister.

A very simple model helps map these aspects of control and resistance to the three positions of senior managers, staff and middle managers (and thus to definitions of middle management):

- senior managers control middle managers through requiring that middle managers exercise control over staff. Senior managers are thus controllers (subjects) who become resisted (object) if middle managers offer resistance;
- staff are controlled (object) but resist control. They are therefore resisters (subjects);
- middle managers are controlled (object) by senior managers but must themselves practise control so are controllers (subjects). They resist the controls placed on them so are resisters (subject) but are resisted by staff so are resisted (object).

Thus all three categories are both subjects and objects of control and resistance, but it is only the middle manager that is subject and object of both control and resistance. To put this into the context of the language we borrow from Butler: the identity of ‘middle manager’ is performatively constituted through the reiteration of the processes of middle managerial tasks. But ‘performativity works, when it works, to counter a certain metaphysical presumption about culturally constructed categories and to *draw our attention to the diverse mechanisms of that construction that produce ontological effects, that is, that work to bring into being certain kinds of realities*’ (Butler, 2010:147, emphasis added). In other words, the middle managerial subject in performatively constituting the self as subject and object of both control and resistance (in subject positions governed by such discourses as identified in this study) constitutes a major distinction between senior managers, staff and themselves. Thus the middle managerial identity, in incorporating controller, controlled, resister and resisted, in looking upwards to senior managers and downwards to junior staff, *constitutes organizational hierarchy*. This calls to mind a classic Foucauldian move, developed further by Butler, whereby the law produces that which it addresses. Thus,

rather than the person becoming a middle manager through being slotted into a position in the organization, the middle manager performatively constitutes that very hierarchy. Through being 'in the middle' the middle manager interpellates some as 'senior' and others as 'junior', calling to each from their various subjects positions of controlled, resister, controller and resisted.

We end with a caveat that leads to a call for more research. This study is located in a large, public sector organization in the United Kingdom where managers, many of whom began their careers as members of the medical and health professions, are responsible for managing members of powerful professions. The constitution of managerial identities outlined here may be in some ways peculiar to such conditions. Further studies are needed that explore middle managers responsible for managing different types of staff, or in conditions governed by the pursuit of profit rather than fulfilling a public service ethos.

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Table One

Focus group	Numbers	Details
A	3	Female senior nurse managers who have all worked in the NHS for more than 20 years.
B	5	Two general managers and three clinical managers, one of whom has three years experience, the others more than 20. Two men and three women.
C	5	Four are general managers and one a clinical lead, all of whom have 20+ years work experience. Three women/two men.
D	5	Two general managers, one in her 20s and one much older, and three clinical managers with long experience, one in her late 50s. All women.
E	4	All general managers from black and ethnic minority staff groups, three of whom had worked in the NHS for less than five years. Two women/two men.
F	3	Three clinical leads, one nearing retirement. One woman/two men.

TABLE TWO: Three Discourses - examples of Empirical Material

Discourse	Representative material
<p>Conformist/managerialist, that is, conforming to instructions about how to implement strategy.</p>	<p><i>FGB</i> You're constantly talent spotting because you're observing all the time those relationships that you're having when you're working with people and what they're doing and how they're working with things and recognising at times actually it's a real .. we need to capture that person; they've got skills in that particular area; what can we do with them that will help?</p> <p><i>FGF</i> I think talent management is finding people with talent. It's people and you can find it at all sorts of levels. I did [a course] ... and there was a young man [there] ... who was quite clearly a quite talented and very interesting young man who is looking forward to training as a nurse. He's in his late 20s and you can spot him at this stage that he's potentially going to go a very long way because he does have talent for what he's doing.</p>
<p>Critical/managerialist, that is, agreeing with the strategy but disagreeing with the way it is being implemented.</p>	<p><i>FGD</i> I think you need, I think what is missing is some sort of structure to it overall. Or something... so it is like you go and do a course or whatever but then don't get the opportunity to put what you have learnt into practice. It is almost like there needs to be someone coordinating that to allow people to...because then the organization doesn't benefit from what individuals have learnt. And 6 months down the line they are going to have forgotten about the course that they have done if you see what I mean.</p> <p><i>FGA:</i> Because she knows I am still aggrieved about not being able to do what I want to do. So she keeps trying to like you know ...we need to develop you but we can't afford this so we will do this instead.</p>
<p>Critical/resistant, that is, critical of the whole strategy and voicing opposition to its implementation</p>	<p><i>FGC</i></p> <p>Woman 1 Yes and also if you are noticed in the organization that is the other thing isn't it</p> <p>Woman 1 Yes absolutely. There has certainly been a culture of spotting people and then saying ... but then it has been quite selective I think. But talent is I suppose by its nature</p> <p>Woman 3 The ones who have got the loudest voices really (Laughter)</p> <p>Man Strutting (Laughs) and preening in the corner (Laughter)</p> <p><i>FGE.</i> There is a friend of mine seconded to ...why do they... she said black people in this organization don't have</p>

	<p>a voice. Why do people when they come into this organization feel like they have to be subdued? So if you are in an organization where you are feeling very subdued then why would you suddenly feel so willing and like an agent of your own change that you are going to apply for something that is going to help you progress? You have got to have real ambition and kind of directed kind of self development that you are going to say I am going to take this forward. Otherwise most people say well the culture of the organization is let's keep quiet. So I will keep quiet, I will do my job. But I think the crucial question for this organization is if there are very few talented BME people sort of at the top, does that mean that there are no talented people in BME? Well no clearly not. So then what is happening?</p>
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Table 3: Glossary for Personal Pronoun Analysis

I (i1)	the embodied place-holder with potential to move into and out of various subject positions
I (i2)	the placeholder in the act of theorising about itself ('I think')
Me	The theory of the self that emerges from i2's work of theorising
You (y1)	used in the first person signals the appearance of a subject ek-static to the place-holding 'I' (i1); the 'I'(i1) has been called and turns, taking up a subject position in which an identity is constituted that is ek-static to the self
You (y2)	second person singular or plural - those persons here present
You (know) (y3)	An inclusive use of the third person plural that seeks agreement and acceptance of the proposition which follows, by invoking a knowledge/understanding held in common (common sense)
We/our (y4)	First person plural. As with y1, signifies the loss or negation of the self within a group identity;
They/people	A disembodied and unidentified collective other – the other (o) is a generalised other, while the Other (O) is agentive.

