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**'Professional partner' or 'management's bitch'?**

**A discourse analytic study of the identity  
construction of HR practitioners in English local  
government**

**Sue Kinsey**

**Thesis submitted to the University of  
Nottingham  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**July 2012**

## **Abstract**

Drawing on the transcripts of 47 semi-structured interviews with HR practitioners in local government in the English Midlands, this thesis explores what Beech (2008) calls the 'route to meaning construction of the self' of HR practitioners as they navigate discourses of HRM and public sector reform in the pursuit of 'professional' identity and organizational legitimacy. Through the use of discourse analysis, the study makes three key contributions: firstly, it challenges the dichotomous characterisation of a 'modernising' public sector and identifies a discursive pragmatism, whereby public sector employees craft a workable identity reconciling 'old' public sector talk with a tempered public sector 'reform' discourse to forge 'third way' discourses. Secondly, it challenges the notion of 'strategic' legitimacy as the only means by which a plausible organizational identity might be constructed for the HR function, with the denigrated 'administrative' HR role rewritten as a problem solving and pragmatic orientation. Finally, it concludes that HR legitimacy will remain elusive whilst HR's identity, particularly in relation to line management, is constructed through gendered and sexualised discourses. The title of the thesis, drawing on the words of interviewees, represents alternative conceptions of the HR function: legitimated through recourse to 'professionalism' and partnership talk, or managerial cipher, in thrall to public sector managerialization, particularly through the construction of HR's role and identity in gendered and sexualised terms.

## **Acknowledgements**

My heartfelt thanks go to my supervisors, Professors Christine Coupland and Mike Humphreys for their unswerving support, wise words and encouragement. Even when I apparently disappeared for lengthy periods, they never gave up on me, as they might reasonably have done.

I could not have achieved this work without the willing participation of the local government employees whose working lives are laid bare here.

Finally, to my long-suffering partner, Ginny, and to my children, who have foregone weekend trips and crept about the house quietly for an unreasonable length of time: thank you for your patience, love and support.

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### **An autobiographical foreword**

It is over 25 years since I joined the graduate training programme of a large, 'blue-chip' financial services organization. After an initial training period working in retail banking branches in the City of London, I managed to secure my first 'proper' role in my chosen area, the Personnel department, claiming 'a desire to work with people' as my motivation. I naively aspired to influence the policies and practices of the organization to ensure that employees might be managed more ethically, with respect and consideration, and I hoped to counter some of the worst excesses of managerial behaviour I had witnessed in branches as an 'employee champion'.

I progressed rapidly through a series of roles from personnel administration, to graduate recruitment, training and management development, employee relations and equal opportunities. My sense of excitement at the roles I undertook, likely in no small part augmented by my relief at leaving the 'business of banking' behind, was initially high. Yet over time I became aware of a growing unease, a nagging doubt; I felt a sense of discomfort, of dissonance between what I held to be my own personal values and the values by which I sensed the organization required me to behave in order to be 'appropriate'. I would often chew over at home the ways in which I had talked and behaved at work, and felt uncomfortable with my performance, yet was aware that I had done what I needed to 'fit in' and to perform my role in the way I was required and indeed rewarded for doing. My espoused desire to 'work with people' was dismissed as naive, and I quickly replaced my apparently 'bleeding heart' script with one of strategic contribution, customer-orientation and 'leveraged assets'. I did not yet have the discourses at my disposal to articulate my discomfort at the 'identity work' in which I was engaging as I navigated and negotiated the performance of my daily organizational 'self'.

It was the best part of fifteen years, a Masters qualification and a new lecturing role later that I read Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) powerful indictment of workplace identity regulation. I was teaching at the time on, among other programmes, the postgraduate diploma in HR leading to chartered membership of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the HR professional body in the UK. The programmes were informed, validated and audited by the CIPD, and the course content heavily geared towards the body's concept of the 'ideal' HR professional. I

was struck by the extent to which I was now required to be complicit in the 'identity regulation' of my aspiring HR practitioner students, ensuring that they met the standards of knowledge and behaviour demanded by the professional body. The CIPD itself had engaged, consciously or otherwise, in a professional identity project (since achieving chartered status in 2000) in which the role and status of the HR professional was articulated *in relation to*, rather than independently of line managers, and whereby 'business knowledge' was considered both separate from and more important than 'HR knowledge'. This professional identity project continues apace with a new (2009) set of standards articulating their 'vision' of the HR professional. This is discussed in more detail within the body of the thesis.

The parallel developments in the public sector context, where a similar identity project of the 'ideal' public sector employee has been and remains under way provides a rich context for my research. The apparent professional autonomy and scope for ethical and moral talk as organizing imperatives formerly enjoyed by public sector employees which I coveted as an HR practitioner in the private sector has ostensibly, and to my great regret been replaced by attempts to introduce greater managerial and market inspired rhetoric as organizing discourses. Students I have taught since 2002 from the public sector have increasingly articulated what they experience as attempts to erode the humanistic orientation to managing workers which has underpinned people management philosophy and practice in the public sector.

It is this theme of identity, and particularly of the regulatory effects of organizations and the discourses which constitute them, which is the main theme of this thesis. My desire to explore the phenomenon of identity construction and regulation is born of my own sense of my experience outlined above, together with a growing sense that whilst the phenomenon is common to all workers, those working in HR seem to be increasingly exhorted to submit to the desires and discourses of others in deciding who and how they are to be. The title of the thesis is informed by tensions for HR practitioners who seek to articulate identities which are palatable and legitimising in an increasingly managerialist context.

Thus my orientation to this research is articulated: I adopt a critical stance informed by my own biography and seek to challenge the discourses which currently dominate

the arenas of HR practice and public management. I approach this thesis as the next chapter in my own story, a continuation of my own attempts to author a cohesive 'self-narrative', and thereby attempt to acknowledge the extent to which I, as the researcher am deeply embedded in the research, shaping it at every turn. My research is not 'value free': far from it. I have, like Whittle et al (2010), sought to 'exploit rather than eliminate the tendency for research to be conducted through a particular lens' (p. 24).

I would not wish, however, to claim any certainty in my understanding or interpretation. My 'constructionist' perspective, which is discussed at length in the main body of the thesis is perhaps best represented by the Robert Graves poem, 'In Broken Images', which has spoken to me most clearly of my own philosophy whilst undertaking this research:

*He is quick, thinking in clear images;  
I am slow, thinking in broken images.*

*He becomes dull, trusting to his clear images;  
I become sharp, mistrusting my broken images.*

*Trusting his images, he assumes their relevance;  
Mistrusting my images, I question their relevance.*

*Assuming their relevance, he assumes the fact;  
Questioning their relevance, I question their fact.*

*When the fact fails him, he questions his senses;  
When the fact fails me, I approve my senses.*

*He continues quick and dull in his clear images;  
I continue slow and sharp in my broken images.*

*He in a new confusion of his understanding;  
I in a new understanding of my confusion*

## **Chapter 1 : Introduction**

### **1.1 Conceptual framework of the thesis**

First I aim to introduce the research by outlining some of the key theoretical and contextual considerations which inform it. Firstly, as a discourse analytic study, the research is informed by discourse theory. I explain my understanding and the importance of a discursive perspective to this research. I then introduce the perspective on identity which informs my approach. Finally I outline some of the key academic and practitioner debates in the areas of public sector reform and human resource management which constitute the organizational and discursive contexts for this research.

#### **1.1.1 Discourse**

In this thesis I adopt a discursive approach to exploring the identity construction of HR practitioners, starting from the premise that language is *constructive* rather than *reflective of* some underlying organizational reality. A discursive approach enables a close analysis of how actors draw on discourses to make sense of their lived experiences in organizations, and how they in turn produce and reproduce the discursively constituted social reality in which they are situated (Grant et al, 1998; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Phillips and Hardy, 2002; Hardy et al, 2005).

Although I am interested in the discourses which prevail in the organizational context in which my research is located, my primary concern is to understand how those discourses frame the ways in which organizational members see the world (and themselves), and how a particular version of the social world becomes 'taken-for-granted' through dominant discourses. Starting from the premise that discourse and language are never neutral but exist within and transmit networks of power (Kornberger and Brown, 2007, p.500; Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010) I employ discourse analysis in order to expose dominant organizational 'discursive formations' and the assumptions which underpin them (Keenoy, 2009). In this way I seek to 'denaturalize' the taken-for-granted axioms associated with HRM and public sector reform which apparently dominate local government HR contexts (both academic and particularly practitioner), through calling into question the way in which such

discursive prescriptions have become dominant, and refuting the ‘*apparently* ‘natural’ and neutral language’ (Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010, p. 803) which populates these ‘textscapes’ (Keenoy and Oswick, 2004).

Discourses may have the power to determine and control subjects (Hardy et al, 2000; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Bergstrom and Knights, 2006), constituting subjectivities in an ‘all-embracing and muscular fashion’ (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000, p. 1127), or may be open to agential intervention (Bergstrom and Knights, 2006) with the subject considered as ‘a politically conscious language user, telling the right kind of stories to the right audiences at the right moment’ (ibid., p1132). My aim therefore is also to investigate how speakers are constructed by, or actively and agentially deploy discourses for particular ends, specifically here the pursuit of organizational legitimacy for the HR function, and how they weave *pragmatic*, plausible identity narratives within the web of multiple and competing discursive strands (some more dominant than others, Davies and Thomas, 2002) which are available.

The discourses considered here are embodied within the texts of interview transcripts, but reflect the wider practices of ‘consumption, production and distribution’ of discourses in the research context, and their capacity to produce and reproduce understandings which shape collective and individual selves and enable identity work (Hardy et al, 2005; Kornberger and Brown, 2007).

### **1.1.2 Identity**

My overarching perspective on identity is that it is fashioned within discursive ‘regimes of truth’ that create epistemological spaces and associated positions, which signify, classify and govern those who operate within them (Clarke et al, 2009; et al, 2010). This research aims to explore the power of discourse to achieve discursive ‘closure’, that is, privileging one, dominant, hegemonic formation and restricting or eliminating alternative interpretations and meanings (Mumby, 1987; Deetz 1992) and to consider how such discourses inform identity construction and ‘identity work’.

Processes of identity construction may be considered to be grounded in power, knowledge and particularly in language (Foucault, 1980, in Pullen and Simpson,

2009) with individual self-perceptions controlled and regulated through the effects of power (Alvesson, 2009). Such power may be constituted in and exercised through the effects of discourses, as outlined above. Kornberger and Brown (2007) suggest that organizational members produce, and reproduce a set of understandings which shape, centre and cohere their individual and collective selves in the workplace, and that local discourses can function hegemonically to discipline organizational members' understandings of their work (p. 498) and of their role and identity as they go about that work. Individual, collective and organizational identities, they argue, are accomplished linguistically within these discursive regimes, drawing on 'institutionally based' resources to accomplish identity work, 'that is, the forming, maintaining, repairing and revising of individual and group conceptions' (p. 499). In this respect, discourses, and specifically for this research, the discourses of HRM and public sector reform may feed into organizational and individual identity projects (Alvesson, 2009, p.63).

The 'turn to identity' in the academic literature has been identified by Alvesson et al (2008) as burgeoning at the same time as I was experiencing my own early career identity crisis outlined above. One might assume after such time that the theme of identity has been exhausted in the academic literature, all avenues explored and a new lens or 'fad' in its place. Yet Alvesson et al (2008) suggest that:

*'After approximately 20 years of expanded identity research in organization studies, there remain opportunities and challenges to deliver on its promise—to develop novel and nuanced theoretical accounts, to produce rich empirical analyses that capture the inter-subjectivity of organizational life in a thoughtful and empathetic fashion, and to demonstrate how individual and collective self-constructions become powerful players in organizing processes and outcomes.'*(p. 7).

This thesis aims to offer such a 'rich empirical analysis' through considering how members of the HR function in English local government construct their identities. Identity work may be demanded particularly when 'routinised reproduction of a self-identity in a stable setting is discontinued' (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008: 15), or where institutional discourses are multiple, divergent and conflicting. The public sector

context represents such a setting, where long-established identity narratives, e.g. the discourses of 'Old Public Administration' have been superseded by discourses associated with New Public Management (NPM), new managerialism, and modernisation. Similarly, for those working in the people management function, 'Traditional Personnel Management' (TPM) discourses have been challenged and substituted by the pervasive rhetoric of human resource management (HRM). The context therefore offers a rich opportunity for considering the 'inter-subjectivity of organizational life'.

We might consider that individuals are simply 'framed and constrained' by dominant discourses (Kornberger and Brown, 2007, p. 511), apparently compliantly taking up positions made available within those discourses to forge their identities (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p.18). However, given, that any new discourse 'merely *adds to* the complex and often contradictory multiplicity of discourses to which all of us are subject' (Halford and Leonard, 1999, p.116-original italics), individuals are more likely to modify, re-define, re-inscribe and resist the positions offered in those discourses (Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Thomas and Davies, 2005) exploiting the 'epistemological spaces made available to them by discursive resources' (Kornberger and Brown, 2007, p. 500), in a bid to author a particular self-narrative, or to fashion a particular discursive identity. Certainly, the discourses of NPM/modernisation and HRM offer a range of discursive positions and linguistic resources which might be readily crafted into plausible, legitimised and palatable identity narratives, although these are not the only discourses which prevail in the local government HR context. The research therefore aims to explore how those discursive positions are taken up and resisted in talk as individuals go about their identity work. The specific discursive contexts of public sector reform and human resource management are considered next.

### **1.1.3 The public sector and local government 'reform' context**

Rhetoric of transformation and similarly 'epochal' reform discourses (Du Gay, 2003) have characterised the construction of the public sector over the past 30 years. Kirkpatrick and Walker (2007), suggest that during this period, the demand for change in UK public services has been unprecedented. This period of 'reform', initiated by Conservative governments in the 1980's and 1990's, is often

characterised as representing a move away from 'old style' public sector to New Public Management (NPM), a set of prescriptive assumptions and value statements characterising how public sector organizations ought to run, grounded in a philosophy of market, cost and efficiency orientation (Diefenbach, 2009) . The reforms have been legitimized by a characterisation of public sector organizations as old-fashioned, anachronistic and irrelevant (Du Gay, 2005) as bureaucratic entities, typically unresponsive, unaccountable, opaque and inefficient; focusing on process and procedure rather than service delivery or client responsiveness (Armbruster, 2005; Ingraham, 2005). Subsequent New Labour administrations continued to draw on the rhetoric associated with NPM to inform their own discourses of 'reformed managerialism' (Cutler and Waine, 2000, p. 318) through the 'modernisation' agenda, essentially a continuation of the NPM change narrative, with some minor modifications (Dawson and Dargie, 2002). This discursive shift has prevailed and arguably intensified with the election of the Conservative-LibDem coalition government in 2010, apparently bent on intensifying 'reform', particularly through the means of 'efficiency savings' and budgetary control.

The 'reform' discourses outlined above have been in clear evidence in the local government context with numerous observers suggesting that the form and very existence of local government has been under serious threat (Walker and Boyne, 2006; Chandler, 2007; du Gay, 2005; Flynn, 1995). As Orr (2005, p. 373) suggests, 'the consensual view within academic commentary is that local government in Britain has been the subject of profound change in the last 25 years'. In this context of change and change rhetoric, the HR function in local government, in common with other functions, has faced continuous review and unprecedented change with reduced resources, increased decentralisation, pressures for outsourcing, and to offer shared services (Harris, 2007) all contributing to a demand for the 'transformation' of the function.

However the discourses of public sector 'reform' are caricatured, one thing is clear: there have been material consequences for how professionals who work in the public sector are required to perform and construct their identities, through the discourses on which they might be encouraged or exhorted to draw as they go about their roles. If we accept Davies' (2003) claim that new managerialism requires a



reconsideration of the role and significance of the professional in the public sector, involving 'the most significant shift in the discursive construction of professional practice and professional responsibility that any of us will ever experience' (p. 91), then clearly this 'shift', and the identity work it demands, merits investigation.

The new professional and managerial subjectivities for public service professionals created through 'reform' discourses, (Miller 1994; du Gay 1996; Halford and Leonard 1999; Whitehead and Moodley 1999; Barry *et al.* 2001) are designed to 'inculcate new attitudes, values, priorities and self-understandings' (Thomas and Davies, 2005, p. 685). However, managerially inspired discourses, including discourses of and associated with 'reform', can rarely be all-pervasive in their effects (Clegg, 1994; Humphreys and Brown, 2002b; Willmott, 2005). Newman (2002) has suggested that tensions can arise as old and new discourses coexist during reform programmes, and Halford and Leonard (1999) point out that whilst the 'new managerialist' discourse might be flourishing across the public sector, 'it has not totally displaced other frameworks of understanding about public sector work and organization' (p. 116).

The extension of managerial prerogatives and organizational controls in the public sector may be cast as a challenge to the autonomy, legitimacy and power of professional groups (Currie *et al.*, 2009) whose discourses of professional legitimacy typically draw on the notion of technical competence and independent judgement (Orr and Vince, 2009). Yet this potential 'challenge' to professional-identified groups may also represent an opportunity for the HR function, particularly given the potential managerial alignment of HRM discourses. The question of whether those in the HR function are able to deploy 'appropriate' discourses during this 'transformation' from 'old' to 'new' public sector as a means of legitimizing the function constitutes a particular focus for this study.

#### **1.1.4 HRM and HR 'professionalism'**

A parallel shift has occurred in the discourses which surround the construction and practice of the people management professional, reflecting a move from 'traditional personnel management' (TPM) to Human Resource Management (HRM). HRM is considered here as a discursive socio-cultural artefact (Keenoy 1999, p. 5; Keenoy,

2009, 455), and a process which is continuously performed through discourse (Janssens and Steyaert, 2009, p.151). Although it has become the 'dominant discourse of choice for employment management' in organizations, (Keenoy, 2009, p.458), achieving 'unparalleled success as a discourse of change' (Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010), what constitutes HRM might be considered as an ongoing project. Within such a project, we might conclude, there is the potential for multiple shifting competing and contingent identities and a range of possible culturally situated meanings (Keenoy, 2009).

Yet recent and current HRM literature has been overwhelmingly dominated by one particular discursive formation (Foucault, 1980) premised on an 'economic logic'. Both academic and practitioner literature has been characterised as narrow and technocratic, prescriptive, functionalist and uncritical, and resistant to dissenting voices (Watson, 2004; Keegan and Boselie, 2006; Janssens and Steyaert, 2009). In this guise, HRM is constructed as a decidedly managerialist project, operating within a unitarist framework and oriented towards the needs of employers rather than any other stakeholder groups (Alvesson, 2009; Marchington, 2008). Thus broader ethical, social and political concerns which populated the discourse of TPM have been marginalised in favour of a concern for contribution to organizational performance through a 'strategic' orientation (Alvesson, 2009; Francis and Keegan, 2006; Keenoy, 2009; Keegan and Francis, 2010; Marchington, 2008; Pritchard, 2010).

The strategic and performance orientated configuration of HRM has proven remarkably resilient and powerful in marginalising not only 'old' personnel talk, but also other discursive versions of HRM such as the 'soft' version, with a greater concern for employee commitment and developmental humanism 'hearts and minds' (see for example, Truss et al, 1997) has to all intents disappeared as the 'hard' version, focused on performance and output in economic terms alone has prevailed (Legge, 2005; Lupton, 2000; Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010). Thus strategy has emerged as the 'ideologically imprinted version' of what goes on (Alvesson, 2009, p. 57), with the achievement of 'competitive advantage' conceived as the primary focus of HR work through 'adding value' in terms which are approved of by management (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). The preoccupation of HRM literature for the past 20

years has been to identify a causal relationship between the policies and practices of HRM and organizational performance. The definitive establishment of such a link, Keenoy suggests (2009) might legitimize the 'strategic' and professional claims of the HR function, without which it might be reduced to an administrative support function 'of questionable legitimacy' (p. 461): evidently functions labelled as 'administrative' and 'support' are of questionable organizational value.

Thus the identity project of the HR function is set by the regime of truth constituted within this privileged discursive version of HRM: it shapes the appropriate and desirable identity of the function (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) and disciplines the possibilities for action of HR practitioners (Brown and Coupland, 2005). This ideal HR identity has predominantly been constructed through the 'strategic business partner' role (Wright, 2008; Pritchard, 2010; Keegan and Francis, 2010). As a source of identification it constitutes a particularly seductive ontology (Whitehead, 2001) offering as it does the promise of parity and integration with managers, of a strategic and business identity (and therefore legitimacy) of the function. The role cements the allegiance between HR and management objectives, and thereby represents an attractive legitimizing identity for both individual HR practitioners and for the function (Caldwell, 2003; Brown et al, 2004). Some authors (e.g. Guest and King, 2004; Harris, 2007) have suggested that the discursive shift to this more managerially-aligned servicing role removes inherent tensions in balancing the employment relationship previously faced by HR professionals (Francis and Keegan, 2006). No longer 'victims of ambiguity' caught between capitalism and patriarchy (Legge, 2005), the business partnering HR practitioner apparently pursues a straightforwardly unitarist agenda, untroubled by previous concerns for employee wellbeing. Such claims may attribute an excessive muscularity to this unitarist discourse, and may fail to acknowledge the resistance of practitioners to this particular discursive formation of HRM. This study aims to explore this phenomenon, and whether alternative discursive resources are drawn upon to construct 'legitimate' selves.

For HR professionals then, the parallel discourses of 'new managerialism' and 'human resource management' may offer resources by which their identity is constructed. Davies and Thomas (2003) suggest that the 'crafting of the self' which

occurs within the discursive field 'produces meanings and subjectivities that are contradictory, contested and clashing' (p.685). For Humphreys and Brown (2002), it is the existence of competing discourses which ensures that 'socialization into any one discourse is never complete' (p. 929). It is this very possibility of choice in situations where multiple and contradictory identities are available through a range of competing discourses which offers scope for studying the ways in which the discourses of HRM and NPM are appropriated, transformed, adapted, subverted and reinscribed, as individuals evaluate the contradictions and tensions they experience in reconciling the potential consequences of dominant discourses for their own identity performance.

## **1.2 Contribution of the thesis**

This thesis is intended to contribute both theoretically and empirically to the questions of the identity, position and role of the HR function, both in a broad sense and in the specific context of the public sector and of local government in particular, from the perspective of the HR practitioners themselves. This research aims to 'denaturalize' the taken-for-granted axioms associated with HRM and public sector reform through calling into question the way in which such discursive prescriptions have become dominant, (Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010). It also investigates how HR practitioners in local government deploy, rewrite and resist such discourses in the pursuit of crafting legitimate, workable and palatable individual and collective identity narratives. In the context of the Gershon review of public sector efficiency (2004) and its legacy of the imperative to identify and reduce 'back office' activity through 'transformation', local government HR is particularly under pressure to demonstrate how it 'adds value'. In a period where HR is being called to account over the efficiency and effectiveness of the function, it is particularly apposite to consider how HR practitioners take sense from and give meaning to the numerous discourses which are prescribing the ways in which they are required to perform.

Despite an extensive literature surrounding Human Resource Management (HRM), examining both prescriptive and descriptive models, the philosophies which underpin them, the enactment and practice of HRM, and the potential effects on employees and firm performance, much less has been written about HR practitioners themselves. Where this literature does exist, it has tended to focus on the competencies required by HR 'professionals' (e.g. Farndale, 2005; Farndale and

Brewster, 2005), the differences between the role of HR practitioners in the public and private sectors (Lupton and Shaw, 2001), or the role, influence, position or contribution of the HR function in organizations, (e.g. Legge, 1978; Storey, 1992; Ulrich, 1997; Harris, 2002; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). Few have focused on the identity of HR practitioners, or the ways in which the multiple discourses evident in the personnel/HRM literature inform the individual and collective identity construction of those working in the profession. A recent exception is Pritchard (2010) who has focused on the narrative identity of the HR practitioner, identifying this lens as novel and calling for more research to be undertaken in a similar vein to explore the identity work undertaken by those in the role. This thesis aims to offer such a contribution.

Equally, the 'textscape' of HRM (Keenoy and Oswick, 2004) has been dominated by managerialist prescriptions which author a particular narrative of organizational life. Numerous authors have identified the need for a more critical perspective on HRM (Steyaert and Janssens, 1999; Keegan and Francis, 2007; Boulton and Houlihan, 2007; Janssens and Steyaert, 2009; Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010), calling for greater reflexivity on the part of HRM scholars, a focus beyond the 'economic contribution' debates, a broader consideration of how the role and identity of the HR function are performed, and an 'unmasking' of the nostrums with which HRM is underpinned.

Additionally, whilst there is a plethora of literature surrounding public sector reform both in the UK and worldwide, and the many initiatives which have sought to 'transform' the sector under successive Governments, 'scant attention' (Brown, 2004, p.304) has been paid to the specific field of HRM in the public sector, or to the comparison of managerial practices in the public and private sectors in the UK (Boyne et al, 1999; Gould-Williams, 2004). Where this literature does exist, it has a tendency to consider the appropriateness of traditional public sector HR practices and philosophies for achieving Government-driven change, and the suitability of new approaches to HRM 'imported' from the private sector. The consequences for those in the HR function of the shift from discourses of traditional public sector personnel management to a new HRM-informed rhetoric have largely been overlooked.

Benwell and Stokoe (2006, p.31) believe that identities are inscribed in available discourses, yet little research has been conducted into the consumption of the 'new'

HRM discourses by those working in public sector HRM functions. There are multiple and competing discourses surrounding both public sector reform and HRM, including the professional identity of the occupation, many of which suggest a rejection of previously available discourses, offering a new 'way of representing the order of things' (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p. 30). Halford and Leonard (1999) suggest that the nature of the changes to the content of work in the public sector has clearly affected the identity of public sector employees, and that whilst the 'new managerialism' which prevails has constructed 'new forms of identity' for public sector staff, 'identities cannot merely be 'read off' from a given context, but take many forms and may encompass individual practices of modification and resistance' (p. 103). Whilst there is empirical evidence of how the discourses of 'New Public Management' and 'Modernisation' may be demanding identity work (Du Gay, 2003) on the part of public sector workers (e.g. Thomas and Davies, 2005), there is a lack of research on how both the 'epochal' discourse of public sector reform (Du Gay, 2003; 2004) and the discourses of HRM are consumed, modified, deployed and resisted as discursive identity resources by HR practitioners. Thomas and Davies (2005) suggest that the literature on public sector reform has lacked a 'nuanced and empirically informed' understanding of how the discourse of 'new public management' has been received, appropriated and transformed by individual public service professionals, with insufficient attention 'paid to the lived experiences of public service professionals, despite a central tenet of the NPM discourse being the promotion of new professional and managerial subjectivities' (p. 683). This thesis aims to offer a just such a 'nuanced and empirically informed' contribution, by considering the identity construction of those working in the HR function in English local government.

### **1.3 Aims and objectives of the thesis**

The aim of this research is therefore to explore the ways in which human resources (HR) practitioners in local government consume, resist, re-inscribe and deploy the discourses associated with public sector 'reform' and human resource management (HRM) as they discursively construct their identity in talk and interaction.

Drawing on 47 interviews conducted with local government HR employees from 5 authorities in the UK Midlands, and employing a critical discourse analytic approach, the research considers specifically the following research questions:

1. How are the discourses of public sector 'reform' drawn on as identity resources in talk?
2. How are the discourses of HRM and HR professionalism deployed in identity construction in talk and interaction?
3. How is discursive legitimacy claimed for the HR function?
4. How is resistance to the dominant discourses performed discursively?
5. How do HR practitioners make sense of and give meaning to ideas about who and how they should be as HR 'professionals'?

The intention of the research is to understand as much to explain (Kornberger and Brown, 2007), and to allow the issues of reconciling potentially competing and divergent discourses in the authoring of self-narratives to emerge through participant talk.

#### **1.4 Structure of the thesis**

The thesis is structured as follows: this first chapter introduces the key concepts of relevance to the research as well as outlining the organizational and theoretical context, and the contribution of the thesis to both scholarship and practice. The literature review which follows in chapter 2 considers in greater detail the key academic and practitioner debates around issues of public sector reform, identity and resistance, and HRM and the role and identity of the HR function. The final section of this chapter considers more closely the literature specific to the UK Local Government context within which the research is located, and particularly the nature of the successive reforms to which it has been subject in the past 30 years. In chapter 3 I outline the philosophical framework which informs the research, before offering a detailed account of the research methods and the nature of the research undertaken in chapter 4. In chapters 5-7 I offer my analysis of the research, organised around the themes of HRM/ business talk, old and new public sector talk, and gender. The 'findings' of the research are discussed in chapter 8, before I

conclude in chapter 9 by revisiting the aims, key findings and contribution of the research, as well as the limitations and avenues for potential future research.



## **2. Literature Review**

This chapter develops the concepts outlined in the introduction which are of relevance to this research. Divided into three main sections, each section aims to adopt a discursive perspective and focus on the body of literature in question. Firstly, it considers the broad context of the public sector, and the discursive trends associated with 'reform'. Secondly, it considers the concepts of identity and resistance, and particularly how they might be achieved discursively. Finally, it evaluates the constructions of HRM and the HR function, and the problems and tensions facing HR practitioners as they seek to establish 'professional' legitimacy.

### **2.1 Public Sector 'Reform': New Public Management, Modernisation and the 'New Managerialism'**

The terms 'New Public Management' (NPM), Modernisation and 'the new managerialism' refer broadly to the set of Government-inspired reforms which have abounded in public sector environments in the past three decades.

According to Flynn (2009) the term 'reform' may encompass a range of changes, from 'minor adjustments to management arrangements, to fundamental changes in ownership, governance and management' (p. 17). The narratives of change which have prevailed in the public sector during this era have tended to fall into the latter category, characterised by an 'epochalist bent' (Du Gay, 2003), and to focus on the inevitability of large scale and comprehensive change (Diefenbach, 2007; 2009), and the absolute necessity of such 'reform' for the very survival of the sector. Much of the literature on public sector and local authority change has been characterised by cataclysmic language, with a dominance in academic commentary of literature drawing on discourses of threat, crisis and the end of consensus (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003).

In addition to such 'epochal' observations, academic debate surrounding public sector reform has tended to draw on discourses of distinctiveness, of contrast, and of difference, emphasizing, for example, the distinctive nature of the public sector (e.g. Du Gay, 2000), contrasting the outmoded bureaucratic style of administration with the desirable 'modernized' public sector, principally represented by the contrast between what has been termed 'old public administration' and 'new public

management' (Dunleavy and Hood, 1994), and highlighting difference between 'old' public sector and the desirable features of the private sector (see Boyne, 2002 for a discussion of the literature on such 'differences'). The emphasis has been on binary and polarised positions, on homogeneity within and heterogeneity between sectors. Thus the discursive battle lines in public sector reform have been drawn in polarised terms: between old and new; between administration and management; between bureaucracy with all its associated features and connotations, and the private sector-emulating, efficient, effective, performance- and output-orientated organization. However, the emphasis on 'homogeneity within' and 'difference between' inherent in such analyses may have failed to capture the complexity of discourses at play in the public sector. Orr and Vince (2009) for example suggest that far from being a unified homogeneous organizational entity, English local government is constituted by a 'melange of voices, interests and assumptions about how to organize, prioritize and mobilize action' (p.655). This melange of voices or 'heteroglossia' (Bakhtin, 1981) provides a rich context within which to consider how 'reform' discourses are played out.

The terms NPM and 'modernisation'<sup>1</sup> allude to the series of initiatives and underlying principles which have involved a move away from a dominance in the public sector of professional (rather than managerial) power and privilege (Winchester and Bach, 1995, in Farnham and Giles, 1996); a rejection of the values of the 'old administration', and an associated problematisation of the bureaucratic principles and practices focusing on process and procedure (Ingraham, 2005) which were seen to perpetuate it. It requires an embracing of the 'managerialist enterprise' of the private sector, turning Government, as employers, into a 'business', and creating 'consumer-responsive' public services (Vickers and Kouzmin, 2001). The

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst NPM has been associated with conservative government reforms from 1979-1997, the 'Modernising Government' white paper published in 1999 represents the priorities of the subsequent New Labour governments. New Labour did not seek to distance itself from the previous emphasis on augmenting managerial control, and continued to pursue change in the public sector with a strongly managerialist agenda coalescing around a discourse of 'modernisation' (Cutler and Waine, 2000) effectively representing a continuity between their approach and what had gone before in all but name. Boyne et al (2001) suggested that the New Labour Government's agenda for change in the public sector might be 'as prescriptive as that imposed under the Conservatives' (p.1).

aspirations of NPM and Modernisation initiatives have espoused the introduction of devolution, delegation and flexibility, in an attempt to enhance the performance of the sector, although Philpott (2004) suggests that mere lip-service is paid to these ideals, and that the government approach still embodies top-down command and control. The increased requirement for transparency and accountability, a focus on performance and the achievement of targets (sometimes mutually incompatible), of (increasingly) rigorous discipline and parsimony in resource allocation (Hood, 1991) has engendered a commensurate increase in the requirement for evidential documentation and work intensification (Philpott, 2004) which is potentially at odds with the concurrent demand for greater efficiency and responsiveness from public services. The remainder of this section of the literature considers the main features of the 'reform' endeavours of relevance to this research, and particularly the initiatives or trends which suggest a need for identity work on the part of public sector employees.

### **2.1.1 De-professionalization: the 'Managerialization' of the Public Sector**

Central to all the reforms in both early and subsequent forms of NPM/Modernisation is the notion of managerialization: a shift towards managerial forms of organizational co-ordination (Clarke et al, 2000), and away from 'professional' dominance of the public sector. A key feature claimed by reform narratives, for example, has been the decentralization of both budgetary and personal authority to line managers (Dunleavy and Hood, 1994; Mountfield, 1997). Despite claims of the apolitical nature of the NPM framework, 'allowing many different values to be pursued effectively' (Hood, 1991, p.8), Osborne et al (1995) suggest that early reforms introduced an entirely new level of commitment to rationalist models of management practice and organizational change than had previously been seen in the public sector.

This managerialization of the public sector, establishing the right of managers to direct, co-ordinate and run its organizations (Clarke et al, 2000), was accompanied by a systematic introduction of managerialism. Some claim this managerialism was deployed in an attempt to subordinate or suppress the professional dominance which previously characterised the public sector context, in favour of more 'economic' forms of judgement (for example Clarke et al, 2000; Dawson and Dargie, 2002; Newman, 2002). This managerialism represents a generic ideology (Pollitt, 1993;

Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004), but is characterized by the belief that public sector organizations can achieve their goals through the application of appropriate management techniques, rather than through a reliance on professional knowledge, judgement or discretion, and an associated professional/public sector ethos. These management techniques are inevitably encapsulated within a normative set of expectations, values and beliefs, privileging and prescribing not only the '*right to manage*', but often '*how to manage*' (Clarke et al, 2000, italics added), whether this be articulated through the 'Value for Money (VfM)' 3 E's, of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness, the 4 C's – ('challenge, compare, consult, compete') of Best Value (BV), or some alternative formation of governmental priorities.

Management may be presented as a Fayol-esque set of technical activities or principles, as a preoccupation with the achievement of a particular set of outcomes or goals, or as a particular 'toolkit' associated with certain applications of management (perhaps here including Human Resource Management-HRM). However, it may also be considered as a political activity, despite the veil of managerial neutrality often claimed, and which Clarke et al (2000) suggest is espoused by managerialism as an ideology. Far from representing neutrality, some writers (e.g. Parker, 2002) suggest that managerialism represents a 'new religion', a form of thought and activity which is limiting and dangerous, and which 'is being used to justify considerable cruelty and inequality' (p.9). Whether or not we accept Parker's critical condemnation of the flaws of managerialism, it is difficult to condone the notion that management and managerialism are neutral, suffused as they are 'with value-laden choices and influenced by broader ideologies' (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004, p.14). These 'broader ideologies' are likely to be dominated by the political initiatives, imperatives, whims and fads which define the priorities of successive governments, and which are enshrined within the particular discursive formations by which they articulate their 'vision' for the public sector. This 'discursive' perspective on managerialism and 'reform' is developed next.

### **2.1.2 A discursive perspective on managerialism**

In refusing to alight upon a 'single, stipulative definition of what public management *really* is', Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004, p.13) reject 'semantic imperialism' as being out of fashion in the post-linguistic turn research era. Yet in the extent to which it

privileges certain discourses and language over others, the 'imperialism of management' (Parker, 2002, p.11) also brings with it a semantic imperialism. Language may not simply reflect reality (Gergen, 1994), but may also be actively engaged in the constitution of reality (Learmonth, 2005). When one discourse is privileged over another, inevitably there are consequences for those for whom positions are created within that discourse. The discourse of management represents such a discourse.

Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004) believe that the rhetoric of managerial improvement can become a 'community of discourse', with its own logic, vocabulary and internal momentum. This managerialist discourse constitutes hierarchies of knowledge and expertise, legitimising a reordering of power relationships within organizations and between their stakeholders (Newman, 2002). Within this discourse 'reform' and 'modernisation' are constituted as moving forward to a better position, from a previous, inferior position (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). New discursive formations are constantly being articulated alongside the more orthodox discourses associated with managerialism of efficiency, quality and consumerism (Newman, 2002) in order to serve the interests of the speakers. Distinctions are made, for example, between 'Best Value' (BV) and 'Value for Money' (VfM), where BV assesses quantity and quality of services, but also, apparently, 'contribution to the well being of the community' (Halachmi and Montgomery, 2000, p.394). Value, quality and performance are constructed in a way which suggests some objectivity is inherent in these notions, rather than being subject to dynamic, individual perceptions (Halachmi and Montgomery, 2000).

Two critiques offered by Hood (1991) have focused on reform as a largely discursive project, summarising the advent of new managerialism and NPM as being 'all hype and no substance', with little having changed other than the public language of senior managers (p.9); and as being a self-serving movement, drawing on that very public language, designed to promote the career interests of an elite group of 'new managerialists', at the expense, perhaps, of the previously dominant 'professional cadre' in the public sector.

However, this characterisation of 'reform' talk as a simple script which can be acquired and deployed in the pursuit of power and legitimacy may constitute an

oversimplification of the complexities of the discourses of NPM/Modernisation. This notion is expanded in the next section.

### **2.1.3 Conflicts and contradictions within NPM/Modernisation**

A number of commentators have identified a range of potential conflicts ('contradictory imperatives'; Levy, 2003, p555; Diefenbach, 2009), not to say incommensurabilities, that is, irreconcilable and mutually exclusive perspectives and demands, inherent within the discourses of NPM, which may prove problematic for public servants attempting to translate the rhetoric into realities of practice.

Disparities may exist between the potency of the language of NPM (and the extent to which its successes are publicly extolled) and the realities of the actual freedoms and potential for success available to public servants (Newman, 2000). Additionally, during the period of 'reform', and potentially for some time to come, the 'old', embedded yet degraded discourse of public administration will co-exist alongside the 'new', privileged discourse of public management (Newman, 2002). Successive iterations of and initiatives associated with NPM/Modernisation have claimed to offer autonomy and flexibility within the public sector, 'enabling' public servants to be innovative, and entrepreneurial. Yet at the same time these claims have been accompanied by systems of supervision, inspection and central control which seek to ensure that activities are monitored and performance targets are achieved (Du Gay, 2000; Newman, 2000; Newman, 2002; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). This central control and 'top-down' monitoring is claimed as representing a 'new' regime which removes the old bureaucratic impediments to modernisation (Newman, 2000), yet which represents a tight and restrictive 'performance management' context.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, professional judgement and local discretion are espoused in the pursuit of devolution and deregulation alongside these Neo-Taylorist forms of measurement and monitoring (Dawson and Dargie, 2000; Newman, 2000). The 'new' public servants are encouraged to be risk-takers, whilst simultaneously becoming more accountable, their previously valued anonymity and impartiality having been removed as ministers 'delegate' responsibility (Mountfield, 1997; Du Gay, 2000). Enhanced service provision and customer responsiveness are encouraged, while spending excesses are curbed, and costs pared to a minimum (Upchurch et al, 2008). Short-term efficiencies are achieved without detriment to the

long-term strategic outcomes required (Newman, 2000). Public services are no longer characterised by monolithic, centralised institutions, but constituted of small, local, decentralised, semi-autonomous units; whilst simultaneously achieving a co-ordinated, 'joined-up' service to citizens (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004).

These conflicts and contradictions may present challenges and difficulties for the public servants required to make sense of them, and may underline the extent to which NPM represents a chimera. They may be typical of the conflicts inherent in large parts of the private sector, the model for much of NPM reform, where the challenge is to reconcile the diverse and often contradictory needs of discrete stakeholders groups. They may alternatively constitute mere rhetoric marshalled to legitimise 'reform' and to curry the favour of public opinion.

Of particular interest is the 'lived experience' of public service employees as they attempt to navigate the multiple and competing narratives of 'reform' and to reconcile them in the context of the apparently conflicting and incommensurate discourses of old public administration which pre-date them (Newman, 2002; Thomas and Davies, 2005). This is considered next.

#### **2.1.4 Reinventing 'Public Servants'**

Despite the promotion of new professional and managerial subjectivities, Thomas and Davies (2005) suggest that the literature on NPM has lacked a 'nuanced and empirically informed' understanding of how the discourse of NPM has been received, appropriated and transformed by individual public service professionals. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004, p.17) for example, propose a model of NPM which identifies 4 levels at which reform occurs, including 'Managerial' and 'Primary Work' levels. Yet nowhere in their otherwise comprehensive text do they appear to account for the consumption, reinscription and enactment of NPM discourse by individual employees. They suggest that configurations of the NPM ideology will vary according to local political forces, but no account is taken of public servants in constructing that configuration; they suggest that the rhetoric of managerial improvement can become a 'community of discourse', with its own logic, vocabulary and internal momentum' (p. 18), although the only role for public servants, other than

that of passive consumers or recipients of this discourse, is to 'learn as they go along', possibly leading to 'shifts of strategy'.

Du Gay (2000a) suggests that the type of strategic and organizational intervention proposed by NPM, in whatever form, depends upon meaning at the *individual* and *collective* level for their effective operation, and should therefore be considered as cultural or discursive practices. Employees are both the object of reform, and the means by which it can occur (Pratchett and Wingfield, 1996), and will both ascribe meaning to and derive meaning from the discourses with which they are presented. The enactment of NPM will be mediated by both context *and* individual agency, and the range of different subject positions available (Thomas and Davies, 2005)

We may therefore, as Du Gay (1996) proposes, consider NPM as an 'identity project', privileging a particular 'ethic of personhood' which is embedded in its programmes (Du Gay, 2000b, p.75). There is clear evidence that a particular set of values, competencies and qualities are required of the New Public Servant. NPM involves 'making up new ways for people to be' (Du Gay, 2000b). Employees are required to manifest 'surface displays of the 'right' feeling' (Vickers and Kouzmin, 2001, p96). As new discursive practices are adopted within the public sector, organizational actors are constituted in particular ways which 'prefer particular forms of judgement and which are based on particular forms of power and knowledge' (Newman, 2002, p.78) They are required to be more entrepreneurial, more involved, more responsible, more accountable (Du Gay, 1993; 2000a; 2000b). This new entrepreneurialism 'brooks no opposition between the mode of self-presentation required of managers and employees, and the ethics of the personal self. Becoming a better worker is represented as the same thing as becoming a more virtuous person' (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992). In this context, workers are required to articulate pro-change orientations and to embrace new ways of defining the public sector if they are to be considered 'appropriate' individuals (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Thus identity work is demanded by reform; if we believe that NPM reconstructs work along entrepreneurial lines, embracing a range of 'private sector best practice', which is positively contrasted with old, 'bad old bureaucratic' ways, this suggests a sweeping away of the values, ethics and ethos which may have underpinned the old



regime, and which constituted the discursive resources by which 'old' identities were articulated. NPM discourses represents a shift in values, for example, which erodes the 'old' values of probity, integrity, honesty and rectitude (Hood's 'Theta-type values', 1991), replacing them with the values associated with entrepreneurial organizational forms (the 'Sigma-type values' of efficiency and matching resources to goals and tasks). These are the values by which the virtuous public servant in the new regime must be defined. This may not be without its costs. Maesschalk's (2004) reading of both academic and practice –oriented literature suggests that there has been a 'significant shift' in public service ethical standards, and a consequent rise in what might previously have been considered unethical behaviour, as ethical behaviour under NPM regimes has come to be understood as behaviour that strengthens 'the three E's' of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Similarly, Dawson and Dargie (2002) claim that the move to NPM, far from mirroring private sector practices which have attempted to bind together employees to their employers, has actually eroded the 'values base' which has 'hitherto bound public servants together in pursuit of values of equality of access and so on' (p.41).

It may be, however, that the mourning for 'old' values is misplaced: Brereton and Temple (1999: in Allmendinger et al, 2003) talk of a 'mythical age of probity...a golden age of integrity that often masked a 'sordid reality'. Perhaps then the integrity of the 'old' public service ethos has been overstated, although one thing remains undeniable: the extent to which the discourse of a new set of normative practices and standards is being introduced through NPM and its successors, calling into question the durability of the discourse associated with this old set of values, real or espoused.

Interestingly, the threat to the 'old' may be overstated. Both Pratchett and Wingfield (1996) and more recently Allmendinger et al (2003) have evaluated the substitution of 'old' with 'new' values, and concluded that exposure to discourses of, for example, market-based reforms, has had the effect of 'encouraging an *evolution* of values rather than a *demise* of the PSE' (Pratchett and Wingfield, p.651-my italics).Of relevance here may be Newman's (2002) suggestion that while discourses (including the discourse of the PSE) may be constitutive, people can learn to speak and deploy new languages *strategically*. Similarly, Thomas and Davies (2005) suggest that public sector employees may act agentially in 'rewriting' reform scripts in ways which

enable subversion and translation at the level of the individual or group. This is developed in the next section.

### **2.1.5 NPM/Modernisation, Identity and Resistance**

To return to an issue previously raised, research identifying the ‘meaning-giving’ of employees in the public sector remains rare. As Thomas and Davies (2005) indicate, the debate around employee responses has tended to focus on the polarised understanding of resistance versus compliance, with resistance usually represented by a range of negative behaviours ranging from truculence or articulating objections to outright sabotage (e.g. Carnall, 2007; Pfeffer, 1994; Burnes, 2009). The common assumption is that resisting change is ‘bad’, to be avoided and not part of being resilient, a quality essential for public servants if they are to survive the processes of reform in the public sector (Vickers and Kouzmin, 2001). In their ‘humanistic’ critique of NPM, Vickers and Kouzmin offer an equally polarised view of the position of employees, casting them as victims of a ‘human tragedy...(of) a generalised inhumanity and callousness in organizational life resulting from the efficiency imperatives of new managerialism...a calculated absence of humane consideration...exacerbated by greed, selfishness, bullying and workplace violence.’ (p. 100)

These polarised perspectives of resistance, resilience and the position of employees may offer too simplistic an analysis of the realities of NPM practice. For Thomas and Davies, the ‘micro-politics of resistance’ may be explored more meaningfully through the ways in which individuals respond in the meanings they ascribe to NPM *and* to their own positioning within these meanings, particularly when the positions offered within the NPM discourse lead to feelings of discomfort and difference. Employees are no longer seen as passive recipients of the discourse, but as subjects who both consume and challenge the ways in which their identities are constituted; ‘There is a need to understand the many, complex and often creative ways in which individuals respond to the dominant discourses of the organization’ (Thomas and Davies, 2005, p685). They understand resistance as ‘a constant process of adaptation, subversion and reinscription of dominant discourses’ (p687). Analysis at this micro-political level may enable a critique of NPM to be made other than through simple, straightforward

condemnations of managerially led initiatives and 'the deleterious consequences for the actors involved' (Vickers and Kouzmin, 2001, p99).

The move from 'old public administration' to Modernisation via 'New Public Management' suggests the requirement for a significant level of identity work from employees within the Public Sector. Thomas and Davies (2005) suggest that the process of 'redefining the workforce' is fundamental to the restructuring of public services and that New Public Management/Modernisation promote new subject positions which challenge traditional understandings of public sector organization and identities (2003). Davies (2003) believes more specifically that new managerialism requires a reconsideration of the role and significance of the professional in the public sector; it 'may well involve the most significant shift in the discursive construction of professional practice and professional responsibility that any of us will ever experience' (p. 91).

### **2. 1. 6 Conclusions on Public Sector 'Reform'**

This section of the literature review has introduced the concepts of public sector 'reform', with a particular focus on the discursive formations which dominate the various 'reform' initiatives and agendas, and the demands for 'identity work' which might arise from such a shifting discursive context. Whilst the broad themes associated with the NPM and modernisation agendas have been introduced here, this has necessarily been a brief overview. The detail of the translation and enactment of the 'reform' agenda in the local government context is considered in much closer detail in part 5 of this literature review below.

Informed by ideas established in this introductory section, the next two sections consider in turn the issues of identity and identity construction, and then, through a consideration of the manifestations of resistance in organizations, how resistance to the dominant discourses of public sector reform might be performed discursively.

## **2.2 Perspectives on Identity**

Many recent writers have suggested that the increasingly fragmented, complex, discontinuous nature of the modern world and Western society is requiring a closer scrutiny of the ways in which individual identity is considered (Giddens, 1991;

Gergen, 1992; Brown, 2001; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). According to Collinson (2003), the shift from identities ascribed by birth and legitimized through religion and family status which produced relatively stable and unambiguous selves, to a dominant ethics of success and achievement where selves are 'achieved through practice' has resulted in identities that are 'much more open' (p. 530). He suggests that this much greater openness of identity can be 'highly threatening' (p. 531).

In organizational research, a rejection of universalistic and monolithic appreciations of individual experience has spawned a centre-staging of identity as 'central for issues of meaning and motivation, commitment, loyalty, logics of action and decision-making, stability and change, leadership, group and intergroup relations, organizational collaborations etc.' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p1164-5). The changes alluded to above have 'stripped away the traditional structures shaping individual identities, placing increased pressure on individuals to construct employable and flexible selves' (Kuhn, 2006, p.1339). As a site of normative control in organizations, identity may provide a means for the integration and orchestration of work (Karreman and Alvesson, 2004).

Attempts to move to a more market and commercial based orientation within the public sector and the associated discourse of enterprise which have dominated much of the reform have called for 'a radical process of attitudinal and behavioural restructuring too' (Driscoll and Morris, 2001, p. 807). Ferlie et al (1996) suggest that such a major shift is problematic or unsustainable unless the underlying values and belief systems of organizational members undergo a similar change. Clearly, this offers an essentialist and relatively stable understanding of individual values and beliefs, but nevertheless draws attention to the way in which individual identity offers a locus for the achievement of change in the narratives of public sector reform. For individual employees, Humphreys and Brown (2002) claim that there may well be significant 'identification dilemmas' in coming to terms with the relationship between individual identity narratives and the organizational identity narratives promulgated by elites. These dilemmas are particularly likely where those organizations are characterised by multiple identity narratives which may be irreconcilable or contradictory.

Clearly the discourses of NPM/Modernisation represent only one of a 'matrix' of discourses 'vying for attention in the process of (individual) identity make-up' (Davies and Thomas, 2003). However, given that much of the literature on NPM/Modernisation suggests a continually shifting set of organizational identity narratives, characterised by a multiplicity of themes, a succession of 'newer, better' initiatives and a continual reconsideration of the priorities, agendas and targets of the Public Sector, we might expect to find evidence of these 'identification dilemmas' among individual Public Sector employees.

The concept of identity and related notions (e.g. self, personality) has a long history in psychological and organizational literature, and it is not the intention of this thesis to carry out a comprehensive review of the literature. Rather, after an initial introduction, and a discussion of some of the limitations of 'essentialist' notions of self and identity, it focuses primarily on recent conceptions of identity drawn primarily from post-structuralist and social constructivist perspectives which inform much of the recent research on identity in organizations, and which influence the perspective adopted in this research. Central to this discussion will be the themes of fixed versus fluid identity, the role of discourse in the construction of identity, the question of agency and subject 'choice' versus hegemonic determination of identity, and the concept of identity work, the activity in which people are engaged in 'forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p1165). A recurring theme will be the question of (apparently mutually exclusive) ontological positions underpinning understandings of identity, although as we will see, the dualist 'realist versus nominalist' framework advocated by the 'seminal' work of Burrell and Morgan (1979) may not be adequate for explaining all positions.

### **2.2.1 Approaches to Theorising and Researching Identity: 'Mainstream' Approaches**

Mainstream, Western post-Enlightenment perspectives on identity tend to assume that identities have an 'intrinsic essential content, defined by a common origin or a common structure of experience, and often, both' (Howard, 2000, p. 385). Human beings 'have traditionally been viewed as unitary, coherent and autonomous individuals who are separate and separable from social relations and organizations'

(Collinson, 2003, p. 527). The literature has been dominated by essentialist notions of a 'real' or 'true' self as an entity possessed by individuals (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998). The formation of this 'self' may be the result of genetic inheritance (e.g. 'trait' and 'type' theories of personality), early developmental experiences (e.g. a Freudian/psychodynamic perspective), stages in life and emotional development (e.g. Piaget, 1953; Erikson, 1963) or a function of learned behaviours based on individual experience (e.g. Watsonian behaviourist perspectives). Whilst some of these perspectives might reject the notion of an inherent self and allow for growth, development and change, they still assume that at a given point the 'true' self will exist. Even a deeply Sartrean existentialist perspective which ostensibly rejects the notion of innate 'essence' assumes that the essential self becomes more concrete and solidly 'entrenched' over time (Hacking, 2004). This 'essential' perspective does not assume that the identity of the self will be one-dimensional: Marcia (1966, 1980, 1993: in Pulkkinen and Kokko, 2000) suggests that individuals will engage in a process of exploration, 'trying out' various identity statuses, but will ultimately commit to a set of convictions, values and goals, and 'achieve' a particular identity. Assagioli's notion of 'psychosynthesis' (1971) refers to a continual tumult in which various personalities and sub-personalities struggle continuously with each other. Symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) rejects the idea of a 'static picture' of identity, and suggested that a 'parliament of selves' exists in each person. Identity is seen as a social and relational construct, a product of the interaction between the 'me' representing 'self identity' and the 'I', the social self who experiences social interactions. Whilst these latter approaches might share with post-modern perspectives a rejection of the notion of an inherent, unified and monolithic 'self', they pay only limited heed to the effects of power exercised on the individual exerting agency over their choices of who or how to be. They also largely ignore the role of language in constructing individual identity.

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) suggest that the functionalist paradigm has dominated in organizational research, and that literature on 'organizational identification', for example (e.g. Dutton et al, 1994), typically assume 'fairly stable views of the organization and self' (p. 1164). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner (1978; 1981) and Self-Categorization Theory which share with Mead the notion that identity is a relational construct, in which identity is formed from

membership of certain social groups, through feedback from social interactions and particularly comparisons and contrasts with others. Social Identity Theory has highlighted the importance of understanding the processes by which identification occurs (Brown and Starkey, 2000), emphasising as it does the group schemas which emerge in socio-political contexts. Both have proven popular in research in organizational settings (e.g. Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hogg and Terry, 2000; Van Dick et al, 2004). The conclusion of these theories is that 'individuals may have as many social identities as he or she has group memberships' and that this multiplicity of identities can and must be managed (Pratt and Foreman, 2000, p19). Whilst this notion of multiplicity may again chime with a post-modern rejection of unified notions of the self and the fragmented nature of identity, it also suggests that such identities have a certain reality, and that the challenge for individuals is simply to identify which identities have greatest salience, relevance and significance. In contrast with post-structuralist perspectives, these theories again privilege individual agency, and ignore the regulatory and hegemonic effects of power, captured in Foucault's belief in the 'death of the subject' (Hacking, 2004, p288). For Foucault, power is not simply a mechanism of control, but is also 'productive of the self' (Barker and Galasinski, 2001, p. 31). Additionally, a social constructivist perspective would suggest that such perspectives on identity (or identities) fail to take account of the fluid, dynamic and unstable nature of the processes (largely discursive) by which those identities might be constructed.

### **2.2.2 Discourse and Identity**

An alternative to the essentialist notions of self and identity outlined above is offered by what Redman (2000) refers to as the 'subject of language approach' to identity (p. 9). According to this largely constructivist perspective, identities are constituted or 'performatively enacted' in and through subject positions made available in language and wider cultural codes. According to Hall (2000), this perspective rejects the notion of the subject or identity as 'the centred author of social practice' (p. 16), and seeks to explore the relationship between subjects and discursive practices; 'the personal and social categories with which people associate are made available to them in a discourse' (Brown, 2001, p. 115)

Phillips and Hardy (2002) claim that in organizational research, the idea of the organization (and those within it?) being socially constructed and existing primarily in language is becoming widely accepted. For Delbridge and Ezzamel (2005), 'the constructive role of language is perhaps the defining characteristic that distinguishes post-structuralist literature from other intellectual approaches'. Discourse analysis shifts attention 'towards an appreciation of the power of language in constituting the world, in the sense that language/discourse is taken as the means by which human actors engage, make sense of and construct the world' (p. 607). Within this perspective, identity is constructed, negotiated, maintained and communicated through discourse (Phillips and Hardy, 2002; Thomas and Davies, 2005; Howard, 2000). In contrast with mainstream approaches which view identity as fixed and stable, identity may be viewed as a fluid and flexible resource which changes through and within interactions, with different 'identity claims' shifting as a result of contextual variation (Howard, 2000). In this vein, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) suggest that individual (and organizational) identities might be better understood in terms of 'becoming' rather than being', a continual process of construction which is lodged in contingency (Hall, 2000). Research informed by a deeply constructionist perspective might use narrative or conversation analysis to study text and talk without reference to the broader discourses or contexts in which they might be located, focusing instead on the dynamic nature of identity production through talk and text. Central to this perspective is the notion of multiple, more or less contradictory and often changing identities (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). The contrast here with the tenets of Social Identity Theory, for example, is that these multiple identities are not fixed or stable; nor are they representative of 'a collective or true self hiding inside the many other more superficially or artificially imposed selves' (Hall, 2000, p. 17). Rather, they represent the notion of a decentred self, where identities are constructed on a continuous, interactive, discursive basis.

However, the dualist proposition offered by 'essentialist versus constructionist' debates is rejected by some. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), for example, believe that 'one may avoid an 'essentialistic' position without moving to the other corner' (p. 1167). Hall maintains that anti-essentialist notions of identity do not reject the idea of an 'interior landscape of the subject' (2000, p.26), but do reject the notion that this landscape is naturally occurring, or that it possesses 'true' or 'real' features.



### 2.2.3 Power, Agency and Possibilities for Action

From a social constructionist perspective, identity moves away from signalling a core, stable self, to becoming a strategic, discursive resource; 'identities are points of temporary attachments to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us' (Hall, 1996, p6). One of the unresolved questions is the extent to which individuals are entirely at the mercy of hegemonic discourses which seek to regulate individual identity. Such 'muscular discourse', with considerable constitutive powers (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000) may exert strong imprints on fragile human subjects (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). In the tradition of Foucault, the subject is considered to be constituted purely in the discursive practices of 'disciplinary regimes' and the iterative performance of 'technologies of the self' (Redman, 2000). Foucault's legacy is a body of research which seeks to explore 'how processes of social construction lead to a social reality that is taken for granted and that advantages some participants at the expense of others' (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, p. 15). Actors may be constrained by discourses which shape a social reality, ensuring that certain phenomena are created, reified and taken for granted, ultimately coming to constitute a reality of sorts (Marcus, 1994; Dunford and Jones, 2000). Whilst acknowledging that discourse is not reflective or constitutive of an underlying reality, it may nevertheless create 'truth effects' through its impact on practice (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

The discourses deployed by organizations in the pursuit of what Karreman and Alvesson (2004) refer to as 'socio-ideological control', and may target social relations, emotions, ideology, 'ideational conformity' and, of particular interest to this research, identity formation. They suggest that in addition to 'sensemaking' processes, the processes of meaning creation (Weick, 1995) which play a significant role in identity *construction*, organizations will engage in processes of sensebreaking, grounded in identity *destruction*. In this respect, identity, and the extent to which it might be subject to the regulatory efforts of organizations and the discourses they utilise in the achievement of that regulation offers a fruitful area for consideration. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) believe that mechanisms and practices of control interact with the identity work of employees, and that this identity work 'is a significant medium and outcome of organizational control'.

These discourses may be deliberately deployed, or a consequence of those who represent the dominant hegemonic force in a given social setting. For example, Dick and Cassell (2004) have examined how the working practices of 'front-line' policing constructed as essential by the officers working on it may actually represent an assertion of masculinity, and be equally subscribed to by both male and female officers. The latter group are therefore unlikely to challenge or resist 'the working practices that seem to operate to marginalize them' (p. 52). The concept of professional identity is of particular relevance here. As Hodgson (2005) suggests, the legitimacy of the professions relies upon the establishment and maintenance of particular norms which can act as a form of discipline over professional labour. Individuals are required to justify admission to or ongoing membership of a particular professional body through demonstration that they possess the 'appropriate' identity. Disciplinary control may be exerted through the condition that membership is contingent upon satisfaction of the required norms. Privileges and status accorded may be dependent on a form of subjugation and reflexive monitoring, and in this respect, claims of professionalization may be seen as just another form of manipulation of individual identity (Hodgson, 2005). Du Gay (1993; 2000a; 2000b), Newman (2002) and Vickers and Kouzmin, (2001) have claimed that the quest for greater entrepreneurship, particularly in the public sector, represented through the deployment of a discourse of enterprise, has required individual actors in organizational contexts to manifest the appropriate values, behaviour and identity in order to be considered valued employees. Whilst post-Fordist, post-scientific management and post-bureaucratic work practices might ostensibly offer the promise of 'micro-emancipation' through claims to increased autonomy and empowerment and the promotion of teamwork as a recipe for 'high performance work systems', the organizational practices, policies and discourses associated with this approach might offer an emancipation which is at best 'precarious' and can result in 'more totalizing 'concertive' forms of control' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p.624), and what might be more accurately characterised as a form of internal compliance (Delbridge and Ezzamel, 2005, p. 606)

However, this perspective does not explain how or why particular discourses are 'taken up' by some subjects and not by others (Barker and Galasinski, 2001). As Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) indicate, there is variation in how people draw

upon and cope with different specific resources of identity stabilization. There is a risk of over-emphasizing the fragility and 'vulnerability' of subjects in the face of the discourses which play a role in constituting identity (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Many writers have urged caution in making claims that individuals are completely at the mercy of such discourses (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Kuhn, 2006), and a discussion of the processes by which individuals may exert choice over how they consume and acquiesce to identities is useful here.

#### **2.2.4 Subjectification and Agency**

Hall (2000) sees identity as a 'meeting point', a point of 'suture' or temporary attachment to subject positions constructed for us by discourses which 'interpellate' or 'hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses' (p. 19). However, he too identifies that this process of 'suturing' of a subject to a particular subject position requires subjects to invest in that position. This then problematizes the notion of the 'fragile human subject' who is entirely buffeted by dominant hegemonic discourses. An early Foucauldian perspective reinforces the entirely self-policing conception of the subject which emerges from disciplinary modalities of power (Hall, 2000, p.24). The assumption is that nothing will prevent individuals from a smooth insertion into the subject positions constructed by discourses. This 'docile bodies' approach tends to overestimate the efficacy of disciplinary power in constructing identities. A decentring of the subject does not necessarily represent a destruction of the subject. The concept of 'interpellation' (Althusser, 1971) requires the subject to have the capacity to choose how and to what extent they will respond, and pre-supposes the existence of an already constituted subject. Clearly this process acknowledges 'an interior landscape' of the individual, some 'interior mechanisms of assent to the rule' which, in Hall's view, saves Foucault's later work from behaviourism (2000, p. 26). The interplay between this 'internal landscape' and the discourses which perform to construct the individual may result in what Hall refers to as 'practices of the self' or 'practices of self-production' (2000, p.26); this performativity might alternatively be referred to as identity work. This concept then calls into question the mechanisms by which individuals as subjects identify (or do not identify) with and take up (or do not take up) the positions offered by discourses. As Coupland (2003) suggests, as well being rule-following, 'we are also rule-breaking, rule-creating and rule-changing agents' (p. 3) who will take up and

*reinterpret* organizational rhetoric as 'active consumers and negotiators of organizationally available 'designated' identities' (p.3). Equally, Thomas and Davies (2005) suggest that individuals will respond to dominant organizational discourses in 'many, complex and creative ways' (p. 685).

The struggle represented here may be between attempts of individuals to secure economic and social legitimacy (Thomas and Linstead, 2002) and the defences which individuals are motivated to deploy in a bid to preserve and defend their personal identity through a need for self-esteem (Brown and Starkey, 2000). Collinson (2003) believes that this process of struggle is a function of self-consciousness. He describes human beings as 'reflexively monitoring and purposive creatures' (p. 529) with the power to reconstruct and change our world, but warns against an over-emphasis on voluntarism and autonomy. Emphasizing the situatedness of discourses, Delbridge and Ezzamel (2005) identify the range of contexts and consequent discourses to which individuals are subject, and the ensuing personal cognitions and interests as mediating factors which prevent a total consumption of particular organizational discourses by individual actors. In a similar vein, Sveningsson and Alvesson draw attention to the possibility of the subject as a 'location of contradictory discourses' between which there are tensions and contradictions. The constant struggle which ensues may bring about *temporary* views of the self, 'where certain identity versions dominate over the others, dependent on the context' (2003, p. 1183). Worthy of discussion here is the extent to which discourses can ever be 'totalizing' in their regulatory effect. Individuals in organizations are subject to a range of discourses both internally and externally, and may choose to privilege particular identities and subjectivities other others (Clegg, 1994). (These differential identities and subjectivities may offer resources for accommodating to or resisting organizational power relations, revisited in the next section when the concept of resistance is discussed in more detail.) For Humphreys and Brown (2002), resistance to specific discursive regimes is made possible by the existence of competing discourses which ensure that 'socialization into any one discourse is never complete' (p. 929) It is the possibility of choice in situations where multiple and contradictory identities are available which provides people with 'the possibility of acting agentially' (Davies and Harre, 1999).

### 2.2.5 Positioning

The concept of subject 'positions' has been discussed in the context of possibilities for action created (and denied) by discourses. According to Harre and van Langenhove (1999), a position is a complex cluster of generic personal attributes, structured in various ways, which impinges on the possibilities of interpersonal, intergroup and even intrapersonal action through some assignment of such rights, duties and obligations to an individual as are sustained by the cluster' (p. 1). In the social constructionist tradition, positions are largely constructed through discourse, and the constitutive force of discursive practices is in the provision of subject positions (Davies and Harre, 1999). Positions are relational and relative: to be positioned as powerful, for example, others must be positioned as powerless. Edley (2001) suggests that we are re-constituted as subjects in the moment we consume discourses: whatever we might say and think about ourselves and others will always be in terms of a language provided by history. This is not to suggest that individuals are powerless in the face of positions created by others: people are 'also the masters of language' (Edley, 2001, p.210), and may choose to acquiesce, to contest or to subvert positions made available to them. People have the opportunity in those processes of subversion, contestation and acquiescence to jointly produce storylines about themselves (Davies and Harre, 1999). However, once positioned, we may subsequently rely on related concepts and resources or repertoires associated with the position (Edley, 2001). For example, the entrepreneurial discourse associated with NPM and the Modernisation may require public sector employees to adopt positions which conflict with their own preferred interest, producing feelings of discomfort and difference (Thomas and Davies, 2005). In this context, individuals may exploit the 'looseness around meanings in a constant and simultaneous process of resistance, reproduction and reinscription' (Thomas and Davies, 2005, p. 699). Individuals may draw on some aspects of the discourse of NPM, while subverting and 'wriggling out' of other ways in which NPM might attempt to produce their identity. Significantly, however, Thomas and Davies conclude that this results in the 'reification, legitimization and reproduction of the very subject positions that they are denying' (2005, p. 700). Thomas and Linstead (2002) remind us of Watson's (1995) caution that individuals do not merely 'pick off an identity' from an available list of discourses; they conclude that the process of identity formation represents an

exercise of social power. This perspective questions Benveniste's (2000) belief that 'language puts forth empty forms' (p. 43), and reintroduces us to the notion of hegemonic forces acting through discourse.

The 'looseness of meaning' which offers the opportunity for individuals to take up alternative positions has been characterised by Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 1990: in Clegg, 2001; Willmott, 2005; Bridgman and Willmott, 2006), as a failure by hegemonic articulations to achieve discursive fixity. Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse theory is both 'fervently anti-essentialist' (p. 116) and simultaneously anti-constructionist 'insofar as they understand objects to exist independently of language and thought' (Bridgman and Willmott, 2006, p.115). Meaning is conferred within systems of differences which are articulated and stabilised through discourse, and it is the performative character of discourse that produces 'truth' and 'objectivity'. They consider identity to be incomplete and ultimately unstable, but 'temporarily solidified through processes of hegemonic articulation' (Bridgman and Willmott, 2006, p.115). The existence of objects, artefacts and social entities in the world 'will always be given as articulated within discursive totalities' (Willmott, 2005, p. 749). These totalities construct 'nodal points' which only partially fix meaning, 'because no structure is exhaustive, and its closure is hegemonically and precariously secured' (Willmott, 2005, p. 752). Because meaning is relational, it can never be finally fixed: what fixity occurs is an effect of power, but what can be achieved at best by hegemonic articulations is a 'temporary solidification' (Clegg, 2001, p. 137). (p. 145). Willmott (2005), concurs with the perspective that 'the extent to which any ascription becomes solidified as 'truth' is the outcome of a hegemonic process', and suggests that fixing is both necessary and impossible: 'as fixings inevitably slip or fail in a process of antagonistic contest, current discourses are displaced, refashioned or supplanted' (p. 763).

However, there may be some disagreement on the extent to which Laclau and Mouffe's theory signals the death knell of hegemony. For Clegg (2001), Laclau and Mouffe's achievement is that the concept of hegemony 'no longer has any content'. This might imply an ontological position which denies the possibility of the effects of hegemonic articulations. Willmott (2005) suggests that Laclau and Mouffe provide an alternative to subject positions: the idea that people are subject to a plurality of *identifications*, and the associated belief that particular identifications will be

privileged over others. This may include the identification of the individual with the state of autonomy-which is nevertheless a product of a particular hegemonic discourse. Willmott then favours 'making stronger connections between knowledge... and the exercise of power that results in social realities, including identities, being articulated and enacted in particular ways' (2005, p. 756).

Clearly, then, whether we consider the constitutive effects of hegemonic discourses as producing 'subject positions' or 'subject identifications', what remains a central consideration is the question of power, and the points at which those discourses may be disrupted and open to alternative articulations of identity. The next section considers perspectives on how individuals may seek to create those alternative articulations.

### **2.2.6 Identity Work and Narratives of Self**

The ambiguity which results from individual separateness from and a simultaneous interdependence with others in the world will typically result in individuals engaging in attempts to secure a stable identity (Collinson, 2003). With and within narratives 'people strive to ...deploy cohesive devices, reveal identity of actors and relatedness of actions across scenes' (Bamberg and McCabe, 1998, iii). This renders accounts of identity potentially prone to discursive bids for coherence, meaning and sense-making, although the discursive field within which the 'crafting of the self' takes place 'produces meanings and subjectivities that are contradictory, contested and clashing...identities are mobile sites of contradiction and disunity' (Davies and Thomas, 2003, p. 685). Identity work may be seen as a buffer against the ambiguity and diversity of the external world (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), and identity narratives as a source of cohesion for individuals. This cohesion does not necessarily represent a 'linear non-contradictory autobiography...but rather, the cumulative fragments of a lived autobiography' (Davies and Harre, 1999, p. 39). Giddens (2000) describes this quest for cohesion in individual accounts and life stories as the pursuit of a 'life trajectory which accords with the individual's inner wishes' (p. 249). A strongly constructionist perspective may refute the existence of 'inner wishes', and a post-structuralist perspective would emphasize the dynamic, unstable and fluid nature of such wishes. Clearly the notion of such a quest should be considered in the context of debates over the agency/subjectification process,

and a key question here is the degree of unified cohesion sought by individuals contrasted with the notion of 'many possible coherent selves' and 'unresolved contradictions which one just lives with' (Davies and Harre, 1999, p. 49). Giddens perhaps responds to the question of fluidity with the idea of 'pluralisation of life-worlds' (Berger, 1974: in Giddens, 2000, p. 257), i.e. the diverse and segmented nature of the settings of modern social life *and* the internal pluralisation to which individuals are prone. For Giddens (2000), self-identity as a coherent phenomenon presumes a narrative 'that has to be worked at, and calls for creative input as a matter of course' (p. 253). Providing a response to the social constructionist critique of the possibility of an essential, sovereign self, Ricoeur's analysis of identity does not rely on an identity 'found at some deep center of our personality', but on a narrative structure which 'provides the self-concept with a concordant, temporal unity' (Ezzy, 1998, p. 245). This represents a sharp contrast to the work of authors such as McAdams (1996) who has usefully contributed to the notion of the 'life story', but who nevertheless adopts a more essentialistic view of dispositional personality traits. Drawing on Ricoeur's work, Cunliffe et al (2004) argue that individuals seek to link disparate life events into a coherent sequence. However, they propose that narratives do not always have coherent plotlines or characters, and suggest that post-modern narrations tend to look for multiple meanings and contradictions, and explore how hegemonic storylines 'may reinforce prevailing stories and marginalize and suppress other voices' (p. 264). This perspective suggests that it is in 'moment-to-moment talk-entwined activities' that our sense of self emerges.

By contrast, Wajcman and Martin (2002) emphasize the 'lifelong project' of constructing and exploring identities, and the intrusion of previously private goals and aspirations into public work as people pursue their 'life projects' (pp986-7). Woodruffe-Burton and Elliott (2005) perhaps reconcile these potentially opposing perspectives on narrative identity by suggesting that the free will we exercise to form images of who we want to be is directed by values which are also probably a social product: 'The pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular socio-cultural and historical context' (Markus and Nurius, 1986: in Woodruffe-Burton and Elliott, 2005, p. 462). Clearly then the ways these contexts are performed discursively will be of particular significance in the possibilities they provide for such narratives to be constructed.



### **2.2.7 Conclusions on Identity**

I have taken the following key points as conclusions on the subject of identity which inform my research: that identity is not fixed or stable, and is not a permanent quality or possession of the individual. Instead it is fluid, fragmented and dynamic.

Identity is constructed largely through discourse. This discourse is principally linguistic, but (after Laclau and Mouffe) may also include practice. The dominant discourses of organization may exert a regulatory effect on how individuals construct their identity, although individuals are subject to multiple, often contradictory identity discourses from a range of social sources and experiences, which may provide opportunities to resist organizational discourses.

We are not entirely passive, docile, and vulnerable, and may have the resources to resist hegemonic articulations in the extent to which we choose or refuse to take up specific discourses. However, this does not reflect a voluntarist perspective: the discourses available to us will still be constrained to a greater or lesser extent by the exercise of social power. Discourses, and particularly those which represent hegemonic articulations will create 'subject positions' or 'identifications' which act to shape and constrain our possibilities for action and 'possible selves'. Such positions or identifications will never be entirely fixed, and may be subverted or replaced by individuals who seek alternatives. Again, the regulatory effects of hegemonic power in creating the illusion of autonomy should be borne in mind.

Identity may be considered an ongoing 'project'. As individuals we seek to create a narrative of self-identity which provides a coherent understanding of our life story. In the pursuit of this coherence, we may seek to make alternative constructions of the past present and future, and this will particularly occur retrospectively. However, the narratives we produce will also be constrained by the social contexts in which they are produced, and we may experience practical difficulties in assembling narratives from a range of potentially divergent available discourses (Clarke et al, 2009).

### **2.3 Resistance**

The phenomenon of employee resistance is often claimed to lie at the heart of change management programmes and is considered to be a key problem for managers and other change agents (e.g. Stickland, 1998; Randall, 2004).

Managerialist/ practitioner literature is replete with recipes and formulae for 'overcoming' resistance, often suggesting that the 'problem' of resistance is a simple matter of management developing appropriate education, communication and participation strategies (e.g. Coch and French, 1948; Beer et al,1990; Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979) designed to persuade employees to share their 'vision of a new future' which will provide 'the pull-through and momentum for change' (Clarke, 1994, p.124).

Typical of this view of resistance is that it represents deliberate attempts on the part of workers to 'slow down or terminate an intended organizational change' (Lines, 2004, p. 198), and recipes for eliminating resistance usually prescribe greater persuasive efforts on the part of change agents. Should employees refuse or be unable to see that 'change can be exciting and can bring new and positive opportunities for all' (Senior and Fleming, 2006, p. 290), managers and change agents are regularly advised to resort to more forceful tactics of manipulation and co-optation, or even explicit and implicit coercion (Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979).

The managerial agenda which tends to be served by this perspective of resistance usually attributes the worst excesses of irrational, problematic or deliberately truculent employees to underlying negative attitudes or 'resistant personalities' (Symon, 2005), or to a failure on the part of management to accurately communicate their vision. Clearly this perspective is informed by a rather simplistic functionalist, unitarist, essentialist and positivistic understanding of the form, purpose and sources of resistance.

The purpose of this section is to consider some of the alternative perspectives on resistance, and to focus on how an understanding of resistance, and particularly the concept of subjectivity, might contribute to a discussion on identity construction in the organizational context, and particularly in times of change. Emphasising the inter-relatedness of the concepts, and in an early appreciation of the role of 'identity work', Jermier et al (1994) suggest that 'it is the formation and reformation of self that is the aspect of subjectivity most important for understanding contemporary strategies of resistance' (p.8), and Knights (2002) claims that resistance occurs 'because of a defence or expression of identity' (p. 585).

### **2.3.1 From Class Struggle to the Micro-Political**

Within the critical literature the dominant perspective on resistance has been represented by the notion of 'class struggle'. Whilst this perspective shares with the managerialist agenda a universalism and essentialism (Collinson, 2005), it firmly establishes a challenge to the notion of unitarism, grounded as it is in the Marxist tradition of labour process theory (Braverman, 1974). Analysis from this perspective tends to focus on the structures of control, the 'objective' category of class, and the extent to which resistance derives from revolutionary class-consciousness (Jermier et al, 1994, p.2). It considers resistance to represent a struggle against the exploitation and alienation of labour, with manifestations usually, as a result, through overt and collective forms of industrial dispute such as strikes, usually organised by trades unions, violent protests or outright sabotage (Thomas et al 2004).

Although this tradition offers a 'rich and influential challenge' to the 'functionalist domination within organization studies' (Thomas et al, 2004, p.3), a body of literature which identifies its shortcomings and advocates a broader conception of resistance has been emerging for well over a decade. Critics suggest that labour process analysis tends to highlight the structures of control, rather than seeking to hear how individual workers perceive these structures (Ezzamel et al, 2001). It is accused of failing to acknowledge the complex way in which the self might be constituted in the labour process (Jermier et al, 1994), focusing as it does purely on class, and omitting a consideration of other categories such as gender, race and sexuality. It portrays resistance as being part of a dyadic, mutually reinforcing, 'cause and effect' relationship with management control (Thomas et al, 2004; Thomas and Davies, 2005a.), and is inadequate in its consideration of the subject and object of resistance. Employees are presented somewhat simplistically as 'economically and environmentally determined' (Thomas and Davies, 2005a, p. 712), and their position is polarised as either 'docile automatons' or the authors of a grand, romanticised worker revolt (Thomas et al, 2004, p.4). The one-dimensional treatment of the role and effects of power in defining groups or individuals in a particular way fails to account for the complexity of subjectivity and the extent to which it might operate at the level of the individual. The essentialist nature of this perspective allows no scope for a consideration of resistance as a socially constructed phenomenon, or for appreciating alternative manifestations of resistance. What counts is large-scale,

overt and collective; the many forms of resistance which may occur at the level of the individual in terms of behaviour, discourse and the performance of identity are overlooked. This universalistic treatment of the nature and forms of resistance fails to appreciate the extent to which resistance may be shaped and determined by the specific context, and enacted differently according to local and situationally specific circumstances (Prasad and Prasad, 2000; Ezzamel et al, 2001; Fleming and Spicer, 2003).

Contemporary attempts to 'manage culture' in organizations may be viewed as sophisticated forms of management control which attempt to 'colonize' the identity of workers, manufacturing positive sentiments (Fleming and Spicer, 2003), producing the 'appropriate individual' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) and creating 'particular types of personhood' (Fleming and Spicer, 2003, p. 158). The more subtle forms of surveillance associated with 'new wave management practices' such as Organizational Development (OD), culture management and HRM, targeted as they are at the 'values, hearts and minds', or 'insides' of employees (Deetz 1995; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), may seek to produce self-disciplining workers who ostensibly behave as willing participants in their own subjugation (Symon, 2005; Thomas et al, 2004). Where the effects of the discourses associated with such initiatives are seen as totalising, the consequences for employees may be such that 'there is no longer a difference between workers' conceptions of self and that offered within the discourse' (Thomas et al, 2004, p.2), again, potentially removing the possibility for resistance. Clearly, in this context the notion of large scale worker revolt becomes more unimaginable, but these management initiatives do not necessarily signal the demise of resistance in organizations. Indeed, there is evidence that workers in the public sector (e.g. local government, the fire service, the Ministry of Defence) are still prepared to engage in large scale collective action over a range of issues (pension reform; working hours; pay). However, a more appropriate analytical approach for understanding alternative forms of resistance which workers deploy in the face of such all-encompassing initiatives might focus at the level of the individual, asking the 'previously absent question' of how workers resist these strategies of control that target their 'very identities' (Fleming and Spicer, 2003, p.159).

The bleak view of the passive, helpless worker who is powerless in the face of all-consuming yet subtle forms of organizational control does not sufficiently account for the possibility of the individual to create alternative versions of the self and to turn to 'quieter' ways of resisting. Jermier et al (1994, p.9) believe for example that power does not directly determine identity 'but merely provides the conditions of possibility for its self-formation'. Indeed, their definition of resistance reminds us of the potential agency of individuals: resistance is 'a reactive process where *agents*, embedded in power relations, actively oppose initiatives by other *agents*'. (My italics)

In this respect, an alternative consideration of resistance may seek to consider what is possible in the space between voluntaristic and deterministic notions of self and agency: although the everyday discourses of organization may favour dominant power relations in the way they frame worker subjectivity (Fleming and Spicer, 2003), individual workers are seen as constituted only '*partially* through the exercise of power in discursive and other practices' (Jermier et al, 1994, p. 10).

Organizational control is never total, and the systems of control may be routinely resisted both formally and informally by different organizational members (Prasad and Prasad, 2000). Employees may be 'neither organizational dupes nor prisoners of corporate sponsored discursive practices' (Brown and Coupland, 2005, p. 1063). As Humphreys and Brown suggest 'all participants in an organization have some capacity to read and author their own reality and thus oppose centralizing impositions' (2002b p. 424); subjectification and subjection are not one and the same.

Thomas et al (2004) describe the juncture between the individual's notion of self and the subjectivity created by the dominant discourse as a 'point of critical reflection' (p.6). They use the term 'micro-political resistance' which offers the opportunity for considering an agential self who may resist through reflecting upon, rewriting and challenging the 'hegemonic ways of being offered in dominant discourses'. This micro-political approach may offer opportunities for understanding resistance in a more sophisticated way than the 'dualistic debate of 'compliance with' versus 'resistance to' to offer a more generative understanding of resistance at the micro-level,' (Thomas and Davies, 2005b, p. 683).

The next section considers in detail how micro-political resistance might be identified in its various manifestations, and some of the problems and issues for researchers attempting to analyse resistance from this perspective.

### **2.3.2 Micro-Political Resistance**

The orthodox conception of resistance as outright challenge or overt hostility has been questioned by a number of writers who have suggested a range of alternative manifestations, often at the individual level. It is this resistance to the dominant at the level of the individual subject which is referred to as micro-political resistance (Weedon, 1987, p.111). Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) discuss the phenomena of work limitation, absenteeism and pilferage as evidence of worker resistance. They also suggest that the ultimate form of resistance might be worker sabotage, suggesting more direct action, although Prasad and Prasad (2000) discuss the possibility of a quiet form of sabotage through circumvention of rules or systems. Equally overt might be open confrontation with managers, colleagues or clients (Prasad and Prasad, 2000), or the persistent pursuit of grievances against the organization or management (Collinson, 1994).

Yet resistance may take the form of even more routine, subtle, prosaic and everyday activities and behaviours. These include cynicism (Fleming and Spicer, 2003), silence (Brown and Coupland, 2005), scepticism (Fleming and Sewell, 2002), humour (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999), gossip and horseplay (Prasad and Prasad, 2000) and rhetoric and counter-argument (Symon, 2005). Whilst such actions and behaviours may apparently be mundane and often unremarkable, they may nevertheless represent omnipresent and persistent efforts on the part of workers to oppose managerial/organizational control and domination (Prasad and Prasad, 2000). Interestingly, Fleming and Spicer (2003) believe that whilst many of the activities above offer opportunities for dis-identifying with prescribed roles, creating an 'inner free space' for workers where they might protect their 'backstage selves' (p.160), at the same time these very activities may serve to render them better organizational citizens as this separation and distance enables them to perform as required. This phenomenon is also considered by Du Gay and Salaman (1992), who suggest that even where individuals maintain a cynical distance from 'enterprise' they nevertheless reproduce it 'through their involvement in everyday practices

within which enterprise is inscribed' (p. 630). Clearly then the consequences of these manifestations of resistance may be less damaging to the organization than some of the more overt forms: the cynical, sceptical or humorous worker may nevertheless work efficiently and meet organizational demands.

King and Anderson (2002) suggest that demotivation, intentional underperformance and purposeful lack of realisation of potential might be symptomatic of employee resistance. Similarly, Prasad and Prasad (2000) believe that resistance might be enacted through employee withdrawal and disengagement. This presents an interesting dilemma for the researcher of resistance: each of these phenomena might equally be considered to be a direct consequence of management or organizational policies and actions rather than a consciously selected course of action on the part of the worker. It is difficult to conceive of demotivation as a *deliberate* strategy of resistance, although it may be captured by what Linstead (1997) describes as 'unconscious' resistance, and Prasad and Prasad (2000) term 'indirect resistance'. This, they suggest, results from managerial interpretations of employee behaviours as disruptive even when they were not deliberately intended as such by the employee. Clearly, a degree of ambiguity is inevitable where this type of resistance is concerned.

A key question here therefore is what might feasibly be considered as resistance. Evidently, if all the behaviours proposed above represent potential manifestations of resistance, it might be possible to interpret *any* behaviour as resistant, regardless of the intentions and motivations of the worker. Gottfried (1994) for example, discusses the potential for 'deviance' in dress and appearance among female workers. Whilst such deviance may represent a departure from established workplace norms of dress, it may also represent a broader rejection of the societal expectations of the performance of gender.

For Prasad and Prasad (2000) the forms of routine resistance outlined above, despite being pervasive in organizations, are frequently less evident, covert, or invisible to the casual observer. This kind of resistance which constitutes part of the informal organization may be cloaked in secrecy or disguised as more legitimate action. Both Ezzamel et al (2001) and Fleming and Spicer (2003) refer to the idea of dissembling co-operation or 'surface acting', a phenomenon to which Faison Hewlin

(2003) refers as 'facades of conformity'. These strategies may enable workers to perform appropriateness or acceptability whilst resisting exhortations to internalise the espoused values of the organization. Such appearances of consensuality and co-operation might conceal resistance, which to outside observers may not be immediately recognizable. Similarly, where individuals actively engage in activities which constitute impression management, it may be difficult to identify resistance within workers' 'apparently accommodative performance of themselves as knowingly compliant employees' (Brown and Coupland, 2005, p. 1063). Prasad and Prasad (2000) see the task of identifying routine resistance as 'immensely problematic' and caution that practices which appear to be subversive and disruptive may not necessarily be intentionally resistant on the part of the worker, whilst ostensibly compliant actions might mask resistance.

Researchers may therefore need caution in identifying and naming behaviours as resistance, or in taking the word of managers who choose to interpret particular actions as resistant. The issue here is what *counts* as resistance, and in attempting to discern resistance at the individual level, researchers run the risk of 'essentializing' resistance, rather than conceiving of it as a socially constructed phenomenon, thus 'imposing rather than investigating the meaning that subjects themselves attribute to their actions or behaviours', (Jermier et al, p.10). This process of investigation may however not be quite the straightforward task suggested: given the messy, complex and ambiguous nature of change, individuals may themselves not be entirely aware of whether they are resisting change or not, and may find it difficult to consciously articulate their position whilst change is occurring (Linstead, 1997). Narratives often consist of retrospective justification in the quest for cogency and cohesion, and actions may be interpreted post hoc as either resistant or not to enable the author to maintain discursive consistency. Prasad and Prasad (2000) suggest that a 'discursive turn' may offer potential opportunity for exploring resistance as it is produced and performed locally and socially by different organization members, where contests over meaning and articulations of counter discourses take place (Thomas et al, 2004). An ethnographic approach (discussed in detail in the methodology chapter) may enable researchers to explore the 'pluralistic and polyphonic' nature of organizations which involve 'multiple dialogical practices that occur simultaneously and sequentially' (Humphreys



and Brown, 2002b, p. 422) and to consider the nature of actions which are discursively constituted as routine resistance, and the processes by which that constitution takes place. In this vein, Thomas and Davies (2005b, p. 684) argue that individual resistance can be understood at the level of meanings and identities where individuals 'struggle to create, appropriate and transform' the dominant organizational discourse through a process of adaptation, subversion and reinscription of dominant discourses. This may take place as individuals evaluate the contradictions and tensions they experience in reconciling the potential consequences of dominant discourses for their own identity performance. This issue of identity and resistance is discussed in more detail below.

### **2.3.3 Resistance as an Expression or Defence of Identity**

Several authors have suggested that workers are concerned to preserve their sense of self-identity, and may seek to maintain working practices which confirm or enhance this sense of self, whilst resisting those which threaten or impugn their identity (e.g. O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001; Knights, 2002; Thomas and Davies, 2005b). Indeed, Knights believes that employees continue to work efficiently and productively in part 'because their identity is tied up in so doing' (2002, p.585). For Ezzamel et al (2001), individual identity is not to be found in behaviour, but in the capacity to maintain a particular narrative of the self. Workers will pursue strategies of resistance against management and organizational strategies, plans and reforms which present perceived threats to their self-identity, and which enable them to secure and enhance their sense of identity at work. These 'identity confirming activities' (p. 1074) may be grounded in routine activities and located in non-work practices which are threatened by new work systems, as identified for the factory workers in their research. Additionally, the 'new wave management' practices referred to earlier may seek to manage individual beliefs, meanings and interpretations in a way which targets identity more directly, for example, through seeking to create entrepreneurial selves (Du Gay, 2000).

Faced with potentially multiple, irreconcilable and competing discursive regimes which offer particular resources for identity construction and negotiation, individuals will seek to author 'relatively coherent and integrated self-narratives' (Humphreys and Brown, 2002a, p. 928). The discursive field within which this 'crafting of the self'

takes place 'produces meanings and subjectivities that are contradictory, contested and clashing...identities are mobile sites of contradiction and disunity' (Davies and Thomas, 2003, p. 685). In addition to organizational-specific discourses, individuals and groups may derive (or seek to derive) a sense of self-identity through a narrative of self based on the nature of the job itself (e.g. discourses of vocational orientation, managerial or professional identity) or the sector in which the work is located (the discourse of the public service ethos, for example). In these circumstances, changes to the nature of the role, the priorities, performance measures or accountability, or discourses which prescribe such changes, may trigger forms of resistance by those employees who are affected, and particularly where they perceive adverse consequences for their narrative of self identity. These issues are discussed in detail below in the section on the role and identity of HR. The conditions of possibility for such resistance may occur where discourses are less fixed, and where individuals, motivated by a desire to preserve (perceived) integrity of self-identity seek to challenge the subject positions or identifications made available to them. One of the advantages of this perspective on resistance is that it may provide the opportunity for understanding resistance amongst managers and professionals who have not traditionally been considered (Thomas and Davies, 2005a). Thomas and Davies (2005a) have identified how social workers, for example, seek to position their identity differently from that promoted within the NPM discourse by drawing on alternative discourses of public service professionals, 'real' managers, caring individuals etc., effectively resisting the 'de-professionalization project of NPM' (p.732).

### **2.3.4 Conclusions on Resistance**

This section has considered resistance not as a phenomenon to be managed or overcome by management strategies, but as a socially constructed phenomenon which varies in its local and individual-level manifestations. The large scale, collective version of resistance associated historically with Marxian labour process informed analysis does not necessarily represent a complete or sophisticated understanding of resistance in organizations, ignoring as it does the processes of sense and meaning making at the level of the individual.

Current forms of management strategy and practice ('new wave') which seek to target individual beliefs, subjectivities and identity may engender alternative forms of resistance in the space where they fail to exert totalitarian control, and where employees' agential self author alternative versions of truth and reality. Micro-political resistance is likely to manifest itself in everyday activities, and particularly in the discursive struggle by which individuals seek to construct, negotiate and preserve a sense of self identity, drawing on a range of discursive resources including the dominant organizational discourse. Managers and professionals may engage in this form of resistance drawing on alternative discourses of, for example, ethics and morals (Kornberger and Brown, 2007), emotion (Clarke et al, 2010), commitment, professionalism or integrity.

Researching the micro-political is far from straightforward, and may be best achieved through methods which enable a view of how resistance and the performance of identity are discursively enacted in the specific context in which they arise.

The final section of this literature review now turns to the discourses which inform the construction of the particular functional/ professional identity of the participants in this research: human resource management and the human resources function.

#### **2.4 HRM and the HR function**

A number of powerful voices and discourses have dominated the HRM arena, with influential prescriptions for how those occupying HR roles should perform. In 2001, Caldwell warned that the emergence of a consultancy or advisory model for the HR role offered the potential for the occupational self-identity and function of the HR professional to be undermined (p. 50). However, as Hope-Hailey et al (2005) indicate, 'we know little about how HR roles are played out, over time, in organizations' (p. 52). The purpose of this section is to consider some of the more prominent discourses of HR identity and performance, particularly those most prominent in the practitioner literature in recent years. As a means of understanding the broader context of how HR is conceived and enacted in organizations, the section begins with a (necessarily brief) consideration of the evolution of HRM and its origins, and particularly of the discourses through which the people management function in organizations has been conceived.

If we accept that HRM (or 'HRM-ism', Keenoy, 1997; 1999) is a fluid, multi-faceted and socio-cultural artefact which has represented a site of discursive struggle, whereby particular discourses are privileged and others marginalized (Harley and Hardy, 2004) then a consideration of the discursive activity which has structured the 'textscape' (Keenoy and Oswick, 2004) of HRM is worthwhile. Of particular interest here are the narratives which have prescribed the 'ideal' role, identity and orientation for the HR function in organizations and how those within the function have drawn on such discursive resources in the pursuit of organizational legitimacy, voice, status and credibility.

The purpose of the section is not to establish any 'truth' about the 'realities' which exist, but to draw attention to the multiple, competing discourses which potentially shape the identities of HR practitioners, and how those discourses have been deployed by various actors.

#### **2.4.1 The Discursive Journey From Welfare and Traditional Personnel Management (TPM) to Human Resource Management (HRM)**

The early origins of personnel management derive from the (predominantly female) welfare officers appointed by philanthropic industrialists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, charged with alleviating some of the social problems of employees. The Welfare Workers Association which was founded in 1914 has ultimately evolved into the present day organization of HR professionals, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). 'Traditional Personnel Management' is largely associated with the post war period when employment legislation was introduced by successive interventionist Governments with the aim of improving conditions for workers, and pluralist and collectivist principles prevailed.

A number of authors have charted the evolution from personnel management to HRM, identifying the key differences in focus, aims and philosophy (e.g. Guest, 1987; Storey, 1992; Legge, 1995). It would be spurious to claim that there is consensus on what constitutes HRM (Paauwe and Boselie, 2005), as there has been considerable ambiguity in the use of the term (Redman and Wilkinson, 2005), and Keenoy (2009) has suggested that the term 'HRM' is a floating or empty signifier, open to articulation, inscription, interpretation in multiple forms and with multiple ends.

Whilst some writers have suggested that in practice, there is little difference between the two, (e.g. Legge, 1995; Gennard and Kelly, 1997) it is, nevertheless possible to identify some of the differences in the discourses of TPM and HRM. The principle differences are considered to be the move away from an employee-centred, bureaucratic, rule-based, policing orientation, to strategic 'value-adding' rhetoric, marshalling talk of contributing to the achievement of business objectives, and with significant responsibility for day-to-day people management activities devolved to line management. Perhaps more significantly, HRM is underpinned by unitarist assumptions, whereby previous collectivist approaches are eschewed in favour of individualistic management/worker relations, and claims that the interests of employees and the organization can be happily aligned. In this vision of organizational harmony, it is the HR department which is charged with reconciling the interests of employees with those of all other stakeholders (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; discussed in more detail below).

Some authors question the notion that HRM can serve the interests of employees; Mueller and Carter, for example, (2005: p. 369) believe that it is no coincidence that HRM emerged at a time when the balance of power in employment relations underwent a 'seismic shift' in favour of management and shareholders. They believe that an increased orientation towards markets, enterprise and the freedom of the manager to act which characterised the early 1980's opened up the 'ontological space for HRM'. Similarly, Bratton and Gold (2007) characterise HRM as the historical outcome of a rising neo-liberalist ideology representing the dominant managerialist thinking. Torrington et al (2005) suggest that in the extent to which HRM is mainly directed at the needs of management, 'It is totally identified with management interests' (p. 10). According to Keenoy (1999), HRM may be considered variably as 'managerialist gloss' (p.827), 'a mask for managerial opportunism' (p.829), and heavily influenced by 'managerialist hyperbole' (p. 837) In this respect, HRM represents a major departure from the espoused aims of paternalistic personnel management. The aspect of HRM which has 'most excited practitioners' is perhaps the claim that HRM as a new and distinctive approach can 'develop and utilise the potential of human resources to the full in pursuit of the organization's strategic objectives' (Redman and Wilkinson, 2005, p.4).

A range of models of HRM has been proposed, principally in the US and UK, which offer the claim that appropriate people management can provide the source of organizational competitive advantage if the right policies and practices can be identified. Two key dimensions exist against which models might be evaluated: their bias for 'best fit', or alignment of HR policies and practices with strategic business contingencies (e.g. Fombrun, Tichy and Devanna 1984; Hendy and Pettigrew, 1990) or for 'best practice', essentially a prescriptive approach which recommends specific 'bundles' of HR practices which may be universally applied, with positive outcomes, regardless of context (e.g. Pfeffer, 1994; Guest, 1997). This approach is often referred to as 'high performance' or 'high commitment' HRM (contrasted with 'control' systems of HRM, e.g. Arthur, 1994), and is underpinned by the premise that the effects of implementing a number of well chosen HRM practices will combine synergistically to reinforce a high commitment paradigm in organizational culture, ultimately leading to superior organizational performance (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2005). This introduces the second (related) dimension by which approaches to HRM have been classified: the notions of 'hard' and 'soft' approaches. The 'hard' approach to HRM based on the premise of 'utilitarian instrumentalism' (Legge, 2005, p.105) views employees as a resource like any other, as a factor of production to be used as management sees fit in the pursuit of business objectives (Boyne et al, 1999; Jaconelli and Sheffield, 2000). A philosophy of 'developmental humanism' (Legge, 2005, p.105) informs the 'soft' approach, premised on the notion that excellent performance is only possible if employees feel a sense of motivation, commitment and job satisfaction as a result of HR policies which focus on the long-term loyalty, development and retention of workers. Despite the claim that HRM is a generic term which 'includes anything and everything associated with the management of employment relationships in the firm' (Boxall and Purcell, 2000, p.184), it is the soft/high commitment version of HRM which has received most attention, and some authors claim that it is *exclusively* this approach which represents HRM (Storey, 1995). However, the labels 'soft' and 'high commitment' may represent a rather misleading rhetoric. For example, Boyne et al (1999) believe that despite the 'soft' discourses deployed by many organizations, particularly in the private sector, the experience reported by employees is more consistent with the 'hard' version (Truss et al, 1997), and Marchington and Grugulis (2000) suggest that

some 'high commitment' practices may actually result in a greater sense of control and work intensification on the part of employees.

Both the practitioner and academic literature focus heavily on the notion that the alignment of HR and business strategies will be conducive to superior organizational performance, and much of this literature has been dominated by uncritical, functionalist prescriptions (Watson, 2004) for how HR might become more strategic, value-added, business-serving, and bottom-line orientated (e.g. Ulrich, 1997, 1998; Beer, 1997; Ulrich and Beatty, 2001; Brockbank, 1999). The HR function has been exhorted to cast off its traditional reactive, prescriptive and administrative mantle, and to become more 'proactive, descriptive and executive' (Budhwar, 2000). The extent to which HRM is considered genuinely strategic, thereby held to contribute more tangibly to the performance of the organization has been debated at length, particularly in the context of the realist and positivistic assumptions which underpin such claims. Paauwe and Boselie (2005) review the range of problems entailed within this somewhat simplistic assertion, and suggest that the need to and possibilities for establishing this business strategy/HR link have been overplayed. Research has attempted to establish clear links between, high commitment or best practice HRM, and advocates support the claims that the effects of such practices are 'real, economically significant and general' (Pfeffer, 1998, pp.33-34), leading to 'positive outcomes for all types of firms' (Huselid, 1995, p.644). This has been tested in a range of organizational settings, including an assessment of the adoption of HRM practices and patient mortality rates in the NHS (West et al, 2002). The majority of literature addressing HRM is premised on such realist assumptions and cause and effect explanations of both HRM and performance. Despite enthusiasm for this form of HRM there is little available evidence supporting the HRM-performance link (Gerhart, 2004; in Paauwe and Boselie, 2005). Nevertheless, there is evidence that the popularity of HRM and the claims made for it continue unabated. Such approaches fail to consider the possibility that HRM is predominantly a discursive construct, a fluid and ambiguous phenomenon whose aim and effect as a language 'project' is principally to shift perceptions of reality (Keenoy, 1990; 1999). What is clear is that the enthusiasm with which such claims have been greeted in practitioner arenas in particular has led to a prevalence of unquestioned, unchallenged HRM discourse(s). For example, the unquestioned notion of a

'strategic' orientation for HRM has been at the centre of this debate, with arguments about the possibilities and consequences of such an achievement dominating the literature. 'Strategicness' is presented unproblematically, with even the critical literature focusing not on the questionability of its possibility or on the largely unchallenged maxim of its necessity, but on the potential consequences for other aspects of the HR role, e.g. as custodian of organizational values, or of employee well-being (see, for example, Nkomo and Ensley, 1999; Francis and Keegan, 2006; Harris, 2007).

It would appear that 'being strategic' (in whatever form that might take) has largely become the sine qua non for the HR function, although Nkomo and Ensley (1999) suggest that it is not self-evident that this should be the case, and that HR's 'courtship' of the strategic discourse limits other ways of thinking about people in organizations. A further criticism of this 'courtship' derives from the fact that 'strategy' and strategising are not themselves unchallenged discourses, and the 'slipperiness' of these discourses has been well documented elsewhere (for a discussion of the 'strategy' literature, see Ezzamel and Willmott, 2008).

#### **2.4.2 The Role of HR and the HR function: achieving legitimacy?**

As Redman and Wilkinson (2005) indicate, current practitioners of people management in organizations are no longer personnel officers, but have been 'rebranded' as HR managers. Caldwell (2003) suggests that personnel managers are 'past masters' at reinventing their role (p.84), and with ubiquitous assertions that those within the HR function need to 'transform how they are perceived' (Beatty et al, 2007), to bridge the 'personnel credibility gap' (Keenoy, 1997), 'to gain reputational effectiveness' (Gratton and Truss, 2007), and to 'win broad acceptance' in order to achieve greater 'confidence in their role in the organization' (Tarplett, 2000), it is perhaps not surprising that HR has been described variably as 'political animals' (Tyson and Fell, 1992) and 'chameleons' (Hope-Hailey et al, 1997). This quest for legitimacy and status may be associated with the tensions inherent within the nature of personnel/HR work: the function has been held responsible for achieving both the control *and* consent of employees (Watson, 2002), for delivering both justice *and* efficiency in the employment relationship (Harris, 2007). For Watson, such dilemmas



may lead to 'occupational insecurity', with implications for 'the identity work which members of such an occupation have to do' (2002, p.102).

The quest for credibility and legitimacy for the HR function is by no means a new phenomenon. As early as 1954, Drucker reported the apparent inability of personnel administrators to prove their contribution and their search for a 'gimmick' with which to impress management (Drucker, 1954). The trend apparently continued even after the advent of HRM and its promise of higher status for the function, with HR employees engaging in impression management, in an attempt to make an impact on senior managers through high profile innovations (Marchington, 1995). Legge offers a rather more self-seeking characterisation on the part of HR as a 'willingness to adopt different roles and rhetorics to suit the contingencies of the times and to exploit possible bases of power,' Legge (1995, p. 53.) This certainly echoes the 'exercise in reinvention' suggested by Ferris et al (2007), through which HR casts off its old identity and transforms itself into a newly strategic and multi-faceted function.

More recently, some authors have suggested that the HR function has acquired greater legitimacy and established a clear and credible identity through articulating a contribution to organizational strategy and performance in line with senior management demands (see for example Shipton and Davies, 2008; Marchington, 2008). For Guest and King (2004), any tensions or ambiguities facing the function which might have arisen from a need to balance the needs of management with a concern for employee interests (as articulated by Legge, 1978) are of little relevance now as the function has evolved a more clear-cut alignment with management. Combined with the rather narrow definitions of 'performance' entailed in the literature (predominantly financial and organizational; see for example Guest, 2011), and the constant quest for HR 'metrics' (Tootell et al, 2009) to demonstrate contribution in terms of managerially-defined 'value added', this suggests a limited role for the function in line with Legge's (1978) concept of the 'conformist innovator'. The HR practitioners assumes this role, she suggested, when they operate within the dominant organizational values and goals and define professionalism in terms of '*acquiring expertise that will enable him (sic) to demonstrate a closer relationship between his activities (means) and organizational success criteria (ends)*'. (p. 79). This is contrasted with the deviant innovator '*who attempts to change this*

*means/ends relationship by gaining acceptance for a different set of criteria for the evaluation of organizational success and his (sic) contribution to it.' (p. 85)*

Perhaps the explanation for this alignment of HR with management, and the 'naturalization' of this alignment as a taken-for-granted orientation for the HR function is to be found in the dominance of Ulrich's work over the past 20 years, and this is discussed in the next section.

### **2.4.3 'Ulrichisation' of the function**

Perhaps the most influential proponent of this 'new HR', with clear prescriptions for the roles which a successful HR function must fulfil is Ulrich, whose 1997 typology has gained a predominant position and has tended to be uncritically accepted (Kirkbride and Ward, 2002, p.70), and is credited with leading to 'an upheaval in the jobs of thousands of HR professionals'.

Since the early 1990's, Ulrich, Professor of Business at the University of Michigan has featured as one of the most widely cited and influential figures in the Human Resource Management literature. Editor of Human Resource Management Journal for nine years from 1990-1999, he has garnered plaudits for his work on the nature, purpose and orientation of the human resources (HR) function, and was voted Business Week's 'number one management educator' in 2001. Ulrich's 20 books, copious peer-reviewed and practitioner articles and book chapters have focused on the 'transformation' of HR from an ineffective, incompetent and costly value-sapping function (1998) into a 'critical contributor to business success' (Ulrich et al, 2009). The distinctiveness of his contribution lies in the prescriptions for HR practitioners on how they should organize themselves and determine their priorities, and specifically on how the function should create a plausible organizational identity for itself. Whilst HR professionals 'must declare, live, and encourage moral principles', more importantly they must deliver something *of value* (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005), and Ulrich's home page declares that HR must 'give *value* or give notice,' (Ulrich, 2009). This 'value proposition' (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005) is not informed by the principles of an independently credible HR profession informed by its own standards and ethical codes, but on the successful articulation of the goals and values of HR's

‘customer’, predominantly line managers, by which the contribution of HR will be measured.

Ulrich’s early work advocated ‘adding value’ to investors, customers *and* employees alike, and the function was charged with, among other roles, championing the interests of employees (Ulrich, 1997) and acting as conscience of the organization (Ulrich and Beatty, 2001). However, more recent writings have focused less on HR’s responsibility to employees than on serving more powerful masters. Targeting perhaps the lucrative corporate client his University home page proudly boasts that *‘His teaching and research addresses how to create an organization that adds value to customers and investors.’* (University of Michigan Faculty page, 2009). The next section considers in greater detail the prescriptions for the role of the function.

Ulrich’s current ‘value proposition’ suggests that HR’s pursuit of legitimacy is ill-served by a commitment to the developmental humanism or welfare orientations of traditional personnel management. The primary concern for the HR practitioner should be the pursuit of ‘strategic business alignment’ which will enable the HR function to be ‘poised for powerful strategic advantage’ (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). His 1997 and 1998 publications claimed to offer a ‘new mandate for human resource professionals’, with a clear model for how the HR function might ‘add value’ and ‘deliver results’. The premise of his proposition was that HR might only be ‘finally accepted as a profession’ by fully demonstrating value to a business-with the clear implication that the function had previously failed to do so. An updated typology proposing ‘new roles to aspire to’ was published in 2005, and both typologies are now considered in some detail. The two typologies (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005) are compared below:

Mid-1990’s	Mid-2000’s
Administrative Expert	Functional Expert
Employee Champion	Employee Advocate Human Capital Developer
Change Agent	Strategic Partner
Strategic Partner	Strategic Partner
	Leader

(Adapted from Ulrich, D and Brockbank, W (2005) 'Role Call', People Management, 16<sup>th</sup> June, 2005, pp.24-28)

Interestingly, the 1997 '*administrative* expert' role, which might be considered to represent the traditional 'bread and butter' activities of traditional personnel management is renamed the '*functional* expert' in 2005. Clearly the 'administrative' label is considered too stigmatised and associated with the old, bureaucratic personnel management approach (particularly relevant in the context of a denigrated 'Old Public Administration' in the public sector), and the shift suggested here is from being an expert in the administration of processes and procedures to HR-related expertise. Whilst both of these 'expert' roles suggest an operational focus, the more recent label denotes a subject-specific expertise which may be grounded in an apparently neutral body of knowledge which underpins the development of HR as a profession.

The early role of employee champion has evolved into 'advocacy', an apparently innocuous shift, although the new title suggests that while the HR practitioner might be prepared to voice the interests or concerns of the employee, they may be less prepared to fight or argue than a 'champion'. The shift here might communicate greater neutrality about the interests of employees, and a stronger alignment with management as the communicator but not defender of employees' interests. At the heart of this role is the responsibility for HR to establish an organization's reputation for fairness and equity, ensuring that policies are implemented across the organization, and rooting out discrimination whenever it appears. Ulrich and Brockbank suggest that the advocacy role can contribute to a 'caring' organization (2005, p. 26), but that this caring should be tempered by fiscal and management responsibility. The assumption underpinning this suggestion is that HR can always manage an optimal balance between fairness, equity, consistency, 'caring', and ensuring mutual respect, and the demands of finance and management, although given the need for HR to communicate 'competitive realities' to employees, they acknowledge that advocacy 'isn't all sweetness and light' ! (p. 26). There is no suggestion that HR should evidence divided loyalties: the measurement of their effectiveness will be in terms of 'business competitiveness rather than employee comfort' (Ulrich, 1998, p.126).

A new dimension to the 2005 typology is the addition of the 'Human Capital (HC) Developer' to the Employee Advocate role. Whilst the advocacy role is preoccupied with short-term issues, the HC role seeks to prepare employees to be successful in the future, 'emphasising individual employees more than organization processes' (p. 27). This again may represent a challenge when juxtaposed with the need to uphold universal fairness and consistency-usually achieved through the consistent implementation of organization processes. Finally, the HC development role includes helping employees to 'forget' old skills, and motivating 'desired behaviours', although it is not clear how these 'desired behaviours' will be identified, or what the consequences might be for employees who are unable to demonstrate them: clearly 'employee comfort' will not be the priority.

Both typologies retain at their core the role of the 'strategic partner', whereby HR practitioners 'partner with line managers to help them reach their goals through strategy formulation and execution' (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005, p. 27). The implication here is that line managers will play an increasing role in the delivery of people management policies and practices, and this devolution of responsibility is core to most versions of HRM (e.g. Guest, 1997; Storey, 2001). The role for HR employees might then be to craft appropriate HR strategies (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005), and to deal with more specialist or complex HR activities such as employee relations, or employment law (Redman and Wilkinson, 2005). Additionally, HR will provide appropriate support and advice to line managers (Currie and Proctor, 2001), asking 'tough questions' in a 'devil's advocate' capacity, being 'not only thought leaders, but masters of practice', and serving as coaches who 'shape points of view and offer feedback on progress' (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005, p. 27).

This 'business partner' role has been welcomed with apparent enthusiasm by many practitioners (Arkin, 2007), although there is acknowledgement that this model offers potential conflicts for the HR officer/manager who is required to satisfy the needs of both line management and a central, corporate HR function. Caldwell (2003) has identified both role conflict and role ambiguity within the HR profession as a result of competing, conflicting demands made upon it, and recent research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development suggests that whilst the 'business partner' role has been enthusiastically embraced by many organizations in the UK (83% of respondents) the experience has not been unproblematic.

A number of authors (e.g. Hope-Hailey et al, 2005; Francis and Keegan, 2006; Harris, 2007) have questioned the wisdom of focusing on the strategic partnering role, suggesting that it may be at odds with both the employee champion/advocate and change agent roles, with the potential result that 'people's everyday work experience may deteriorate' (p. 63), eroding goodwill and loyalty, thus diminishing the commitment of employees. Additionally, the question remains of the espoused philosophy by which HR employees might operate: is the role to satisfy the needs of 'the line' at all costs, or to ensure consistent implementation of a universal set of HR principles and practices? A complicating factor here is the reporting line of the incumbents: if their job security and progression depends on the approval of business managers, it would not be surprising if (as the CIPD research mentioned above suggests) they were to 'go native'. The battle lines (and militaristic metaphors are not unusual in this arena: see for example, Gratton and Truss, 2007, who refer to 'bold actions', 'bravery', 'winning' and 'war rooms') may be redrawn so that HR business partners are pitted against a central HR 'expert function'. As the CIPD's own research suggests, 'business partnering' may have resulted not in the integration of the HR function into the business, but in the recreation of silos drawn on HR roles rather than on functionalist lines.

The re-allocation of HR responsibility to line management implicit within the typologies may not be unproblematic, and the assumption that line managers will be ready, willing and able to take over the roles previously fulfilled by the HR function may represent a rather optimistic view. A number of factors have been offered in explanation of managerial reluctance or inability, including a lack of appropriate skills on the part of line management; a lack of time because of competing priorities and the need to respond to short-term business demands; a disdain for HR work, and a lack of incentive or recognition for taking on this additional work; and inconsistencies in application (Cunningham and Hyman, 1999; McGovern, 1999; Brewster and Holt Larsen, 2000). Additionally, HR practitioners may be reluctant to relinquish control of activities, fearful for their own future, and may have a vested interest in maintaining a high level of dependency on the part of line managers, particularly where this offers access to claims of legitimacy and status. Clearly this has potentially negative consequences for employees, who may be less than effectively managed, for the HR function who often remain accountable but not responsible for effective delivery of

HR practice, and for organizations if the value of the organization's human capital is diminished as a result (Hope-Hailey et al, 2005).

The devolvement of HR implementation responsibilities from the HR function to the line is often associated with a 'freeing-up' of HR to focus on the 'strategic' dimension of their role. However, the paradox here is that HR might only be offered a strategic role as a 'full member' of the organization's management (Brockbank, 1999) if it can earn credibility and legitimacy through operational/administrative excellence (Harris, 2007), but that it is only through 'neglecting the basics' that the function might be able to pursue strategic legitimacy (Redman and Wilkinson, 2001). Redman et al (1997, in Renwick, 2003) suggest that middle manager reluctance might be based on a feeling of being 'stuck in the middle', a fate already documented by Watson (2002) when describing the dilemmas faced by personnel managers, 'caught in the middle' between various interests, e.g. between management and trade unions. Perhaps this syndrome is inevitable for those responsible for day-to-day people management practice (whether line manager or HR employee) while people management priorities remain a 'third or fourth order' consideration behind marketing, finance and economic/profit maximisation considerations (Keenoy, 1997).

Finally, the role of 'change agent' present in the 1997 typology has disappeared from the 2005 version, to be replaced by the role of 'HR Leader'. This is perhaps surprising given the prominence accorded to the 'changemaker' role in a wide range of prescriptive literature (e.g. Storey, 1992), and the original significance of the change management competencies described by Ulrich in 1997 as 'the most important for success' (p. 31). Caldwell characterises HRM as 'a philosophy of competitive advantage concerned with managing innovation and change in the workplace' (2001, p. 41) and Ulrich's 1997 typology as 'an inspiring vision.. (of) the HR professional as a proactive agency of culture change' (2001, p. 50). Ulrich and Brockbank justify the omission of the change agent role as 'a response to the changing roles we are observing in the leading organizations with which we work' (2005, p.24) and suggest that the work of the change agent is often absorbed into that of the HR strategic business partner. The omission of this role from the 2005 typology may represent an acknowledgement that in practice HRM is situated as a 'downstream' strategy implementation activity (Legge, 1993), affording fewer strategic intervention opportunities for the HR function, or a recognition that when

major change is contemplated by organizations, HR consultants or interim change managers may be considered preferable to ‘an internal HR function that may be intrinsically ‘antithetical to change’ (Caldwell, 2001, p 49).

The ‘HR Leader’ role is introduced as ‘leadership is so critical’ (p. 24); a ‘well-led’ HR department earns credibility ‘and the reverse is also true’ (p. 28). However, leadership is not confined to the most senior HR managers: ‘every HR professional exercises personal leadership by accepting accountability for doing today’s work while adapting for tomorrow’s requirements’. The implication is that effective HR practitioners will readily adopt chameleon-like behaviours in ensuring that their identity is continuously evolving to meet the changing demands of the business.

Finally, one ostensibly small but nevertheless significant point which underlines the centrality of HR assuming an appropriate identity: Ulrich and Brockbank introduce their 2005 typology with the observation that a role is an identity (an observation supported elsewhere, e.g. Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p.5), and suggest that to perform successfully in the HR function, identity work may be necessary (‘To deliver value as an HR professional, *I must be a...*’ p. 24-my italics). They also conclude that few HR professionals perform all five roles simultaneously, but that when moving from one area of HR to another, HR practitioners will need to ‘learn the script’ for the new role (p. 28). Despite the realist claims and assertions underpinning their prescriptions, perhaps they too are acknowledging that HRM is essentially a discursive identity project.

The seductive appeal of Ulrich’s prescriptions may be explained by the hope it proffers the HR function for greater organizational legitimacy and influence. Perhaps not surprisingly given such lavish claims, Ulrich’s ideas appear to have received an enthusiastic welcome from the HR practitioner community. Awarded honorary doctorates and frequent ‘top guru’ and ‘most influential person’ awards by a range of practitioner publications, the World Federation of Personnel Managers presented him with an award for ‘lifetime contribution’ to the human resource profession’ in 2000. His ideas appear to have similarly seduced the HR practitioner bodies of the UK, US and Australia. The Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI) operates a ‘Model of Excellence’ for the HR profession based on the work of Ulrich and Brockbank. Similarly the UK’s Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development



(CIPD) has long championed the Ulrich model of the 'Business Partnering' HR function as a means to 'adding value' in organizations. Ulrich claims to have conducted research with over half of the Fortune 200, and in the UK was extolled in the magazine of the CIPD as the 'father' of the HR 'transformation' programme in the NHS (Arkin, 2006).

Evidently, Ulrich's influence on the dominant discourses of HRM and on the desired role and identity for the HR function itself has been considerable. Yet despite the extent to which 'the discourse of human resource management (HRM) is increasingly dominated by a normative, consensus-oriented perspective on managing the employment relationship' (Francis, 2006, p. 65) a marginalised but growing body of critique has emerged alternative role and identity discourses for the function. These draw predominantly on discourses of ethics and well being (e.g. Foote and Robinson, 1999; Francis and Keegan, 2006); of trust (Kochan, 2004); of sustainability (Janssens and Steyaert, 2009); and of pluralism (Marchington, 2008; Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010). Perhaps these attempts to author alternative discourses by which the HR function might articulate itself represent a re-invigoration of Legge's (1978) 'deviant innovator' concept.

The outstanding question here is how those who work in the function choose to author meaningful accounts of their individual and collective identity as HR practitioners. Which discourses offer the greatest opportunities for acquiring organizational legitimacy? Has mainstream HRM achieved a dominant, hegemonic discursive 'closure' in constructing how the employment relationship should be managed, and thus how the HR function should articulate itself? What hope is there for those in the function of acquiring legitimacy through resistance to these discourses, or through the articulation of alternative discourses as identity constructing resources?

#### **2.4.4 HR Competence and Credibility**

The question of establishing credibility has already been identified as an issue for the HR function, and increasingly central to discussions of the role of HR is a consideration of the skills and competencies required by HR professionals in order for them to be considered credible and competent. As early as 1986, Watson's

representation of line managers' views of personnel specialists as either 'passive administrative nobodies' or 'clever, ambitious power-seekers' identified the potential for the function to be marginalised and dismissed (1986, p.204). In 1993, Legge suggested that HR was a profession constantly seeking to secure its professional status and legitimacy, and Bratton and Gold refer to 'The perennial quest of HRM specialists for centrality and credibility' (2007, p.3). Buckley and Monks (2004) suggest that professional credibility rests on the extent to which HR professionals embody the values of the firm (NOT the profession) and act 'with attitude' in dealing with HR issues.

Evaluations by senior management of the competence and credibility of the HR practitioner are often placed at the heart of the question of whether the HR function will acquire power and status organizationally; one conclusion that may be drawn here is that there is little organizational faith in the principle of sound people management per se, given that its primacy depends on the credibility of the function which supports effective people management practice. Alternatively (or additionally) the assumption may be that line management can achieve effective people management without the intervention of an HR function which may be considered an impediment in the process-particularly where HR have been concerned to ensure compliance with employment legislation or universalistic policy prescriptions. According to Khatri and Budhwar (2002) credibility is perceived by HR managers to be dependent on their ability to convince senior management that they are capable of 'managing the fundamental HR functions'. Only then will they be 'invited to the strategic table' (p. 178). This may underestimate the expectations of HR by senior management: Redman and Wilkinson (2005) believe that the threat of outsourcing HR has been fuelled by senior management concerns about the quality and *responsiveness* of HR functions, and others have identified that the core issue is an inability to display the required competencies (Barney and Wright, 1998; Torrington, Hall and Taylor, 2005); a lack of the necessary skills to perform their duties competently (Cunningham and Debrah (1995); a lack of innovation, flexibility and readiness to change (Caldwell, 2001); and an inability to use business and financial language, or to describe the rationale for HR activities in terms of added value (Torrington, Hall and Taylor, 2005). Perhaps more alarmingly are the claims that only when HR practitioners can deliver 'HR with attitude' (Ulrich, 2007) and become

'players' will they be taken seriously: 'HR professionals must be more than partners; they must be players. Players contribute...they add value...they do things that make a difference' (Ulrich and Beatty, 2001, p. 294).

Of major concern here is the extent to which these evaluative discourses are deployed with apparent objectivity and political neutrality; Ulrich and Brockbank, for example, suggests that 'All HR professionals aspire to add value' (2005, p. 24). Here we see evidence of two discursive devices: the discourse of professionalism in HR and the discourse of 'added value'. The discourse of professionalism is discussed at length in the next section; it is nevertheless worth noting here that the measures of HR competence discussed earlier are articulated predominantly by line managers rather than by any professional body. Who, then, are the arbiters of so-called HR professionalism? If it is line management, perhaps it is no surprise that, as Phillips claims, the HR profession is 'desperately trying to collaborate with line management' (1995, p.20). Equally, it may be no surprise if this 'collaboration' brooks no challenge or opposition: an HR function which articulates and responds to employee needs, as recommended by Ulrich's employee champion/advocate roles, or which employs discourses of equity, fairness and legislative compliance may be considered to be naive or insufficiently aware of management's 'business priorities' of cost-cutting or profit maximisation. 'Seeing the world through employees' eyes' may be difficult to reconcile with the demand of 'looking through customers', shareholders' and managers' eyes' (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005, p. 24), and the unitarist assumptions which underpin HRM may be most tested at the level of the individual HR practitioner who is required to achieve a balanced and universally palatable outcome for *all* stakeholders. Ulrich's vision of an 'unproblematic, collaborative partnership' between line management and HR does not take into account a pluralist perspective of 'competing stakeholder groups, not all of whom are united behind the corporate aim of increased competitive advantage' (Hope-Hailey et al, 2005, p. 51). Numerous authors have identified the multiple stakeholders whom HR might be expected to serve, and their often competing and conflicting expectations. The strategic discourse required by senior management may 'close off' the well-being agenda (Francis and Keegan, 2006), and there may be adverse consequences if HR is seen to be 'helping a particular interest group to achieve its agenda' (Tarplett, 2000, p.7). HR is often charged with balancing competing

interests, and 'it is always possible for directors, powerful elected members or certain non-executive board members to have the power to dominate other groups' (Tarplett, 2000, p.12). Caldwell (2003) suggests that personnel professionals have always been a relatively weak occupational group, and there is a history of the function being seen as too close to staff, and not 'on side with the rest of management (Tarplett, 2000, p. 11).

The HR 'strategic business partner' who articulates the potentially negative reactions of employees to proposed business strategies (e.g. closing a plant) may be considered bureaucratic, administrative and unaware of the harsh realities of business, and Francis and Keegan suggest that playing the 'employee champion' may not be seen as a viable career move for ambitious HR practitioners (2006, p.242). The 'added value' discourse suggests that value is a neutral, tangible and universally recognisable construct, when in reality, 'defining the parameters for delivering value is a more or less arbitrary, political and discursive process' (Mueller and Carter, 2005, p. 375). Where the HR practitioner defines 'added value' in ways which do not meet the approval of senior management (for example by defending the interests of employees in the pursuit of long-term loyalty and commitment), they may yet again be considered to be lacking in credibility.

The credibility and status of HR may depend in such circumstances on its ability to 'concentrate on priorities as defined by the business' (Torrington, Hall and Taylor, 2005, p. 43), priorities often driven by the interests of shareholders or the demands of Government. Whilst the CIPD (2007) suggests that the HR function may need to 'buy in' customers as diverse as line managers, employees, ex-employees and shareholders, Harris (2007) concluded that HR staff in local government identified their role primarily as one of providing a service to line management: a positive view of the function can only be established by engaging with line managers' immediate concerns, particularly as the function's performance is assessed 'on the perception of line managers rather than on its strategic contribution' (p.41). The cost therefore of securing 'a place at the strategic table' may be the loss of a voice representing or defending employee views and interests, a conundrum which Caldwell summarises as a choice between 'identifying with the business manager role or embracing softer variants of HRM' (2001, p. 46). Indeed, Ulrich himself acknowledged the difficulties for the HR function in establishing a clear identity and role when he emphasised that

the multiple roles which the HR function is required to fulfil are inherently paradoxical (1997, p. 47). Perhaps the shrewd HR practitioner will be fluent in a range of discourses, deploying them cautiously dependent on context and audience.

#### **2.4.5 HR Roles and Power**

One important dimension of the roles of HR which receives insufficient attention in the typologies outlined above is the function of the power (or perceived power) in the relationship between the HR function and line/senior management. Two frameworks which may offer an insight into the potential power dynamics affecting the role and position of HR in the wider organizational context are those of Legge (1978) and Storey (1992). Whilst both have been criticised for failing to capture the complexity of the personnel/HR role, they nevertheless offer an insight into how HR practitioners may be constrained by their lack of power and credibility in organizations. Legge (1978) identified two potential roles which personnel managers might adopt in order to develop power and influence in organizations: the 'conformist innovator' and 'deviant innovator' roles. The former is likely to develop and implement HR solutions aligned with existing business priorities and definitions of added value. The latter will be more likely to adopt an independent 'professional' stance and propose new ideas or values by which organizations might be evaluated, including wider social considerations. Clearly this is a risky strategy unless the HR practitioner has an established power base from which to argue; a conformist stance deploying the discourse of organizationally dictated priorities is more likely to accord with demands from the organization for HR to demonstrate business awareness. (In reality, research in the 1990's suggested, the Personnel/HR function rarely adopted either stance, with only scant evidence in favour of the conformist innovator role; Guest, 1991; Clark, 1993; Hope-Hailey et al, 1997). Perhaps it is no surprise that Gratton and Truss (2007) see 'assuming a line management mindset' (p.401) as a benefit of strategic partnering, if only for the survival of the function. Indeed, they suggest that access to greater resources for HR will be secured by achieving the business goals of the line. If HR departments are to strive for 'instrumental legitimacy', they are most likely to be successful by 'providing constituents with what they demand', and gaining a positive reputation through abiding by the norms and values of the organization (Ferris et al, 2007). The CIPD (2007) report on the changing nature of the HR function suggests that success might be achieved by 'reconstituting the HR

philosophy in line with the business philosophy': no scope here then, for Legge's deviant innovation.

Storey's (1992) four-fold typology of personnel roles incorporated a consideration of how personnel/HR roles might be enacted on two dimensions: strategic/tactical, and interventionary/non-interventionary. The two roles which have interventionary powers are the 'changemaker' (strategic) and 'regulator' (tactical). The non-interventionary, strategic role is labelled the 'adviser', and the least powerful role which is neither strategic nor interventionary is labelled the 'handmaiden' (particularly interesting given the prevalence of women in personnel roles at the time). Clearly intervention is only possible where the function has some power and status in the organization, and the 'handmaiden' role is considered to contribute reactively, and at a routine level, on an agenda very much determined by the 'customer', in this case, line management. In this scenario, personnel's activities are 'closely scrutinised by line management, with an explicit understanding that any parts of the service...judged not to be of value to the business or (which) could be obtained cheaper elsewhere, would be dropped.' (Legge, 2005, p. 87). 'Advisors' may have managed to free themselves from the routine in favour of an internal consultancy role, but without the necessary power to drive or enforce an HR or personnel-led agenda, can merely offer specialist advice for management to heed or ignore as they wish. Both of these non-interventionary roles may be considered to represent 'ad hocery' or 'humble advice' (Storey, 1992, p.180), with the ever-present threat that the function's credibility and status depends on management's tolerance and their ability to be seen to respond to the business agenda appropriately. Playing a simple 'support' role may result not in a relationship of 'partnership' but of HR playing servant to management's 'master', with the suggestion that HR is merely there to do management's bidding (CIPD, 2007). Whilst this may be position of relative comfort, freeing HR from the need to espouse other agendas, it does not resolve demands for the function to act as the 'moral conscience' or 'internal referee' of the organization (Ulrich and Beatty, 2001). Woodall and Winstanley (2001) may be acknowledging that this is an unreasonable demand placed on any single organizational function, particularly one which apparently lacks organizational power and influence, when they suggest that ethical stewardship should be the role of all managers in organizations, and not conveniently delegated to the HR function.

Having considered some of the dominant discourses surrounding HRM and the positions and spaces created for the HR function by those discourses, this section now turns to with a discussion of the conception of HR as a profession, and how a the pursuit of a 'professional' identity for the function might shape the discourses and identities of the HR practitioner.

#### **2.4.6 The 'HR Profession'**

Personnel/HR has witnessed an increasing attempt to 'professionalise' its status since the function's early development in the twentieth century. Ulrich (1997) has suggested that the phrase 'human resource professional' is an oxymoron. Farndale and Brewster (2005) maintain that doubts have long existed over whether personnel or HR might be classed as a true profession, but acknowledge that encouragements to 'become more professional' abound from both academic and professional body sources alike (p. 33). The Ulrich and Brockbank typology (2005) discussed previously is premised on the identity of the HR practitioner as an 'HR professional', a term used throughout the article. The process of professionalization might be considered as fundamental to the function acquiring increased occupational identity, status, credibility and control (Lounsbury, 2002; Farndale and Brewster, 2005) and to the acquisition of 'a place in corporate decision-making structures' (Hope-Hailey et al, 1997; Farndale, 2005, p. 660). As indicated previously, the status of the HR function has often been considered in terms of the characteristics of individual HR practitioners (e.g. competence, credibility, skill, ability to deploy appropriate 'business' language) or through the acquisition of seniority in organizations (e.g. a place on the board) or a strategic role which can 'demonstrate its contribution to organizational performance' (Farndale, 2005, p.661). A paradox exists here: the 'professionalism' sought by HR to enable it to acquire status and power may be dependent on the conferral of that status by senior management. As discussed above, in this respect, it is the judgement and arbitration of senior management which determines HR professionalism, rather than for example, membership of a professional body or acquisition of the professional qualification associated with the occupation. In this respect, HR may differ from other professions (e.g. social workers, teachers, doctors), as the criterion applied for assessing professional status is the exhibiting of 'professional *behaviour*', as defined by management, rather than membership of a recognised professional group or body. The willingness of

management to involve the HR department in strategic decision-making may be evidence of 'the perceived competence of HR to make a legitimate contribution in this arena' (Farndale, 2005, p.661). Watson's (2002) discussion of occupational versus organizational attachment may be illuminating here. The extent to which HR 'professionals' have secured occupational versus organizational attachment is debatable. A 'true' profession may be able to acquire professional status through establishing and maintaining independence via high ethical standards, specialised knowledge and practice, and moral authority. However, if professionalism can only be conferred through the support of a political, economic or social elite (Freidson, 1970, in Macdonald, 1995), then the question for an aspiring HR profession must be where that elite is to be found. Whilst the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development achieved its Chartered status in 2000, it is questionable whether it has secured the independence or 'privileged' position that such status might suggest. Larson's (1977) concept of the professional project perhaps more accurately captures the socially constructed nature of the professional phenomenon, in that it suggests an 'endless effort 'on the part of an occupation to defend , maintain and improve its position', persuading the public and other interested parties of its professionalism through the use of appropriate linguistic and discursive resources. Where those efforts are thwarted, for example, through the counter-discourses of managerialism and managerial prerogative, or Governmental interventions (the Gershon review casting HR as 'back office'), then the aspiring members of the profession will need to redouble their efforts through a more persuasive narrative. It is easy to see why Watson (2002) might identify such efforts as identity work. The CIPD has been a key player in these efforts, through achieving Chartered status, and requiring members to achieve certificated 'professional qualifications'. It has keenly 'courted' the Ulrich model of HRM as a potential means of securing professional status. Harley and Hardy (2004) suggest that certain discursive 'subject positions' may be accorded legitimacy, and that actors will draw on particular narratives in order to legitimate their interests. Whilst Keenoy (1997) suggests that it is impossible to 'fix' or 'identify' HRM with any degree of confidence, the enthusiasm with which the CIPD has embraced and promulgated the discourse of Ulrich might suggest that a partial fixity has been achieved. Harley and Hardy (2004) believe that some meanings become sufficiently solid to become taken for granted, and in the context of establishing HR professionalism, the Ulrich view of the HRM terrain may



be just such an example. It may be no surprise then, that in the CIPD's (2007) research, the majority of respondents identified 'strategic thinking' as the most important competency to establishing the function's effectiveness and credibility. This echoes Peltonen's 'primacy of the strategic visioning for the identity project of the HR manager' (2003, p.12). Just as 'professionalism' may be considered a discursive resource (Watson, 2002), so might 'being strategic' be a discursive resource deployed in the pursuit of 'professional identity'.

Of interest here is the belief that it is a strategic orientation which represents both the goal and the evidence of professional status, rather than the possession of particular knowledge or expertise, or, as suggested by Legge's 'deviant innovator' (1978), a set of values, ethics or standards which reinforce the independence of the HR practitioner from managerial agendas and control. Three related factors are of relevance here: the possibility of 'professional autonomy' (Torbert, 1991) for HR, and whether the nature of the expertise and knowledge of HR professionals might enable them to 'establish a monopoly of the services that derive from it' (Macdonald, 1995, p. xii)-what McAuley et al (2000) refer to as 'the professional project' (p.90-see also Larson, 1977-above); the nature of admission to and membership of the 'HR profession'; and the extent to which the work of HR might ever be seen as independent from the managerial agenda, or whether it is inevitably destined to be viewed as one of the key levers by which managerial aims might be achieved. Each of these issues is considered in turn below.

The professional autonomy to which HR may aspire is dependent on the belief that there is a specific body of knowledge and expertise which informs HR practice, and that this is exclusively the domain of the HR function. One of the measures by which current models of HRM assess the 'professional' status of the function, that of devolution of HR responsibility to line managers (Farndale, 2005), suggests that HR is a shared responsibility. In this context, possibilities for 'exclusivity' may be limited, particularly if HR has low levels of power and influence, as discussed previously. In this scenario, the work of the HR function may be taken over by line management, accessed through increasing technology-based 'self-service' systems, outsourced to one of the many service providers offering low-cost/enhanced performance alternatives which respond to managerial agendas, or simply dispensed with. Many writers have observed the increasing marginalisation and removal of power from

professionals, particularly in the public sector (e.g. Pollitt, 1993) in a bid to 'flush out the 'natural inefficiencies' of bureaucracy' (p. 49), and in this context, the professional autonomy of HR, if it ever existed, may be considered particularly under threat: while 'lay people' may be reluctant or unable to aspire to the work of the technical professions, the HR occupation has never established itself as an exclusive grouping.

Despite the acquisition in the UK of chartered status by the HR professional body, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in 2000, no licence is required to practice; as indicated previously, full membership of the organization is dependent on achievement of the postgraduate professional qualification as well as workplace 'verification' of appropriate skills, although it is at the discretion of individual employers whether they require this qualification for their HR practitioners; and the CIPD has no powers to vet, sanction or regulate the conduct of individual members. Indeed, some authors suggest that far from exclusivity of membership, where the boundaries between members and non-members may serve as 'guides to action and identity' (Lawrence, 2004, p.116), the appointment of lay people (e.g. line managers) may be advantageous to the HR function (Torrington, Hall and Taylor, 2005). This exclusivity is also called into question by the number of organizations which operate apparently without an HR function, because they either 'do not need or cannot afford HR managers at all' (ibid., p.9).

A key question here is the extent to which the work and identities of managers and professionals might be considered as distinctive. Halford and Leonard (1999) believe that the literature on both 'managers' and 'professionals' treat the categories as mutually exclusive, with separate identities: 'typically, while 'the professional' is altruistic, independent and creative, 'the manager' is self-interested, conventional and conformist' (p.104). For HR professionals this separation is less apparent: the term 'management' has long been and continues to be applied to the occupation ('personnel *management*'; 'human resource *management*'). Clearly the case for a separation of 'professional' and 'manager' is difficult to sustain for the HR function. Halford and Leonard (1999) suggest that professionals are able to retain extra-organizational independence: 'Their identities are linked to particular bodies of knowledge and not to bureaucratic procedures, organizational politics, or even to interpersonal skills' (p. 105). In their discussion of the implications of an increasing

public sector managerialism for research scientist 'professionals', McAuley et al (2000) suggest that an important issue for professionals is the extent to which they can create a relationship with business and management which enables them to feel that they preserve their 'integrity as professionals' (p. 90). This may be problematic for the HR practitioner whose purpose is apparently defined as adding value according to the dictates of business and management. Given the lack of both accountability to and protection afforded by the HR professional body, it is perhaps no surprise if HR professionals are more closely aligned and identified with their employing organizations than professionals in other occupations. Returning to the theme of occupational versus organizational attachment, Buford and Lindner (2002) (writing about HR in local government) suggest that members of the HR profession 'must owe ultimate loyalty to their employing organizations rather than to professional or ethical obligations' (p.38).

A final question is raised here about how the role, identity and professional status of the HR function might be conceived: the impact of the sector in which the function operates. Discussions so far have focused on how management might shape the 'appropriate' HR identity, but the influence of other stakeholders has been largely ignored. When considering HR practitioners in the public sector, it may be useful to discuss how the espoused ethos and culture of the sector, and the influence of Government as the most powerful stakeholder, has shaped the discourses surrounding the HR function. The next section considers this issue.

#### **2.4.7 HR in the Public Sector**

The earlier section on NPM/modernisation has already outlined the broad public sector context in which this research takes place, and a specific consideration of how recent changes have affected the HR function is useful.

There has been a tendency for people management in the public sector to share a commonality of perspective and practice, explained by Boselie, Paauwe and Richardson (2003) using the framework of DiMaggio and Powell's institutional theory as the effects of a high level of institutionalism: the common coercive mechanisms of governmental influence, trade unions and employment legislation; shared normative mechanisms, particularly in highly professionalised public sector environments; and the mimetic mechanisms captured by successive twentieth century administrations'

desire for the public sector to achieve 'model employer' status, but most closely associated in recent years with notions of 'best practice', benchmarking, and the pressure to emulate 'superior' private sector counterparts. An interest in best practice approaches has been fuelled by the impact of organizational restructuring, downsizing, and 'an increasing pressure to provide more efficient and effective services' (Gould-Williams, 2003, p.28). At a time when public sector organizations have been subjected to greater scrutiny and monitoring of performance (e.g. the 'comprehensive performance audit' (CPA) of local government bodies by the Audit Commission), increased competitive market forces (e.g. CCT and 'Best Value'), and progressively tighter financial regimes (Boyne et al, 1999; Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler, 2000; Gould-Williams, 2004), it is perhaps not surprising that traditional management approaches in the public sector, including people management, are facing challenges.

Traditional personnel management in the public sector has been characterised by universal and standardised approaches, with national pay structures and conditions of service ensuring consistency and fairness, and often guaranteeing job security- a philosophy which has delegated little policy discretion to local management; a commitment to collectivism informed by a pluralist perspective and evidenced through the mechanisms of consultation, negotiation and collective bargaining with trade unions; a commitment to the status of 'model employer', as indicated above, setting standards for private sector organizations to follow, particularly in the area of equal opportunities; and a welfare-centred, paternalistic style of management designed to promote the well-being of workers (Farnham and Horton, 1996, 1999; Boyne et al, 1999; Horton, 2000; Gould –Williams, 2003). The role of the personnel/HR function in the public sector has traditionally been conceived of as that of an administrative, bureaucratic function with a focus on process, offering advice, and ensuring policy compliance through monitoring and enforcing standardized rules and procedures (Farnham and Horton, 1996; Horton, 2000; Truss, 2003). The HR function has also been characterised as 'a centralised, bureaucratic HR structure, processes and systems', focusing more on performing administrative and functional expert roles than on strategic activities (Teo and Crawford, 2005, p.2-3). Harris et al (2002) suggest that that the HR function was 'over-controlling', and had achieved a

dominance which resulted in the removal of ownership for the conduct of the employment relationship from line management.

#### **2.4.8 'Reform' of Personnel Management/HRM in the Public Sector**

This 'traditional pattern of HRM' in the public sector has latterly been considered to be 'a barrier to better organizational performance' (Boyne et al, 1999, p. 411). Ingraham (2005, p. 521) claims that the reform of HRM has constituted a prominent part of broader governmental reform and change in many nations for the past twenty years, and Brown (2004) suggests that HRM has played a central role in public sector reform, and that its contribution to understanding the constituent elements of the 'new' public sector is significant (p. 308). The new managerialism underpinning public sector reform includes a shift of emphasis from 'administration' to 'management' in the pursuit of enhanced efficiency, effectiveness and quality of service. This shift includes new ways of managing public sector employees, and places the philosophy and practices of HRM at the centre of public sector reform. Interestingly the move from 'TPM' to HRM might be said to mirror the claimed shift in the public sector from OPA to NPM/modernisation, and certainly the discourses share much in common (e.g. devolution/local responsibility; performance orientation and 'adding value'; anti-bureaucracy and rules; maximising use of resources). Boyne et al (1999) believe that all four of the traditional features of personnel management/HRM in the public sector described above have been weakened in response to economic constraints and a desire to improve organizational performance. Farnham and Horton (1996, p.324) offer a four-fold characterisation of the shift from traditional personnel management to the new people management approaches demanded by new public management: a shift to a strategic role for the personnel/HR function; a move to a more rationalist (rather than paternalistic) style of management; less standardised and more flexible employment practices; dualist rather than collectivist industrial relations (incorporating both pluralist and individualist elements); and a move from 'model employer' status to that of 'new mode' employer, borrowing from private sector ideas and practice rather than acting as exemplars to the private sector. The use of appropriate people management strategies designed to use people as productively and cost-effectively as possible, they suggest, can contribute to the overriding strategic aim of public sector reform: 'to slim down their size and make what remains of them more efficient, customer

centred and quality driven' (p. 325). HRM in the 'new' public sector, is characterised by programmes of decentralisation and devolution, and a move from service-wide consistency and rules to greater flexibility and discretion at the level of local managers and supervisors (Brown, 2004; Ingraham, 2005); by the notion of human resources having the capacity to achieve performance outcomes in line with the strategic direction of the public sector organization, and a greater concentration on performance and output measures. Typical policies include a reshaping of jobs, greater numerical, functional and pay flexibility, tighter cost control, more flexible working patterns and a move to more fixed term contracts and performance related pay (Farnham and Giles, 1996; Horton, 2000).

Brown (2004) draws attention to the difficulties of balancing 'competing values about the role and purpose of the public sector and the possibility of recuperating a viable human resource model that considers both the particular character of the public service and also responds to the shifting conditions wrought by new management practices'. This highlights some of the problems associated with adopting 'private sector' practice in the public sector, in line with government exhortations to compare public sector performance with that of the private sector in order to 'match the best in its ability to innovate' (Cabinet Office, 1999, p. 35). There is, for an example, an assumption of homogeneity amongst private sector organizations in their HR practice, and an implicit conclusion that private sector people management practices have been successful. The veracity of such a claim may be considered questionable when measures of 'success' which are common between organizations are difficult to establish (and may be irrelevant between sectors, e.g. profitability, increased shareholder value, growth in market share), and as, discussed previously, conclusive evidence of the HRM-performance link is at best tenuous. Additionally, as Stewart and Walsh argue, 'in adopting a private sector language there is a danger that organizations in the public domain will neglect the values inherent in that domain' (1992, p.516). This identifies a problem for HR practitioners in the public sector: it is not simply the practices of people management which may be called to account, but the values and philosophy which have underpinned those practices-what Truss (2003) refers to as the 'public sector heritage' (p.58). For example, Berman et al (2006) suggest that 'effective human resource problem solving' requires managers to 'combine *right intentions* with personal integrity, and that they engage in *careful*

*values assessment* (p. 29-my italics). They do not offer, however, suggestions of how 'right intentions' or 'values' might be determined, and whether those values might be different from those traditionally applied in the public sector, but they do acknowledge that public managers 'walk a tightrope seeking to balance the jurisdiction's basic values, the needs of workers and the organization's financial resources' (p. 23). This may represent a challenge for HR managers required to exhibit the 'public service values of impartiality, objectivity and integrity' (Cabinet Office, 1999, p. 55), whilst at the same time tasked with achieving improved efficiency, effectiveness and measurable performance outcomes. The value of 'integrity' may be challenged when a shift is required from the paternalistic developmental approach to people management which has promoted a concern for employee well-being (Farnham and Horton, 1996; Boyne et al, 1999; Gould-Williams, 2004) results in a dilution of some of the practices and conditions that have traditionally set the public sector apart from private sector organizations (Brown, 2004). Teo and Crawford (2005) believe that negative comparisons with private sector counterparts have placed public sector HR practitioners in a position of defence and justification. This may constitute evidence not of the inferiority of public sector HR functions, but of the changing criteria by which public sector people management practices are judged, and a shift in the values which underpin them. Buford and Lindner (2002), for example, suggest that it is the role of local government HR to promote the idea among both employees and management that 'like it or not, competition is now a fact of life' (2002, p.7). Additionally, HR managers may be charged with the role of shifting the values of the organization through 'values management', which involves 'building and sustaining a shared set of beliefs among employees that is beneficial to the organization, its members and the public' (West and Berman, 2003, p. 266). This echoes the role described for HR professionals by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) of creating a universal vision which will unite the interests of all stakeholders, and assumes that such a vision is unproblematic.

There are mixed reports of the impact of the changes in the approach to people management adopted by the public sector. For example, Horton (2000) has suggested that public sector employees have faced redundancy, relocation, or transfer of employment to the private sector, a removal of the guarantee of a job for

life and job intensification, with resultant evidence of low staff morale and high levels of dissatisfaction and stress. This might suggest that far from achieving a greater strategic function, HR in the public sector has been preoccupied with the delivery and implementation of new policies and practices for achieving those changes, with managing the consequences of industrial relations disputes, dealing with the legal complexities and tensions of 'TUPE' transfers, and the task of re-engaging a demotivated workforce. Flynn (2002) identifies evidence of an increased 'scientific management' approach with commensurate mechanisation, job simplification and managerial control in certain public sector environments (e.g NHS Direct and the Benefits Agency), an increase in the distance between the treatment of those at the top and those at the bottom of the pay hierarchy, and a loss of job stability and security for public sector workers. By contrast, Gould-Williams (2004) found evidence of the positive impact of employing 'high commitment' HRM practices such as teamworking and training on local government employee attitudes. This evidence might suggest that the HR function has been able to influence the attitudes and practices of public sector managers in achieving a shift from old ways of working to new HRM-style practices.

The desire to cast the HR function in a more strategic role may have been hampered by a number of factors. Harris et al (2002) suggest that despite the impact of initiatives such as CCT, best value in local government and budgetary constraints acting as the driving force for the restructuring of roles, responsibilities and relationships, there has been a 'reluctance to dismantle centralised HR control, or the function's 'moral neutrality' as a 'referee' in employment practices' (p. 219). Attempts to devolve responsibility for HR issues to the line which would enable HR to adopt a more strategic role have been limited in local government by a high level of trade union membership and the 'political dimension and visibility of local government', which has meant that many HR issues continue to be dealt with centrally. Nevertheless, Harris (2002) reports some evidence of devolution from her research, with a personnel specialist allocated to each department largely fulfilling a support (rather than strategic) 'business partner' role, and a reduction in the resources available to the central HR function. However, she does call into question the sustainability of such a model as 'over-stretched' central functions are required to undertake major projects with inadequate resources. Of equal significance is an



increase in regulatory structures such as employment legislation and a raft of new employment rights which may demand increased expertise on the part of those handling employment issues, and the desire to ensure that local authorities promote their image as 'good employers' through consistent and fair application of employment practices (Harris, 2002). This, Harris et al (2002) suggest, may lead to HR being required to maintain the familiar public sector roles of monitor, policer and enforcer, with the associated criticisms of the function's inflexibility, rule-bound orientation and over-controlling approach. Additionally, the requirement of the HR function to implement measures which audit its effectiveness may reinforce the role of the function as 'the keeper of the rulebook' (Harris, 2002, p. 371). For example, one of the authorities in her research received a positive report from the Audit Commission for its effective record keeping in case the Council should need to defend itself at an employment tribunal. The research of Harris et al (2002) also demonstrates that public sector line management still expect HR to continue to provide the traditional range of personnel administration services, even when HR responsibilities have been devolved. The role of the public sector HR department, they conclude, is to continue to achieve its dual responsibility of achieving 'both efficiency and justice' in internally regulating the employment relationship' (Harris et al, 2002, p. 227), responsibilities identified by the predecessor of the CIPD, the Institute of Personnel Management, in its definition of the personnel role in 1963.

#### **2.4.9 Conclusions on HRM**

To conclude, this section has considered a range of discourses which surround the HR function, both in general terms and in the specific context of the public sector and local government. It has considered the traditional functions, role and identity of personnel at large and in the public sector in particular, and discussed the changing nature of HR as a result of the prevalence of HRM and its prescriptions, and the ways in which narratives of change and reform in the public sector are demanding new approaches to people management.

It has identified some of the paradoxes inherent within both the prescriptions for and enactment of the HR function in the public sector, in particular, the requirement to be simultaneously strategic and operational, excellence in the latter potentially affording opportunities for involvement in the former; the need to be both caring and

controlling, securing employee engagement alongside efficiency and profit maximisation; the demands to devolve responsibility for HR to line management whilst continuing to provide an administrative support function, and maintaining exclusivity of 'professional' knowledge and practice; the ability to demonstrate 'added value' through responding to the needs of the business and short-term requirements of line managers whilst acting as employee advocates; the requirement to establish 'professional' competence and credibility without a secure and independent 'professional status', but by responding to 'managerial' agendas; the requirement to act as custodians of the values of the public sector, whilst introducing new values and concepts such as competition and entrepreneurialism; and finally, the need to act as 'policer', enforcer, moral and ethical referee and record-keeper, whilst demonstrating 'added value' in terms of contribution to the achievement of business objectives.

As Currie and Brown (2003) suggest, identity is a contested phenomenon, intensely governed and scrutinised by a range of actors. Language and narratives in particular are simultaneously 'the grounds, the objects and the means by which struggles for power are engaged in' (p.565).

These conclusions do not intend to suggest 'real' or 'definitive' observations about the nature of the role of the HR practitioner, but to highlight the multiple and competing discourses and narratives which offer possibilities (and limitations) for action which surround the construction of both HRM itself and the identity of the 'HR professional'.

Having previously outlined the broad public sector context in which this research is located, the final section of this literature review considers more closely the specific literature pertaining to the UK local authority context.

## **2.5 The Local Government Context**

The 'much-discussed paradigm shift' (Hood and Scott, 2000, p.17) in public sector management which occurred during the 1980's and 1990's, and which has been subsequently referred to as the 'New Public Management', discussed earlier, has principally been characterised as a move from rules-based and process-driven 'old public administration' to a more output-based and results-driven model for the public

sector. Such a characterisation, Hood and Scott suggest, may represent a rather simplistic stereotype, requiring more 'subtle and varied' interpretations. Whilst this may be true for central governmental departments, where, they claim, protocols often depended on more informal relationships and mutuality among senior echelons of the public sector, for local government, there is much to suggest that the characterisation they outline may well reflect the nature of the shift which has occurred. Orr (2005) refers to the 'profound change' to which local government has been subject in the past 25 years, and Walker and Boyne refer to the widespread reforms of local government implemented by New Labour governments since 1997 as a 'Big Bang' (2006). Whether or not we consider local government reform since 1979 to have represented a seismic or more subtle shift, given that 'each class of overseer certainly has its own particular methods, institutional history and mode of discourse' (Hood and Scott, 2000, p. 4) what is worthy of exploration is the philosophy which apparently underpins the shift, and which is evident in the discourses which articulate the 'desired' outputs and results, the accompanying narratives which apparently justify the necessity for and nature of proposed change, and the array of methods to which local government has been subjected in the pursuit of 'reform'.

### **2.5.1 Marketization and Managerialisation: Conservative reforms, 1979-1997**

Whilst this section focuses primarily on the post-1997 initiatives of New Labour, it necessarily takes account of the context of local government during the previous conservative administrations from 1979-1997, widely considered to have been the architects of the 'paradigm shift' referred to previously. Academic writers tend to describe 'Thatcherism's legacy' for local government as a period of profound and unique transformation, unlike any other in history (Orr, 2005), and characterised by a hostility which threatened the very existence of the elected local authority (Flynn, 1995). Under the broad '3E's' umbrella themes (economy, efficiency and effectiveness, Entwistle et al, 2007) of public sector reform, the aim of Thatcherism with respect to local government has been characterised as a desire to convert large, unresponsive bureaucracies into 'leaner, fitter organizations, in particular by exposing them to market competition and by transferring some or all of their functions into the private sector' (Elcock, 1996, p.110-in Farnham and Horton, 1999).

## *Marketization*

This New Right -influenced 'enabling' philosophy (Chandler, 2007) grounded in a free market, laissez-faire tradition, with its inherent commitment to the notion that private competition can and should supply public needs, was founded on the desire to 'roll back the frontiers of the state' (Chandler, 2007, p.256) and was principally enacted in the case of local government in the Local Government Act of 1988. The most significant aspect of this Act was the introduction of a policy of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT), effectively a 'marketization' of the public sector (Higgins and Roper, 2002), designed to 'bring greater efficiency to local government ... through the use of competition' (SERCO, 2008) and premised on the belief that local authority functions could be delivered more efficiently by the application of stiff private sector competition. Indeed, local authorities were proscribed by the Act from undertaking certain activities unless they could demonstrate that they were doing so 'competitively'. The subsequent 1992 Local Government Act extended the ambit of CCT from direct services to professional services such as financial, legal and technical services. Inherent in the reform is an implied criticism of the way in which local government officials had operated previously. Orr (2005) observes that the policy discourse of Conservative governments relied on 'a market-derived language of business, competition and customers' (p. 375), a discourse which suggests that 'bureaucrats and producers had too much power' and were unresponsive to the needs of 'consumers', i.e. local taxpayers. Higgins and Roper (2002) believe that the tenor of the reforms suggest that public administrators were also considered guilty during the preceding era of colluding in union-led attempts to insulate local government workers from working practice and productivity reforms, with the consequence that local taxpayers were not receiving value for money.

Whilst the policy of CCT represented a radical shift in the philosophy of local government as the only providers of a range of services to local communities, CCT did not result in major outsourcing, with the majority of contracts remaining in-house, and the 'efficiency' of outsourcing has subsequently been called into question, with the Audit Commission review of 'back office' efficiency (2008) suggesting that 'in-sourcing' might be a route to securing efficiency savings, clearly suggesting that the CCT rationale of securing Value for Money (VFM) may not have been entirely successful. Nevertheless, the policy continues to dominate the nature of local

government reform, with outsourcing still regarded as a potential source of improved service and enhanced efficiency (Audit Commission, 2008). Interestingly, this policy also led to criticism of the behaviour of local authority employees: responsibility for the limitations of CCT has been laid at the door of local government officers themselves rather than any inherent flaws in the philosophy of placing responsibility for the delivery of public services in the hands of private sector providers: 'While it is generally recognised that strong incentives were needed to stimulate reform, compulsion resulted in *resistance by local authorities* and health trusts, an immature market and *poorly-conducted procurements*' (SERCO, 2008, my italics). If the explanation of 'poorly-conducted procurements' does account for the limited successes of CCT, it may be partly understood by considering the unusual position in which local authority employees found themselves for the first time – becoming for the first time both commissioners and providers of services through the introduction of Direct Service Organizations (DSO's). The subsequent focus of New Labour on developing procurement expertise in the public sector (e.g. the Transforming Government Procurement Report of 2007) may belatedly acknowledge the extent to which the objectives of CCT underestimated the enormity of the shift in role and focus for local government employees.

Perhaps more significantly, the 'resistance' referred to here was anticipated by central government, not only from unions and 'recalcitrant' managers (Higgins and Roper, 2002), but also from political opponents in the form of locally elected councillors drawn from the Conservatives' political opponents. The response of the Government was to frame the rules of CCT 'in such a way as to prohibit the restriction, distortion or prevention of competition' (Higgins and Roper, 2002, p.268) by local authorities. These attempts to restrict resistance to CCT were considered not entirely successful by the government, which explicitly attacked the implied collusion between local authorities' political leaders, its managers and its in-house unions as an attempt to bend the rules and 'cushion their workforces against the full force of competition' (Treasury, 1991, in Higgins and Roper, 2002). The clear suggestion here is that local government managers were not behaving sufficiently managerially, although this observation may fail to take into account the unenviable position of local authority employees and managers caught between the directives of central government and its agencies, and the political will of locally elected

representatives. This theme will be discussed in more detail below. Additionally, the imperatives of CCT signalled, albeit implicitly, a further development for local authorities: a departure from the rhetoric of public sector organizations as 'model employer' (Morgan and Allington, 2002) setting the standard for good people management practice which private sector organizations might seek to emulate, which prevailed during the 1970's and earlier. CCT 'intended to shift local authorities' emphasis from the good employer role to the good provider role, away from employment and the workforce towards customers and services' (Higgins and Roper, 2002, p. 269).

Whilst with the benefit of hindsight warnings of the demise of local government may be considered to have been premature, there are clear signs that conservative governments during the 1980's and 1990's sought to limit the powers of local authorities to resist and challenge central authority, effectively 'destroying the traditional independence of local government' (Chandler, 2007). For example, the Local Government Act of 1986 prevented local authorities from campaigning against the Government, clearly enforcing the view that local government is constitutionally subordinate to Parliament and has no right to voice publicly opinions contrary to those of the state (Chandler, 2007). Chandler also believes that Conservative governments during the era, whose narratives primarily espoused the efficient delivery of services at as a low a cost as possible, were also seeking to present an ideological challenge designed to undermine the very idea of local government, producing what Orr (2005) refers to rather euphemistically as 'a distinctive climate of peculiarly uneasy central-local relations' (p.374).

### *Managerialism*

As Hood and Scott observe (2000), public sector reform in the UK has followed a managerialist route (a managerial 'public service bargain'), whereby 'public servants accept direct responsibility for service provision *within defined policy settings* (my italics), while elected politicians abjure hands-on control over operational issues'(p.13). Under such conditions, they suggest, the emphasis is likely to be on controlling public servants according to output and outcome rather than on input and process, which are left to managerial discretion and authority. This new 'bargain' was accompanied by what Chandler (2007) refers to as 'the insidious adoption of

management values and ideas culled from the private sector' (p.270). The 'managerial revolution' in the public sector was, according to Chandler (2007) 'also a move to loosen the grip of the specialist professional on services', with professionals 'pushed further down the decision making hierarchy by a small collective of senior managers', with the role of the professional designated as that of merely implementing management policies. Clarke et al (1994) echo this view, suggesting that 'managerialization constitutes the means through which the structure and culture of public services is being re-cast' (p. 4). Interestingly this analysis suggests a clear separation between managers and professionals, with the implication that they remain distinct and discrete cadres, or a subordination of professional affiliation for those who move from 'professional' to 'managerial' status. Assuming such a clear and identifiable division between these two groups may fail to take account of the 'complexities involved in distinguishing managerial work from professional work' (Exworthy and Halford, 1999, p.1). It may be spurious to consider 'professionals' as a homogeneous group given their diverse identities and affiliations, and even within specific professional groupings it may be unhelpful to assume a univocal identity where internal stratification may exist. Causer and Exworthy (1999) for example draw on Freidson's (1994) distinction between rank-and-file practitioners and supervisory or managerial professionals, as well as considering the possibility that a range of hybrid roles may exist, 'in which the exercise of formalized managerial responsibilities is carried on alongside continuing engagement in professional practice' (p.83).

Equally, the antagonism between managers and professionals suggested by these analyses pre-supposes a resistance to the reforms by professionals, effectively excluding the possibility of collaboration on the part of those professionals. If we accept, for example, that the HR function constitutes a 'professional' group, it might well serve the interests of those who belong to that group to embrace a managerialist reform discourse in the pursuit of greater organizational legitimacy. In this respect, Mueller and Carter (2005) argue that HRM should be seen as a 'project' which belongs to the wider project of managerialism. What may be concluded is that there has been 'a widespread shift in the *legitimacy* of management in the public sector' (Exworthy and Halford, 1999, p.5) and that 'central government and sections of public sector agencies invested faith in *managers* and in the language, techniques

and values of *managerialism*, as the only way actually to deliver change' (Ibid, p.6). Chandler (2007) maintains that the consequences of the reform of local government under the Conservatives was that local government became more fragmented, with local authorities gradually transforming themselves 'in line with New Right thinking through the insidious adoption of management values and ideas culled from the private sector' (p. 270).

A number of writers suggest that these Conservative reforms effectively set the scene for subsequent labour administrations: Chandler observes that 'the more insidious private sector managerial values are still strongly entrenched in Blairism' (2007, p. 271), and Wright and Gamble rather graphically refer to 'Mrs. Thatcher as the midwife of Blairism' (2001, p.1). The next section turns to the question of local government reform under New Labour.

### **2.5.2 New Labour: NPM in the guise of 'Modernisation'?**

Broadbent and Laughlin (1999) claim that the election of the New Labour Government in 1997 'brought some readjustment to the modes of organising' with the thrust of policy directed to the building of public-private partnerships and a desire to implement a defined set of outputs for various services (p. 96). However, the extent to which these New Labour approaches to the reform of local government represent a departure from what has been labelled the 'New Public Management' era of Conservative administrations is debatable and Orr (2005) has observed a tendency amongst academic writers to emphasize the continuity between New Labour and preceding Conservative governments. Whilst post-1997 initiatives may be considered to be typified by new values such as partnership and consultation, 'The New Labour discourse of 'modernisation' is also, in part, parasitic upon the earlier narratives offered by the conservative critique of local government' (Orr, 2005, p. 376). Whilst the challenges to traditional manifestations of local government presented by Conservative governments may have represented a radical transformation for the sector, arguably New Labour has intensified the scale and pace of the reforms. Geddes maintains that the economic and social agendas of New Labour 'essentially seek to reinforce the broad political objectives of Thatcherism, namely the consolidation of the power of capital, and the further embeddedness of 'the market' and competitive individualism in social, economic and



political life' (2006, p.79). Entwistle et al (2007) go so far as to suggest that what is distinctive about the 'New Labour brand of NPM' is that it has been delivered 'on a scale and an intensity that represents a more significant challenge to the traditional public sector than ever did the Conservative reforms' (p.1574), and Geddes (2006) believes that New Labour's espoused 'third way' approach to public management amounts to little more than a rhetorical cloak for the continuation of neo-liberal policy by other means.

### *Cementing Performance Measurement: the Best Value Regime*

Certainly the 'accounting logic' which underpinned the 1979-1997 reforms, and which believes it is possible to quantify outputs and outcomes (financial or otherwise) and link them to financial inputs (Broadbent and Laughlin, 1999) continued apace. The Best Value (BV) regime for example, introduced in 2000 and 'streamlined' in 2001, effectively replaced CCT in local government, and sought to promote 'a radical refocusing of councils' traditional roles (Modern Local Government White Paper, 1998, p.50). This regime aimed to build upon but also move beyond previous local government reforms, running 'wider and deeper' than previous regulations (Audit Commission, 1998). The objective of the policy was to introduce 'a duty to deliver services to clear standards –covering both cost and quality-by the most effective, economic and efficient means available' (Modern Local Government: In touch with the people, 1998), clearly redolent of the Conservatives' principles of cost-effectiveness and competition, although the 'range of management tools' available to local authorities by which they might deliver BV were elsewhere conceptualised as the '4 C's': challenge, consultation, comparison and competition (Higgins and Roper, 2002). The BV regime 'emphasises continuous improvement, the analysis of performance and 'management by fact' ' (Boyne et al, 2002, p.11), and relies on BV reviews covering *all* local authority functions (unlike CCT) which 'require the purpose of services to be challenged and the most effective means of delivering them to be identified' in consultation with local taxpayers and service users. BV reviews result in action plans which set targets for improved performance, and Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI) incorporating national standards against which progress and performance are measured.

The prescriptive nature of such a performance management system for local government might sit uncomfortably alongside New Labour's espoused principles of devolution and deregulation (OPSR, 2002) and the banner of 'freedom and flexibility' under which BV was promoted (Higgins and Roper, 2002), particularly where central government 'has wide powers of coercion and persuasion at its disposal, which helps to ensure that reform is not mere rhetoric but is actually implemented by service providers' (Walker and Boyne, 2006). This complex mix of both locally and nationally determined standards is described in the White Paper as follows: 'In carrying out this duty local authorities will be accountable to local people and have a responsibility to central government in its role as representative of the broader national interest. Local authorities will set those standards - covering both cost and quality - for all the services for which they are responsible. But in those areas such as education and social services where the Government has key responsibilities and commitments, the Government itself will set national standards. Here authorities will need to take the national dimension into account in setting their own standards' (p.50). This apparent rhetoric of both local and national input may belie what Chandler refers to as 'a harder edge of managerialist leadership' where 'Individuals are empowered only as long as they are seen to be successful' (2007, p.281), with success measured largely in terms of the central agenda.

Standards of measurement for local authorities have been determined by the Audit Commission via BV inspections, with 'excellent' performance rewarded through the award of 'Beacon' status to specific local authority delivery units which appear to be exemplars of good practice. Conversely, those councils deemed to be failing, or even those judged to be 'complacent or coasting' faced the potentially 'draconian' measures of local authorities being prohibited from providing services directly, 'but also the right to retain strategic and by implication democratic control' by central government, therefore potentially challenging the 'enabling' role of the local authority (Higgins and Roper, 2002, p.273). Subsequently, performance measurement for local government has been reinforced by the introduction of Local Public Service Agreements and Comprehensive Performance Assessments (CPA's) introduced in 2002, and perhaps somewhat euphemistically described by the Audit Commission (2003) 'as a way of supporting councils to deliver improvements in services to local people'. Essentially the CPA constitutes an overall judgement of a council's

corporate performance (including BVPI's) with an overall rating awarded of excellent, good, fair, weak or poor, subsequently changed to a star system (4 stars-0 stars), coupled with a 'direction of travel' judgement, 'indicating progress being made by the local authority in achieving improvement' (DCLG, 2008). The process has ostensibly opened council performance to both local and national scrutiny, but additionally introduced an element of inter-authority competition, with the Department of Communities and Local Government (2008) claiming that as a result of CPA's, 'for the first time local residents, councils themselves and central government were easily able to gauge the level of service delivery by a council and also compare performance relative to other councils', with individual council performance publicised via league tables. What is less evident from government communication is the differentiated nature of the central-local government relationship enshrined within the system: those authorities categorized as excellent may win additional 'freedoms and flexibilities', whilst poor performers may be subject to an increased level of government intervention (Andrews et al, 2005).

According to Wilson (2005), the success of BV and CPA is by no means self-evident. For such performance measurement systems to be credible, they must be 'technically sound' (Andrews et al, 2005) yet despite the increased importance of central judgements on local authority performance, resulting as they do in differentiated treatment, 'such judgements cannot be assumed to be correct' (Jones and Stewart, 2003, p. 24). Perhaps not surprisingly, research conducted by Andrews et al in 2005 identified the imperfection of the CPA measurement system, concluding that contextual factors such as large size and economic prosperity are more likely to lead to high performance ratings. Whilst the criteria used to evaluate the performance of local authorities may be presented as 'apparently impartial' they remain 'ultimately derived from preferences derived from political choices and normative judgements' (Kelly, 2003, p. 462). Additionally, as Brooks (2000) observes, several services provided by local authorities are not easily reducible to input and output measurement, and the process of measuring performance and the continuous appraisal of outcomes suggests that 'the operation of monitoring may become enthralling in its own right (p. 599), resulting in the operation of what Power (1997) refers to as 'the rituals of verification'. Kelly (2006) suggests that the audit functions of the Audit Commission, the 'independent' body charged with regulating

local government, have been characterised by interpretative judgements of local council performance based on its own hegemonic narratives of what constitutes a well-run council, with local government practitioners claiming that AC inspectors and auditors are intent on 'fault-finding' and being overly critical, and CPA scores being determined arbitrarily (p.608). Additionally, the independence of the AC may be called into question given that its guidance often reflects prevailing ideological trends with associated values 'becoming embedded at every level of the audit process against which local authorities are judged' (Kelly, 2003, p. 463).

### **2.5.3 'Modernisation' as a departure from NPM**

An alternative although less widespread interpretation of New Labour strategies to the 'continuity' thesis emphasizes the differences in tone of New Labour rhetoric. Dunleavy et al (2006) propose somewhat boldly that 'New Public Management is dead', arguing that a minority of its elements are still actively developing but that 'key parts of the NPM reform message have been reversed because they lead to policy disasters' (p. 468). Whether or not New Labour's version of public sector reform may be characterised as a continuation of or departure from New Public Management may be a moot point. For example, several writers have identified a key difference between BV and CCT in the extent to which co-operative relations between trade unions and employers based on partnership principles, and negotiation around professional and union resistance are preferred to Thatcherite-style imposition typical of NPM (e.g. Entwistle et al, 2007; Walker and Boyne, 2006).

In some respects, New Labour may be seen to have courted collusion from public servants by emphasizing the important role which staff have to play in service delivery organizations, although Richardson et al (2005) believe that this 'partnership approach' has been largely limited to agreement between trade unions and employers, with the involvement of public service staff only marginal. Orr (2005, p. 379) characterises this approach as indicating 'conditional respect' rather than 'outright disrespect'. Echoing Chandler's critique of New Labour's inherently managerialist approach, whereby 'modernisation' arguably masks a continuation of NPM principles by any other name, Rose and Lawton (2001) indicate the contingent nature of the relationship between central and local government: that 'local government continues to exist only on conditional approval. If it renews itself and

regenerates its culture it will be a valued partner. If not, however, one can probably assume that it will cease to exist in any meaningful sense' (p.21).

This somewhat lengthy but by no means comprehensive discussion of New Labour initiatives impacting on local government is designed to illustrate a significant trend: that 'whilst the terminology of compulsion and competition have changed to that of partnership and 'best value', the momentum of restructuring, cost control and performance indicators remain' (Webb, 1999, p.752). Travers has suggested that the changes were 'strongly backed up the kind of public rhetoric and private ministerial comment (elsewhere called 'spin') that amounted to a powerful critique of local government' (2001, p. 125, in Orr, 2005), and Chandler (2007) believes that in addition to the explicit reforms enshrined within Local Government Acts 'the labour party was more insidiously changing the role and structure of the local government system through the pursuit of principles and programmes that were not designed solely with local government in mind and in some cases without any thought to their implications for local government' (p.296). The themes of more recent initiatives such as 'joined-up government', community initiatives and the reform of the local government performance management system from CPA to Comprehensive Area Assessments (CPA-commencing in 2009), reducing the need for inspection to those services deemed to be at risk, may represent 'a response to the long-term, gradual but insidious undermining of any semblance of community government' (Chandler, 2007, p.298).

#### **2.5.4 Central-local tensions**

One of the themes which has regularly been explored in considering New Labour's approach to local government reform is the extent to which the reforms follow a 'hierarchist' or top-down principle. Several key questions arise in considering whether this is the case: what level of local autonomy, self-governance and freedom to act exists for local authorities; to what extent are local authorities merely local implementers of nationally determined policy; and what is the nature and level of input afforded to local public servants in shaping that policy?

##### *Local Autonomy*

Whilst New Labour's election manifesto claimed that 'local decision-making should be less constrained by central government' (New Labour-Because Britain Deserves Better, p.34), many writers have observed that central control of local government has not only continued under New Labour, but intensified. Whilst the Labour government ratified the European Charter of Local Self-Government in its first year of office, Wilson believes that there has nevertheless been evidence of 'the centre's determination to keep a firm hand on the tiller' (2003, p.325). Pratchett (2004) suggests that local autonomy is a relative concept, and that local government's form and powers will always be limited by the ultimate sovereignty of Parliament. Although the 2001 White Paper (Strong Local Leadership-Quality Public Services) may have signalled a departure from, or at least a dilution of, the preceding 'relentless centralisation' (p. 331) with the Government acknowledging its over-centralising tendencies, for Pratchett, what lies at the heart of an espoused 'new localism' are 'constrained discretion' and 'earned autonomy' (2004, p.369), whereby those authorities which demonstrate an ability to embrace reform as determined centrally will be favoured with greater status and powers over local decisions. Conversely, those who are unable or unwilling to 'work to the modern agenda' may find that the government looks to 'other partners' to take on their role (Wilson, 2003, p. 326).

However, in considering the form of UK local government and the powers delegated to it (or otherwise), Stoker (2001, in Wilson, 2003), characterises New Labour's approach as 'control freakery gone mad' (p.3). Brooks (2000) believes that Labour's modernising project was grounded in regulation, and may therefore be interpreted as a further step in the continuing trend of control of local government by the centre. Labour's first term was characterised by what Wilson describes as the 'carrots and Semtex' approach, although he also cautions against too extreme an interpretation of the top-down imposition, believing that alongside hierarchist features in the relationship between New Labour and local authorities, 'many new initiatives are as much a product of professionals in local government as civil servants' (p.329). Clearly this involvement may reflect a range of motives: an opportunistic desire to gain legitimacy (as discussed previously), a fatalistic acknowledgement that to refuse to be involved may lead to a 'sidelining' or worse, a genuine commitment to reform, or a form of behavioural and discursive compliance which is seen as the 'line of least resistance'. Brooks (2000) suggests that New Labour's early modernisation

programme received minimal opposition and some sympathy from local authority practitioners.

One explanation for this apparent compliance and co-operation may be that the rhetoric of dialogue and partnership 'cloaked the regime of over-regulation and over-inspection' apparently offering the illusion of a new, more balanced relationship 'while covertly increasing central control' (Wilson, 2003, p. 342). Additionally, the nature of the involvement may be called into question, for as Wilson acknowledges, whilst the New Labour narrative of reform has espoused increasing dialogue between central government departments and local authorities, much of that dialogue has remained 'formal and ritualistic', and much of the dialogue has been between the government and representative bodies of local government, rather than with individual local authorities, with the emphasis on the 'conditionality' discussed above: in other words, if councils or their representatives show that they are prepared to embrace change, they may access greater freedom and enhanced status. Those who offer resistance may be subject to punitive sanctions including 'naming and shaming', or direct intervention. And as Wilson reminds us, where such dialogue occurs, it can 'all too easily become a proxy for increased policy clout' (2003, p.327).

One body which played a key role in the 'dialogue', ostensibly giving legitimacy to the programme of modernisation was the Local Government Association (LGA). Given the 'party-political' nature of this organization, which draws its membership from the elected councils of England and Wales, it may be no surprise that they were keen to comply, dominated as they were in the early 2000's by Labour -led authorities. Brooks' (2000) warning that opposition parties might employ local electoral gains to challenge the government's modernisation project may be more relevant now than ever: since the 2008 local elections over 50% of local authorities are under Conservative control, with barely more than 10% in the hands of Labour. This raises the interesting position of local officials who may find themselves caught between the imperatives of reform from the centre, and the accompanying regulatory and monitoring regime to which they are accountable, and the requirement to comply with locally elected officials who both scrutinise local policy implementation decisions and have powers of sanction and veto in the shaping of local action plans. This tension is discussed further below.

### **2.5.5 Central-local-local relations**

Tichelar and Watts (2000) believe that the 'prescriptive and regulatory' relationship established between central and local government has generated an increasing need for internal command and control on the part of senior local authority managers, particularly in relation to budgetary constraint and performance management, essentially re-iterating the 'managerialization' thesis. This trend sits uncomfortably alongside the accompanying 'decentralisation' narrative which seeks to spread 'executive responsibility' across local government service departments.

In engaging directly with certain professional groups and 'frontline' public servants, the Government may be considered to be increasingly bypassing local authorities (Wilson, 2003), and creates a dilemma for the local authority 'corporate centre' accountable for delivering centrally-determined change. Local authority officials working as part of the 'corporate centre' have often been required to play the role of informal 'mediator' between 'the unmitigated political and organizational impact of governmental legislation, and the authority's existing political and organizational values' (Tichelar and Watts, 2000, p. 226). Thus those working in 'central' units, often including the HR function, are required to satisfy the demands of multiple and often competing 'masters': central government or its appointed bodies (e.g. the Audit Commission); local service units and the professionals working within them (potentially complicated for HR by the existence of 'business partners' charged with identifying and satisfying specific service requirements located within services rather than at the 'centre'); local councillors, often with political agendas which may seek to oppose central government imperatives; and local communities and service users, whose requirements may not be adequately articulated by their elected representatives. Additionally, local public servants are increasingly required to demonstrate evidence of working in partnership with a range of other local service providers via Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP's), combining 'community and faith groups, the council, police and fire & rescue services, charity groups, businesses, schools, health bodies and more' (DCLG, 2008).

Given the difficulty of satisfying the potentially conflicting agendas of such multiple stakeholders, it is perhaps inevitable that public officers will give greater attention to central imperatives measured formally via audits and inspections, especially given



that performance measurement has more tangible consequences of enhanced discretion or heightened direct intervention. The hegemony of the AC is bolstered by the belief amongst local government practitioners that they are 'obligated to respond to its duty to regulate councils' (Kelly, 2003, p.465). Thus, Kelly (2006) suggests, the hegemonic discourse of the Audit Commission 'is internalised by local authority actors'. As a result, Kelly (2003) suggests that political accountability through regular (local) elections has become peripheral to 'the technocratic process' of central performance measurement (p. 464). Under such conditions, it is perhaps not surprising that 'the negative image of policing and controlling' is projected onto managers in the 'centre' by those in service departments (Tichelar and Watts, 2000). Therefore, despite claims to the contrary, 'the state has retained its authority' and continues to exercise central steering mechanisms (Kelly, 2006, p.604).

### **2.5.6 Recent Developments**

In addition to the formal performance measurement systems put in place by New Labour, a number of formal reviews instigated by the government reinforced the requirement for the public sector to change in pursuit of greater 'efficiency'. Such reviews typically represent a view of the UK public sector as 'broken' and requiring 're-invention' along principles of 'new entrepreneurialism' (Du Gay, 2003, p. 670), and often propose the removal of unnecessary bureaucracy and 'an attachment to existing practices for their own sake' (ibid, p.677). One of the most significant reviews, particularly for the HR function, is the Gershon review of Public Service Efficiency and the Management of Change (2004) which claims to identify how the fiscal constraints imposed on the public sector might be achieved by public services making 'better use of the resources available in order to sustain progress and make further improvements in service quality' (the Work Foundation, 2004, p.6). The review suggests that greater efficiency might be achieved through the reform of 'back office' functions, including HR, through the development of shared services, the adoption of best practice, and the simplification and standardisation of processes and procedures (p. 12). 'Very significant improvements are possible' if back office functions are 'provided on a more efficient basis' and if best practice is 'achieved consistently and rapidly' (p.38).

Seifert and Ironside (2004) criticise the notion of 'efficiency' deployed by the review as focusing primarily on 'market' rather than 'social' efficiency, and suggest that the distinction between front and back office is spurious, arguing that 'front and back room are analytically inseparable, as actual service delivery depends on both' (p. 10). Additionally, notions of 'best practice' and standardisation are applauded as means by which HR and other 'back office' departments might become more efficient, with the assumption that consensus is readily available on what constitutes 'best practice'. Unsurprisingly, such judgements are not left to the discretion of local public servants, and the Audit Commission has sought to provide clear visions of what might be acceptable best practice with its publications 'Tomorrows people: Building a Local Government Workforce for the Future' (2008) and 'Back to Front: a Review of Efficiency of Back Office Functions in Local Government' (2008). Clearly the 'appropriate' interpretation of initiatives such as Gershon is still considered to be the remit of the AC, and thus it retains its role as opinion former on 'what constitutes exemplary practice in the management of local authorities' (Kelly, 2003, p. 465).

The local government White Paper (Strong and Prosperous Communities, 2006) appeared to offer the potential for what Milton (2006) referred to as the '3 D's' necessary for a renaissance in local democracy: 'deregulation, decentralisation and devolution'. The paper proposed a more 'risk-based' approach with fewer inspections, but failed to offer a devolution of powers from the centre, despite demands from the LGA, based on the belief that 'so much more can be achieved with a more localist approach' (Milton, 2006). However, according to Thorogood (2007) the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill which gave legislative effect to the White Paper apparently seriously questions the 'devolutionary integrity' of the Government's aims, as it enshrines the power of the secretary of state to agree, change or 'designate' any part of the Local Area Agreement which sets out 'the priorities for a local area agreed between central government and a local area (the local authority and Local Strategic Partnership)' (DCLG, 2008). As a result, even though de-regulation through reduced inspections may be on the horizon for local government, Thorogood (2007) concludes on the thorny subject of central-local relations that power still does not lie with local government, suggesting that local practitioners will be subject to the whims of ever-changing centrally articulated and politically inspired discourses; and that access to power, resources

and legitimacy will reside in the ability of local government employees (and groups of employees, or functions within local government) to successfully recognise, consume and redeploy those discourses as they articulate their role and identity .

### **2.5.7 Post 2010 election trends**

There is a plethora of evidence to suggest that the Conservative-Lib-Dem coalition government elected in 2010 will continue and intensify activities associated with the public sector 'reform' agenda, legitimised particularly through discourses of deficit, crisis and economic disaster. Continuing the epochal bent of 'reform' talk, the UK Local Government Association (LGA) commented that the 'emergency' budget announced by the new Government in June, 2010 was 'a very tough Budget that will have far-reaching effects', calling for 'radical reform' and 'nothing less than a transformation of the way the public sector works to deliver savings' (LGA, 2010). The aftermath of this budget and the October 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review has seen a 'radical programme' of reforms to public services (Griffiths, 2011, p.23) focused primarily on cost-reduction and arguably informed by a 'neo-liberal policy agenda' (Williams and Scott, 2011, p.516), with significant cuts to public sector budgets and a curtailing of the ambit of public sector activities presented as virtuous and prudent fiscal management. The message for public sector employees is that they are responsible for the 'public debt' and re-emphasizes the familiar narrative that in their responsibilities for reducing this debt, there are 'back office' functions which can be cut without detriment to 'front line' activities (Seddon and O'Donovan, 2011, p. 135).

### **2.5.8 Conclusions on the local government context**

This section has sought to explore the current local government landscape through a discussion of the main policy initiatives to which it has been subject since 1979, focusing particularly on the philosophies which apparently underpinned the changes, and the accompanying discourses and narratives deployed to legitimize the nature of the reforms. What is evident from this brief review is that a number of key themes and associated tensions have remained at the heart of local government reform: the desire to eliminate public sector monopoly of the delivery of local public services with the claim that competition or 'partnership' will result in enhanced efficiency and

improved levels of service, and the associated implication that the previous model failed to deliver either efficient or effective services; increased accountability (via enhanced central measurement and regulatory mechanisms) to a range of centrally determined performance targets and standards, suggesting that previous systems failed to achieve satisfactory standards of performance or self-measurement, paradoxically accompanied by a discourse of devolution and deregulation; enhanced mechanisms of coercion and persuasion with a centrally articulated vision of the 'ideal' local authority against which all are measured and rewarded or found wanting. These reforms have resulted in a complex set of demands for local authority 'managers' (for managerialization lies at their heart) seeking to satisfy the demands of a diverse range of stakeholders, whilst depending on the judgement of central government or its appointed bodies for approval in order to retain some degree of trust and autonomy, with the possibility that such approval is contingent not on achieving desired outcomes, but on taking appropriate policy choices (Wilson, 2003).

Much of the academic commentary on local government reform has centred on whether the reforms might be adequately captured by the term 'New Public Management', a broad but 'slippery' label (Dunleavy et al, 2005), and whether New Labour's 'modernising' agenda represents a continuation of or departure from the Conservative reform agenda. Nevertheless, what is indisputable is that the reforms have had significant material effects for local government officers, and Orr (2005) suggests that future research might usefully examine the verbal discourses used by local practitioners in 'bringing off their roles and animating the processes and institutions of local governance within a context of change' (p. 382).

## **2.6 Summary**

The purpose of this review has been to evaluate the literature of relevance to the main themes and context of the research, namely the public sector and local government context, and specifically the dominance of the 'reform' literature surrounding these contexts; the nature of identity and its workplace relevance; how resistance is performed by employees, and particularly the discursive dimension to both identity and resistance; and the HRM literature, focusing on the construction of

the HR function and its aspirations to 'professional' identity. The next two chapters consider the methodological framework for the research.

### **3. Methodology: Philosophical Issues**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The reader arriving at this section to discover that multiple regression analysis was the research method of choice might be understandably surprised, as both the nature of the research questions and the preceding literature review clearly indicate a particular set of ontological and epistemological 'commitments' (Johnson and Duberley, 2000) at odds with such a choice. Discussions of the nature of key concepts such as identity and resistance have already made reference to an anti-representationalist stance, and have emphasised the processual, fluid and discursive nature of those concepts, and the issues of both HRM and public sector reform have been explored from a critical discursive perspective. The purpose of this methodology section is to elaborate those 'commitments' and to explain how they have informed the primary research undertaken here and the choices made in conducting and analysing that research. The purpose is not to offer a critique of alternative perspectives or possible research options, but rather a rationale for and account of what has been done, and, to borrow from Czarniawska, hopefully to argue for the attractiveness of my position (2003, p.129). In doing so, the section will cover the questions of ontology and epistemology, with discussions focusing particularly on social constructionism and relativism which provide the philosophical underpinnings of this research. It will then consider the merits of a discursive approach and the use of discourse analysis, before considering how the research might be evaluated, including a discussion of reflexivity and ethics in the research process. The final section offers an account of the specific research undertaken.

When I undertook my Masters in Organizational Behaviour we were introduced to the research process through lectures and recommended texts exhorting us to follow the 'scientific research process'. Such a process was presented as linear, logical, clearly structured, systematic and sequential.

All research I have undertaken subsequently has been far removed from this prescription. I have discovered that research is iterative, open-ended, messy, discontinuous (especially as a part-time student!) and at times, far from certain. If the following account suggests that the research has been anything other, it is likely a function of the academic requirements of a doctoral thesis which encourage one to

write with clarity, certainty and a sense of cohesion in the pursuit of credibility. Indeed, as a novice researcher, reading such accounts in refereed journals where the research 'journey' is typically accounted for in a 'methodologically technicist' way (Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008, p. 1525) and crises and quandaries encountered along the route are rarely elaborated can be rather disheartening. I would encourage the reader of this section to bear in mind the processual, fluid and dynamic nature of research, and the lack of absolute certainty which has underpinned my efforts.

## **3.2 Philosophy and Epistemology**

### **3.2.1 The Linguistic Turn and Social Constructionism**

In seeking to explore the discursive construction and performance of identity, this research may be considered as belonging to 'the linguistic turn' in social science research (Deetz, 2003), which emphasises the significance of language in *creating and constituting* rather than *representing* reality. The 'turn' brings with it an understanding of language not as some kind of neutral, objective, scientific tool which simply corresponds with and helps to reveal truth and reality. It suggests that 'language is never innocent; that no meaning exists beyond language; that knowledge and truth are linguistic entities constantly open to revision' (Johnson and Duberley, 2000, p.95). Lyotard (1984; in Benton and Craib, 2001), for example, suggests we exist 'within a fluid and linguistic reality, through which we move from one language game to another, not a world of objects or structures' (p169). What we take to be knowledge is constructed in and through language; language is not a neutral medium for the transmission and reception of 'pre-existing' knowledge, 'it is the key ingredient in the very constitution of knowledge' (Jaworski and Coupland, 2006, p. 3). Within this tradition, Habermas (1984 and 1987, in Benton and Craib, 2001), suggests that language may be performative, i.e. deployed in a strategic, purposive or instrumental way in order to achieve particular ends. Language does not act as a mirror which reflects some objective world; instead it 'makes' rather than 'finds' representation, and subjectivity and identity are constituted through the regulatory power of discourse (Barker and Galasinski, 2001).

Discourse analysis therefore may be considered more than simply a method or set of techniques for analysis: it also involves certain assumptions concerning the constructive effects of language (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). This perspective in turn follows from a particular set of ontological assumptions about the social world, namely that social phenomena are socially constructed, that is, accomplished by social actors, and as such are subject to continual review and reconstruction. Knowledge about society may be considered a realization, both 'in the sense of apprehending the objectivated social reality, and in the sense of ongoingly producing this reality' (Berger and Luckmann, 2002, p. 50). Grant and Hardy (2004) suggest that discourse helps to *construct* reality through the way it 'rules in' certain ways of talking about a topic, defines acceptable ways by which one might talk, write or conduct oneself, and rules out, limits or restricts other ways of talking or conducting oneself.

The terms social constructionism and constructivism are often deployed interchangeably (see for example Bryman and Bell, 2003; Bryman, 2004) although some writers draw a clear distinction between the two (see for example Phillips et al's 2006 response to Lok and Willmott, who mistakenly discuss the former's 'constructivist' perspective). Social constructionism has been defined as differing from constructivism in that the former 'is concerned with *social processes* in the production and legitimization of truth claims, whilst the latter refers to *individual constructions of meaning*' (Bleakley, 2003, p. 409-my italics). Constructionism claims that knowledge and meaning are historically and culturally constructed through social processes and action, whilst constructivism focuses on how the individual cognitively engages in the construction of knowledge (Young and Collin, 2004, p.373). Despite these distinctions 'considerable ambiguity' remains in the use of these terms (Young and Collin, 2004). If we accept the distinctions drawn here, this research might be considered as being informed by both perspectives: although it is the social performance of the research participants and their deployment of particular discursive resources which is the primary focus, the nature of the research method (one-to-one interviews) must inevitably consider meaning- and sense-making at the level of the individual.

However, this is not to suggest that the research seeks to deal with individual *cognition*; the interest here remains that of individual *performance* without seeking to



claim conclusive insight into underlying cognitive processes. Additionally, as Burman reminds us, the purpose of discourse work is not to focus on individuals but on the 'cultural frameworks' they reproduce (2003, p. 2). My overriding position remains a constructionist one: that the social nature of reality is constructed not in people's minds 'but in their social interaction, and especially in their linguistic interaction' (Phillips et al, 2006, p. 480).

Research which subscribes to a social constructionist paradigm may be less concerned with establishing what is real, true or accurate. Indeed, as Tsoukas (2000) reminds us, questions about whether social investigations get to the truth of the matter or capture what is 'really going on' are undecidable. The focus of constructionist research is more likely to be the investigation of the ways in which social actors produce and act upon 'knowledge'; the processes by which temporary meaning becomes (however temporarily) taken-for-granted; and the historical, cultural and social influences which go to make 'this reality rather than that reality' (Tsoukas, 2000, p. 531). This focus on the relevance of the context and circumstances of production of social 'reality' is discussed in the next section which considers the concepts of relativism, truth and reality.

### **3.2.2 Relativism and the nature of 'Truth' and 'Reality'**

Rejecting the dualism of subject/object-realist/nominalist debates which have abounded in discussions of research paradigms (e.g. Burrell and Morgan, 1979), Lincoln and Guba (2000) propose a third ontological stance for constructionist influenced research: relativism. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), the constructivist/constructionist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology, whereby realities are context-specific and constructed locally. The epistemological application of relativism suggests that what counts as warranted knowledge, truth and reason are always relative to (i.e conditioned by) some historical epoch and/or cultural context. Epistemic standards encoded into paradigms are seen as culturally specific, and 'express preferences for and surreptitiously privilege, particular cultural traditions' (Johnson and Duberley, 2000, p76). Lincoln and Guba (2000) go on to suggest that the aims of research conducted from this relativist perspective are to understand and reconstruct, based on individual interpretation and reconstruction of experience which *may* coalesce around consensus.

However, one of the criticisms which has been levelled at constructionism is that it espouses *moral* relativism, and refuses to 'take a stand' (Ashmore et al, 1994, p.7). Fairclough, in his rejection of extreme constructivism in favour of critical realism suggests that the latter is preferable as it rejects judgmental relativism, i.e. 'the view that all representations of the world are equally good' (2005, p. 922). Yet this critique fails to acknowledge that relativism may be epistemological rather than judgmental: the former acknowledges that knowledge emerges from and is shaped by particular historical and social circumstances, whilst the latter deals with the universality or absolute nature of standards employed for making moral judgments (Brown, 1994). However, even this distinction does not counter all criticism of a relativistic position: Thompson (1993, in Fournier and Grey, 2000) suggests that neo-Marxists for example view postmodern analysis as politically inept, irresponsible and dangerous, believing that epistemological and ontological relativism inevitably lead to moral nihilism (Thompson, 1993) (post-modernism being deployed here as a rather broad-brush term for non-realist, non-positivistic research).

The ethico-political standards and aims informing this and other research are discussed at length below, but I would argue that far from refusing to take a stand, epistemological relativism which informs my research perspective enables a robust criticism of the status quo by identifying how conditions which have come to prevail have been arbitrary rather than inevitable. The critical potential of a constructionist/relativist perspective lies in showing that any particular version of reality is not natural or inevitable and, in fact, may serve the political aims of specific interest groups (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004). In defending relativism as being preferable to the worst excesses of absolutism, Brown (1994) suggests that any fears we hold about it might be allayed by shifting to a conception of 'truth' as invention or process, rather than as some form of enduring entity. Questioning how particular ends and interests are served by the production and distribution of particular versions of 'truth' may de-stabilise and question the taken-for-granted nature of those truths, for 'if you can detect my personal interests you throw my authority into disrepute' (Gergen, 1999, p. 21). Such goals may refute the 'moral nihilism' of which relativism is accused, and resonate more comfortably with Fairclough's critical realism, which entails a 'search for grounds for determining

whether some representations constitute *better* knowledge of the world than others' (2005, p. 922, my italics).

My research does seek to explore how particular discourses have assumed a dominant and hegemonic status, and how those discourses become inculcated and enacted by social actors. Hegemony in this sense is understood as a system of control which advocates a specific set of values and visions, which favours dominant groups, and which pervades common sense, becoming part of the ordinary way of seeing the world (Deetz, 1994). Seeking hegemony, according to Fairclough (2003) is a matter of seeking to 'universalize particular meanings in the service of achieving and maintaining dominance' (p. 58). This subtle yet routine operation of power occurs most effectively through consent rather than coercion, whereby those who possess power are able to induce those who have less of it to interpret the world from their point of view (Mumby and Clair, 1997). However, Deetz suggests there is always the possibility of a gap between that which is 'inscribed by the dominant order and that which a dominated group would have preferred'. In this respect, meaning might be considered pluralistic and 'deferred' in the sense that 'there can be no final determination' (Deetz, 1994, p.194). As a consequence, any unitary meaning may be considered temporary and held in place only by force before it 'drifts away' (ibid.). In this respect, my research also considers both the nature of such gaps, where meaning may be deferred, and how and whether *preferred* interpretations and constructions of the social world may have emerged. Nevertheless, I draw the line at laying claim to Fairclough's notion of 'better' knowledge: such an approach may risk what Gergen describes as 'the replacement of one form of totalization with its opposite number' (1994, p. 68) whereby 'seemingly emancipatory discourses can be, or become, a form of normalising, disciplinary domination' (Willmott, 1994, p. 115).

My research philosophy does not adopt an extreme or radical constructionist/constructivist perspective, whereby reality consists entirely of what actors think about or bring about through discourse (Chia, 2000, p. 536). Instead it subscribes to Czarniawska's view that constructionism 'does not protest realism but *essentialism*' and Rorty's much quoted belief that we need to 'make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there' (2003, p.131). Whilst questioning the extent to which a tangible, fixed and concrete extra-discursive reality exists in the social world, the discourse analyst may still acknowledge that

discourse 'is not all'. Mumby and Clair (1997) suggest that organizations exist only in so far as their members create them through discourse; however, they maintain that such a claim does not render organizations 'nothing but' discourse; rather, discourse 'is the principal means by which organizational members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are' (p. 181).

Similarly, whilst acknowledging the existence of a 'primordial reality', Chia claims that discourse functions to construct an orderly, predictable and livable social world 'out of the mobile, shapeless and amorphous mass that is our pre-linguistic reality' (2000, p. 536-7). Whilst acknowledging that the social world exists outside discourse, Laclau and Mouffe (1987) protest the extent to which it might be knowable in its 'raw' state, proposing that whilst 'not everything is discursive....most of what we know is through discursive means'. Cederstrom and Spicer (2006) suggest that it is difficult to keep the discursive and non-discursive apart in any meaningful way either empirically or analytically, adding that it proves difficult if not impossible 'to identify and analyse any 'real' social phenomena in a way which is not loaded and shaped by a certain discourse' (p. 8).

Cederstrom and Spicer (2006) also suggest that inherent within a relativist epistemology is the notion of multiple competing truth claims. For Brown (1994) and others, the interesting question is not whether there is a truth, but how particular accounts (rather than others) come to acquire the *status* of truth, what Jorgensen (2003) refers to as 'a culturally recognisable representation of reality' (p.63). Foucault proposes that each society has its own 'regime of truth', that is, discourses which it accepts and makes function as true (1980, p.131): 'Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it' (p. 133) In this respect, the production of truth is 'charged with effects on the subject' (p. 215). According to Kress (1985), Foucault's interest is in seeing historically how *effects* of truth are produced within discourses which themselves are neither true nor false. In this respect, research may acknowledge that *actual* truth and reality are slippery and difficult to capture 'objectively', but that discursively deployed social constructions of 'reality' may have perceptible 'truth effects' for those who speak or consume them. The discourses of public sector reform and HRM, for example, will have particular 'truth effects', discussed in the preceding literature review, including desirable subject positions for

those who speak them (see Phillips et al, 2008, for a discussion of the 'truth effects' of 'strategic' discourse).

In discussing my research (and indeed, the literature reviewed previously) I have attempted to present my observations without resorting to the use of language implying excessive concreteness. I lay no claim to having unearthed the 'truth' of any situation. Yet I am aware that at times my account may fall into the trap of what Willmott and Lok describe as 'realist assertions' (2006, p. 479). I therefore posit an overarching caveat here: my aim is to represent my research participants' construction of their lived experience. Thompson (1984, in, Gouveia, 2003) reminds us that discourse (language realized in speech and writing) is already an interpretation, and that to undertake an analysis of discourse is to produce an interpretation, to re-interpret a pre-interpreted domain. My interpretations here are based on my analysis of the shared experience and meaning making (between myself and my research participants) in the research scenario (the interviews conducted). What follows, then is a construction (mine) of a co-construction (jointly between me and my research participants) of a construction (research participants') (see Thomas and Davies, 2005b; Thomas and Linstead, 2002). Perhaps not surprisingly I hope this explanation will suffice as a one-off defence of my position: echoing Phillips et al (2006, p. 481), adopting a social constructionist framework should not entail an overly onerous reflexive position, nor require the socially constructed nature of theories, concepts and observations to be defended at every turn.

The questions of hegemonic discourse, 'dominated groups', the discursive functioning of power and the operation of 'truth effects' mentioned above suggest that the issue of agency is worthy of reconsideration, and the next section of this methodology revisits the topic.

### **3.2.3 The Question of Agency**

Cederstrom and Spicer (2006) suggest that one of the critiques of discourse analysis is that it is trapped in a kind of linguistic determinism whereby the effects of discourses on socio-cultural power relations are overplayed. The removal of workers from the academic gaze, they maintain, makes it hard to 'get a sense of how active agential selves 'make a difference' through 'playing' with discursive practices'( p.5).

This critique offers the notion that 'workers' are a distinctive and clearly identifiable group, separate from 'managers', as though the latter might be mere peddlers of discourse, rather than themselves subject to a range of discursive forces. It also makes the assumption that academic research has 'removed' the worker from its gaze and thus failed to engage with worker responses.

I would counter this critique in several ways. Firstly, research may engage with worker (as well as managerial) talk in organizations. This research (as will be fully discussed below) is based on interviews with HR employees of all grades and levels of seniority, including the most junior (the workers?). Secondly, scope for acknowledging agency is possible by adopting a Laclavian understanding of discourse which is underpinned by the notion of a 'constitutive lack' hampering 'closure' (Cederstrom and Spicer, 2006). Through an appreciation of the incompleteness of any discourse, the failure to completely secure 'fixity' or hegemonic 'closure', as discussed previously, the discourse analyst may identify where agency is possible. It is at the margins, in the gap identified by Deetz where organizational members may find scope for acting agentially. Thirdly, Laclau and Mouffe suggest that 'any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity' (1985, p.112). Clearly, few are entirely successful in completely marginalising all others, and the co-existence of multiple, competing discourses suggests that 'workers' (I would argue *all* employees) do have choices in how they speak, re-write and subvert particular discourses (see, for example, Thomas and Davies, 2005). It might be simplistic to suggest that organizational members merely 'pick off' their discourses of choice, consciously selecting and manipulating from a 'menu' of discursive resources, since some discourses are more enduring than others, some are more powerful than others, and meanings are open to contestation and mediation by other discourses (Thomas and Linstead, 2002). Similarly, not all social actors have equal access to all discourses (Musson and Duberley, 2007). However, the co-existence of multiple discourses may allow for resistance and contestation over meaning at either the group or individual level, and Hardy et al (2000) suggest that drawing on alternative, foreign discourses ('interdiscursivity') may thus offer scope for agency.

Even where ostensible 'passivity' appears to be evident, this in itself may represent an active choice on the part of the individual. Czarniawska (2003) for example,

suggests that 'people are willing to be made into objects when they believe it brings them just treatment' (p. 134), or perhaps to deploy the dominant discourse where it apparently serves the interests of the speaker or the group(s) to which they belong. In this vein Phillips et al (2004) suggest that 'agents can act self-interestedly and work towards discursive change in ways that privilege their interests and goals' (p. 637).

This may present a problem for the researcher who is confronted with such discourses and seeks to make sense of them—the question of what Fairclough (2003) refers to as the problematic issue of attributing intentions. Am I to conclude that my research participants are 'unwitting collaborators in their own oppression' (Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008, p. 1530), 'unconsciously positioned within a discourse' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 208), or shrewd, self-conscious and self-interested manipulators of hegemonic discourses in the pursuit of their own ends? In reality, I am unable to indicate neither conclusively, for to do so would be to second guess the motivations of my participants, and to ascribe to them far more cogent and cohesive strategies than I think probable, and greater certainty on my part than I think is desirable. Interestingly, Czarniawska (2003) suggests that constructionism refuses *both* determinism and voluntarism, seeking instead to understand and reveal how the taken-for-granted becomes taken-for-granted, or possibly subverted, suggesting that simple questions of agency may be inappropriate. However, like Hardy et al (2000) whilst not assuming that agency is limitless, I work from the assumption that individuals are rarely completely oppressed, and engage in discursive activity which may be beneficial to them. My interest is in exploring how those who work in HR in local government respond to, draw upon, circumvent and resist the discourses of HRM and public sector reform (and how, in turn that might be related to processes of identity construction –discussed in more detail below.) Whilst these two discourses are the main focus of the research, in the processes of undertaking and analysing the research, I am inevitably concerned to appreciate how other discourses may be drawn upon by my participants.

The aim of the preceding section has been to explore the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this research and important associated concepts of truth, reality and agency. The next section discusses in more detail the specific approach to discourse and discourse analysis entailed here.

### 3.3 Discourse

#### 3.3.1 Discourse analysis

In viewing the social world through a constructionist/relativist framework, the importance of language in constructing social reality cannot be underestimated. Alvesson and Karreman suggest that language is the most important phenomenon in social and organizational research (2000). Fairclough (2005) suggests that it is in discourse that social phenomena are socially constructed, and Wetherell et al (2001) justify the study of discourse by claiming that 'to 'do' social life is to 'do' discourse'.

However, the term 'discourse analysis' encompasses a range of approaches and research foci. Fairclough proposes that discourse is a difficult concept 'largely because there are so many conflicting and overlapping definitions formulated from various theoretical and disciplinary standpoints' (1995, p. 3), and Antaki et al (2003) suggest that there are tensions between the different aims of the various approaches. For Wetherell et al, (2001), the study of discourse is the study of language-in-use, which may lean towards the view of discourse as a purely linguistic device, whereas Jaworski and Coupland (2006, p. 5) adopt a more context-sensitive approach, suggesting that discourse analysis offers a means of exposing or deconstructing the social practices which constitute social structure and 'conventional meaning structures' of social life. The first approach has been criticised as focusing too narrowly on the micro-linguistic aspects of discourse, at the expense of more macro social aspects which might explain 'how the social world is produced through acts of inter-subjective meaning' (Phillips et al, 2008, p.771). Similarly Billig (2003) suggests that more 'mainstream' approaches to discourse analysis may preclude systematic social critique. By contrast, the latter approach which considers the relationship between discourse and the dynamics of social systems, addressing issues of power, for example, may operate at a 'very high level of abstraction' (Phillips et al, 2008), and fail to tackle everyday processes of language use and meaning making.

Alvesson and Karreman (2000) echo this criticism: they caution against both 'linguistic reductionism' on the one hand, that is, a narrow focus on language and the specific process and social context within which discourse is produced, which may be seen as peripheral or esoteric; and a tendency to ascribe too much power to



discourse 'over, for example, fragile subjects and a discourse driven social reality' (p. 1145). They draw a distinction between the study of discourse as the study of the social text of organizations which highlights the 'talked' and 'textual' nature of everyday interaction in organizations; and the study of how 'Discourses' construct and maintain social reality and function as a powerful ordering force in organizations, whereby other levels of social reality may be shaped or subordinated by the power-knowledge relations established in discourse (pp.1126-1127).

Any research which focuses on discourse may provide an opportunity to identify links between locally produced and enacted discourses and the ways in which 'struggles around meaning are played out in organizations'(Grant and Hardy, 2004), and the influence of grander, more macro 'Discourses' (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000). In the context of this study, the locally produced talk and texts which constitute the research (i.e. interview transcripts) may be considered in the nature of their linguistic content and formation, within the specific discursive context of their enactment (i.e. the research setting), or they may be set against the wider contexts of the 'HRM Project' (Mueller and Carter, 2005), of New Public Management/Modernisation and public sector/local government reform, or of worker control, identity regulation and resistance, and their attendant Discourses. The aim of this research is to adopt a 'meso-discourse' approach: to attempt to reconcile the local and the macro. Whilst Alvesson and Karreman (2000) suggest that it is not easy to accurately account for treating discourse as both an emergent and locally constructed phenomenon whilst simultaneously recognising the presence of more grandiose, reality-shaping discourses, they nevertheless encourage the aims of such research where 'social relevance' can benefit (p. 1134). Mumby and Clair suggest that the study of discourse allows us to get at the relationship between everyday organizational talk, and larger macro-social issues of social structure and meaning which are at stake in the ways in which organizational members pursue their routine practices(1997). They propose that the examination of organizational members' communicative practices may reveal how they are both constructed by and contribute to the constitution of the wider social reality. Similarly, Jaworski and Coupland (2006, p. 5) suggest that 'local and global perspectives come together when some type of discourse analysis can show how the pressure of broad social or institutional norms are brought to bear on the identity and classification of individuals'.

Phillips and Hardy (2002) suggest that discourse analytic research might be categorized along two theoretical dimensions: the relative importance of text and context, and the focus on power dynamics as opposed to the processes of social construction that constitute social reality. Studies which are more concerned with context than text, and with criticality rather than constructivism are labelled critical discourse analysis. Fairclough (1992; 2003) however, contends that the choice between discourse analysis at the local/linguistic level, and discourse analysis at the social/theoretical should not be an either/or choice. He suggests that discourse analysis should be concerned with continuity and change at the more abstract structural level, as well as with what happens in particular texts. The framework of critical discourse analysis which he proposed as a means of encompassing both is discussed in more detail in the next section.

### **3.3.2 Discourse analysis and criticality**

Gouveia (2003) reminds us that even within the term 'critical discourse analysis', a considerable diversity of positions and approaches exists. For Mumby and Clair (1997), critical discourse studies are those which concern themselves with how the competing interests of groups of different organizational members get resolved through the control of symbolic and discursive resources. Critical discourse analysis they suggest, aims to move beyond a surface level examination of discourse 'to show how it simultaneously produces and hides 'deep structure' relations of power and inequality' (1997, p. 183). Similarly, Van Dijk (1993) suggests that critical discourse analysis might act as a means of criticising the social order, and that it 'should describe and explain how power abuse is enacted, reproduced or legitimated by the talk and text of dominant institutions' (1996, p. 84). Billig maintains that its criticality is rooted in a radical critique of social relations (2003), and that that critical approaches not only seek to expose gaps in the 'supposedly non-critical orthodoxy but then seek to show how these gaps are neither neutral nor haphazard' (p. 40).

One of the most prominent approaches to discourse analysis in recent studies, Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), has become associated with a critical realist perspective (see for example, his defence of 'the case for critical realism', 2005). Fairclough suggests that critical realists 'can accept a moderate version of the claim that the world is textually constructed, but not an extreme version' (2003, p.

9). Whilst the previous section clearly indicates a more constructionist leaning in my research philosophy than might be acceptable to some critical realists (e.g. Reed, 2000, who would doubtless claim I am collapsing ontology into epistemology by suggesting that what is 'real' is only knowable through discourse) my sympathies nevertheless lie with the aims of CDA. Fairclough suggests that it is particularly concerned with how desires are represented as facts, with how the 'imaginaries of interested parties' come to be represented as the way the world actually is (2003, p. 204), making certain outcomes seem inevitable. The aim of CDA is to show 'connections and causes that are hidden' (1992, p. 9) identifying how particular discourses become enacted and inculcated, through the analysis of discourse. In this respect CDA aims to reveal the role of language as it relates to power, ideology and socio-cultural change (Grant et al, 2004). For Ainsworth and Hardy (2004), CDA involves the use of discourse analytic techniques, combined with a critical perspective, to interrogate social phenomena, drawing on social constructionist assumptions, but at the same time providing a critical framework with which to explore material effects.

Fairclough (1992; 2003) proposes a three-dimensional framework for CDA suggesting that discursive events may be simultaneously analysed at three levels: firstly, at a textual level, considering content and linguistic formation; secondly, at the level of interaction, considering how a text is 'discursively practiced', that is, produced and interpreted; and thirdly, at the level of social context, considering how institutional and social factors surrounding the discursive event might shape the discourse in question. Within this framework, discursive events may be considered simultaneously as 'a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice, and instance of social practice' (1992, p. 4). Utilising the framework may overcome Alvesson and Kärreman's (2000) fear that researchers are inclined to 'jump over' language use, whilst nevertheless taking us 'beyond simple explanations of verbal and written interaction' (Grant et al, 2004, p.12) in order that we might appreciate the importance of 'who uses language, how, why and when' (Van Dijk, 1997, p.2). Similarly, Jaworski and Coupland (2006, p. 7) suggest that 'the forensic task of discourse analysis is to track how various forms of discourse and their associated values and assumptions are incorporated into a particular text, why, and with what effects'.

However, Billig (2003) cautions against the rhetoric of self-praise which may be associated with the 'critical' label: the danger may be that the 'critical' researcher assumes a privileged insight, revealing 'truths' invisible to others, including the 'oppressed' research participants themselves. Thus 'critical' research may become self-legitimizing (Wray-Bliss, 2003). Whilst I would label my research critical discourse analysis (if not CDA), I do not seek to impose my interpretation, nor to suggest that my reading of my research is the only one possible, nor indeed uncontested, and make no claim that my research is value-free (see Gouveia, 2003). Equally, whilst attempting to underline the authoritative nature of this research in the pursuit of a doctoral success, I baulk at positioning myself as 'authoritative researcher' (Wray-Bliss, 2003). This issue is discussed further in the section below discussing criteria for evaluating research, ethics and reflexivity.

### **3.3.3 Discourse and organization**

Previous discussions have alluded to the centrality of discourse in seeking to understand organizations. Phillips and Hardy (2002) emphasize the difficulty of studying organizations as if they were solid, fixed, material objects, and suggest that we search instead for the discourses that hold them together and make them real for us. Similarly, Mueller and Carter (2005) suggest that the linguistic turn within management studies 'is predicated on the notion that organizations are grammatocentric in that they are dominated by words, written texts and conversations' (p. 372). Moreover, the 'dominating' language may provide the resources and means by which organizational members act, behave and construct their identity. For example, Phillips et al (2004) suggest that discursive activity in organizations influences *actions*, and that discourses 'provide the socially constituted, self-regulating mechanisms that *enact* institutions and *shape individual behaviour*' (p. 635). Similarly, for Grant et al (2000), language and discourse are the means by which organizational members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are. An 'organization' can be seen as a 'continuous process of social accomplishment which in both senses of the term is *articulated* by and through the deployment of discursive resources' (Grant et al, 1998, p.12). Mumby and Clair suggest that the very existence of organizations as symbolic structures 'shot through with competing interests, struggles and contradictions' renders them precarious (1997, p. 187). Studying discourse may therefore be seen as 'a powerful

way to explore processes of organizing and, particularly, the fragility of, and struggles within, organizational life' (Hardy et al, 2000, p. 1232).

Whilst acknowledging that the identity of organizations and their members may be constituted, reconstituted, created and contested by prevailing discourses (Thomas and Linstead, 2002), it is important to consider, as previously discussed, that the hegemony of dominant discourses may never be fully accomplished. Laclau and Mouffe, according to Willmott (2005), maintain that the accomplishment of social reality through articulatory practices is at once hegemonic *and* irremediably incomplete and inherently subject to contestation. This incompleteness and contestation means that discourses will have differing persuasiveness, appeal and fixity at different times. Meanings may be contested, subverted, appropriated. And multiple discourses, narratives and interpretations may co-exist and interact within organizational settings, each telling and in some way performing how the organization and its members should be (Doolin, 2003, p. 756). Boje et al (2004) refute research which treats organizations as 'sites of monological coherence and univocal harmony' (p. 572) as unrealistic and untenable, preferring to consider organizations as phenomena 'in and of language (which)..can be understood as collaborative and contending discourses' (p. 571). Their preference for an appreciation of organizational 'heteroglossia' calls for research which acknowledges the multiplicity of languages within the apparent discursive unity of any organization, and the constant tensions and competitions which result from 'contending multi-voiced discourses and speech forms' within local and more macro contexts (p.572). In this vein, Burman suggests that good discursive analyses acknowledge the multiple and contested character of the interplay of discourses 'by showing how different discursive representations are built to interact with and ward off others' (2003, p.4)

Equally, the aim of the research is not to author a monological account, i.e. a singular or coherent narrative of the individuals and organization in question, but to produce a dialogical analysis which is comprised of a 'multiplicity of discourses which reflect 'plurivocal' meanings brought to bear by participants (and) potentially permits a multitude of organizational realities, which, although relatively autonomous discourses, may overlap and permeate each other' (Grant et al, 1998, p.7). This approach allows for different organizational actors experiencing the same discursive

event differently, and for diverse and disparate interpretations to be made by the same actor over time.

### **3.4 Evaluating the research: Ethics and reflexivity**

Clearly for qualitative research grounded in a paradigm which refutes the notion of 'objectivity', the conventional scientific criteria of validity, reliability and generalisation associated with positivistic research are not appropriate. For Grant et al (1998), discourse analysis 'prioritises subjectivity, acknowledges instrumentalism, explores rhetoric, values multiplicity and celebrates uncertainty' (p.12). Of greater relevance here therefore are the criteria of 'authenticity' including resonance, rhetoric and applicability (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, 1994); of richness, depth, multivocality and personal responsibility (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003); and of 'discursive democracy', transparency and reflexivity (Johnson et al, 2006).

A reflexive stance on the part of the researcher may be considered integral to a relativist approach, for if all knowledge is socially situated, we must exercise caution about the claims we can then make for the knowledge we produce ourselves as 'scientific knowledge producers' (Jorgensen, 2003, p.63). Knowledge is built and contributed to through assembling more informed and sophisticated reconstructions, and the researcher is seen as a 'passionate participant-as facilitator of multi-voice reconstruction' (Lincoln and Guba, 2005, p166). Research represents a particular interpretation of a particular situation at a given time, and meanings are jointly created between both the researcher, who can never act as an objective, disinterested entity, and the research participant. Duberley and Johnson (2000) believe that 'traditional academic conventions have developed which remove the researcher as a person from the presentation of our research' (p 45). This quest for objectivity and detachment ignores the political aspect of research, and particularly the political aspect of management and organizational research. It assumes that the researcher is value-neutral, both in determining what to study, but also in deciding how the research is to be carried out, and in the carrying out of the research itself.

For example, in counselling the researcher to avoid 'taking sides' with participants in the research process, Antaki et al (2003) seem to suggest that researcher detachment is possible, and that ethico-political motivations and agendas may be suppressed in the pursuit of objectivity and rigour. However, Westwood and Clegg

(2003) maintain that there is a moral imperative in all research practice, and that 'any question about the purpose of research activity should be answered from an ethico-political position and not a methodological-ontological one (p.21). Similarly, Parker (2000) encourages 'those who make their living studying organizations' to engage with questions of value (p. 519), and the 'ends' of our commitments (p. 539) (rather than the epistemological and methodological 'means'). Jaworski and Coupland (2006) suggest that discourse analysis 'is a sort of forensic activity with a libertarian political slant' (p.5), and that those choosing to undertake discourse analytic research are often motivated by a concern about social inequality and the perpetuation of power relationships.

The aim of reflexivity in this research is to emphasize the inclusion of the researcher in the subject matter under question, to take account of the relationship between the researcher and the research subject, and to acknowledge the limitations of the researcher in representing the subjects under study and their effect on the creation of 'knowledge' (Hardy et al, 2001). However, the challenge of reflexivity and of declaring an ethico-political motivation is to ensure that in the processes of doing so, all attention is not drawn away from the subject of the research and refocused instead on the researcher (Hardy et al, 2005).

### **3.5 Summary**

In addition to considering my ethical concerns and desire for reflexivity in undertaking this research, this chapter has outlined the philosophical perspectives underpinning my approach to the research. Focusing on the constructionist, relativist and critical discursive lenses which combine to inform a particular methodological framework, the chapter has set the scene for a consideration of the design and execution of the research study. The next chapter offers a detailed account and evaluation of the primary research activity undertaken, including a more focused discussion of specific ethical issues and my concern for reflexivity in the context of my research practice and identity as a researcher .

## **4.0 Methodology: Research methods**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Having already considered the philosophical perspectives which underpin this research, the next section aims to outline how I actually conducted the research. First, I outline the rationale for the research 'design' and choice of interviews and discourse analysis in the context of the overall aims and research questions. Next I describe the process by which the data, or 'empirical material' (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007) was produced and analyzed, considering in particular in the spirit of reflexivity my role in shaping the research. Finally, I consider again some of the ethical issues associated with the undertaking of the research, and potential criteria against which the research might be evaluated.

### **4.2 The language of 'method': a caveat**

I have considered long and hard the most appropriate terms to describe the research I have undertaken as I am aware that an inappropriately used term may suggest to the reader particular assumptions on my part. For example, the use of terms such as 'informants', 'data', 'results', and 'findings' sits uncomfortably with my research philosophy, suggesting as they do the revelation or discovery of truth through the appropriate manipulation of reliably gathered facts by an objective researcher. I have opted for terms which I hope will convey my understanding of the research scenario as informed by my constructionist philosophy, discussed in the previous section. For example, the '-ee' suffix of the term 'interviewee' which I have used might suggest that my 'participants' were passive objects of the research, pinned down, and scientifically 'recorded' in perpetuity in the glass box of the butterfly collector. On the contrary, I prefer to understand the interview as a derivation of the French '(s)entrevoir', meaning to catch a glimpse (of one another): no interview is ever complete in what it accomplishes, and no account ever definitive. I consider the interviews undertaken here as a temporal site of *co-constructed* meaning, and acknowledge that both interviewer and interviewee were engaged in deploying particular identities, glimpsed momentarily and in a fragmentary way, subject to a complex set of power dynamics within the context of 'the research interview'. Equally, the analysis of the texts produced from the interviews represents a particular interpretation on my part from a number of possible readings. I urge the



reader to bear this in mind if I appear, through the use of particular phrases to have adopted an overly essentialist, realist or positivistic position.

### **4.3 Research Design**

The broad focus of this research is how the personal and social identities of HR practitioners might be narrated through the discursive resources of HRM and public sector reform. The study aims to consider how HR practitioners interpret, resist and enact discourses of HRM/public sector reform, and in the process of that enactment undertake identity work. Clarke et al (2009) suggest that organizations are sites for 'realizing the project of the self', and it is the accounts of HR practitioner 'selves' realized in the context of a 'modernised' and 'reformed' local government that I am interested.

#### **4.3.1. Interviews as a method for researching identity**

In order to study how those selves are accomplished in the organizational context, my original intention was to undertake an ethnographically influenced study with opportunities for attending meetings, job-shadowing etc., in addition to interviews, to enable my research to be based on an analysis of more 'naturally occurring' talk and texts. Unfortunately the opportunity to do so did not come to fruition. Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of undertaking this research has been the negotiation of access to suitable sites and participants, and to my initial disappointment, to a certain extent the choice of interviews as a research method was somewhat forced by the research opportunities offered and my own time limitations.

However, through the process of reflection and analysis I have concluded that the interview scenario provides the ideal forum for the production of a personal narrative of the self (Learmonth, 2006; Musson and Duberley, 2007). Silverman (2006) suggests that the distinction between interview texts and naturally occurring talk and texts represents an overly simplistic distinction 'between methods that are contrived and those that are 'natural'' (p. 111), with interviews providing an opportunity for 'direct observation of the phenomenon of interest'.

If we accept Alvesson et al's (2008) claim that identity work is prompted by social interactions that raise questions of 'who am I' and 'who are we' (p. 15), then interviews offer an ideal stimulus for identity work (whether conscious or not, Cassell,

2005), and a scenario in which we might 'construct and reflexively manage who we are' (Coupland, 2007, p. 277). Indeed, interviewees may use the interview to reflect on and describe their identities and roles 'in ways they might not otherwise have done' (Ainsworth et al, 2009, p.12). Mueller et al (2004) also suggest that interviews offer 'high validity in terms of advanced understanding of linguistic and social categories used by protagonists in order to make sense of their situation' (p.79). Interviews might therefore be considered particularly relevant for studies of identity (Coupland, 2007).

My assumption is not that the interview represents an 'epistemologically neutral device for data collection' (Cassell, 2005, p. 170) nor that accounts given therein reflect some kind of underlying reality, for as Ezzy indicates 'it is a mistake to assume that lived experience is in some way separate from its narration' (1998, p. 244). The interview is itself a site for the production of meaning, for the construction of identities, and I consider my participants to be active agents, creating identities for themselves during the interview. Individuals have a 'battery of repertoires' (Dick and Cassell, 2002, p. 544) on which they might draw and within which they might position themselves, and my interest here is in how those repertoires are deployed in the construction of their identity. This is not to suggest that agency is unbounded: any personal narrative will inevitably be limited and shaped by the 'repertoire of available and sanctioned stories' and therefore 'located in social narratives rarely of our own making' (Ezzy, 1998, p.246). As Alvesson et al (2008) suggest, 'for both form and substance, personal identities necessarily draw on available social discourses or narratives about who one can be and how one should act' (p.11).

A Foucauldian perspective would suggest that identity might be considered as the product of a range of *competing* discourses which in turn are a reflection of power relations within a wider social context. Clarke et al (2009) suggest that socialization into any one discourse is never complete and there are practical difficulties in assembling narratives of the self from this range of competing discourses. For Fairclough (2001) this process of 'assembly' can only be achieved through a process of negotiation. This process may be further complicated where discourses themselves are inherently contradictory: Beech et al (2008) offer the example of NPM discourse as a *dominant* and *limiting* discourse for public sector employees, simultaneously requiring as it does a focus on stakeholder consultation alongside an

espousal of measurement, efficiency and effectiveness. Thus the interview scenario might offer the opportunity to observe how HR employees in local government discursively negotiate the conflicting demands placed on them by this and a range of other discourses, and with what consequences. This issue is considered in greater detail in the discussion of how the analysis was undertaken.

Although the first part of this chapter outlined the rationale for a discourse-based study, it is nevertheless useful to briefly revisit the justification and approach adopted.

### **4.3.2 Discourse Analysis revisited: The practice**

As already indicated, this study is grounded in a constructionist epistemology, which considers language to be the medium through which we come to understand and know the world (Edley, 2001). It therefore follows that language should be the focus of the analysis. The premise on which this research is based is that human beings are essentially rhetorical, making meaning of the social world via discursive activity (Musson and Duberley, 2007) and this discursive activity offers scope for rich analysis. For example, Dick and Cassell (2002) suggest that seeking to verify what counts as reality may be replaced by seeking to understand the function that specific accounts of reality serve.

Attention to discourse allows us the opportunity to consider how certain meanings have gained importance, which meanings they are, and by what processes of social construction they have done so (Phillips and Hardy, 2002; Iyer, 2009.) The term 'discourse' is understood here as 'an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination and reception, that brings an object into being' (Parker, 1992; Phillips and Hardy, 2002). Through DA we might reveal the non-obvious ways in which language figures in social processes, and reveal how what is considered taken for granted comes to be so (Fairclough, 2001). Discourses are not neutral, and Jaworski and Coupland (2006) suggest that the forensic task of discourse analysis is to track how various forms of discourse and associated values and assumptions are incorporated into a particular text, why, and with what effects. This process, may offer a means of exposing or deconstructing the social practices

that constitute social structure (Jaworski and Coupland 2006), or act as a means to interrupting what is taken for everyday common sense (Iyer, 2009).

DA allows us to explore how the producers of texts draw on discourses in a strategic way, and to identify how 'grand discourses' (Discourses) appear in everyday discourses, making particular outcomes and actions appear both inevitable and legitimate (Hardy, 2004). Discourse in the organizational context helps to construct reality by becoming embedded and adopted, shaping the ways in which particular issues can be talked about (Hardy, 2004). However, the meaning of a text is not pre-given, and 'disjunctures will always exist between dominant readings and individual interpretations' (p. 421). The approach to DA utilised here follows the assumptions outlined by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000), specifically that language is used for a variety of functions, and has a variety of consequences, and that the constructive and flexible ways in which language is used should be a central subject of study. Hardy's 'disjunctures' represent an opportunity for such constructive and flexible use, and therefore for rich research.

Iedema et al (2003) seek to identify how organizational discourses embody both multiplicity and closure in talk through both centrifugal (opening up) and centripetal (closing off) effects (see also Currie and Brown, 2003). They propose an appreciation of heteroglossia *within* the accounts of individual speakers as a means of expressing tensions, ambiguities and contradictions, often associated with a requirement to articulate 'incommensurable semantic orientations' (p. 23). Several other authors have addressed the issues of closure, ambiguity, multiplicity and antagonism within the talk of participants. Chandler (2008) for example suggests that individuals do not necessarily identify in a straightforward way with one position or another, but may demonstrate ambiguity in their talk. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) suggest that variation and inconsistency will exist in how particular phenomena are described. Ball and Wilson (2000) identify the phenomenon of 'reciprocal positioning', whereby individuals 'position themselves or others in a dominant repertoire by virtue of the use of its terms, but in inverse relation to that repertoire' and alternative positioning, whereby individuals position themselves in an alternative repertoire to that which is dominant (p. 545). Clarke et al (2009) identify both identity incoherence and inherent dualities in the accounts we offer of

ourselves, incorporating contrasting and antagonistic positions, as well as disconnected versions of those selves. Finally, Musson and Duberley (2007) suggest that individual responses to phenomena are more complex and varied than many polarised 'either/or' explanations can account for.

These alternative articulations, contradictions, subversions and antagonisms may well reflect the reality of organizational life as experienced by employees, and offer a rich opportunity for exploration through the medium of discourse analysis. The specific approach to analysis adopted in this study is described at length below.

It is worth mentioning that DA is not without its critics. Hammersley (2003), for example, has accused discourse analysis of refusing to engage with the content of what people say, or to treat what research participants say about the social world as a source of information about it. I would refute this accusation:. DA does not reject the idea that participants' talk is a source of information, only that the talk may be considered definitive or representative. Similarly, DA provides the opportunity to address both form and content -what Silverman (2006) refers to as a concern with 'conversational skills' as well as the content of talk. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) suggest that a discourse analyst should be concerned with 'the way accounts are organized *as well as what is actually said* (my italics)' (p. 206).

Having outlined the rationale for a discourse analytic approach to interview based research, the next part of this chapter considers in detail the research undertaken.

### **4.3.3 The research study**

49 semi-structured interviews were carried out over an 18 month period in 5 West Midlands local government HR departments, although only 47 are represented here (the reasons are explained below).

Additionally, I attended one HR senior management team day-long meeting, and two, two-hour meetings of HR officers; scrutinised a wide range of relevant documentation, e.g. Government reviews and publications (Audit Commission guidelines, Gershon Review of Public Sector Efficiency etc.), local authority 'strategic plans' and websites; publications and videos from one of the 'strategic partners'; and two critical websites/fora run by employees of two of the authorities. The purpose

was not to conduct a comparative study of authorities, nor of HR functions, nor yet of individual HR employees. The object of analysis here is not the people involved, but the narrative account as produced in the interview scenarios (Dick and Cassell, 2002).

#### **4.3.4 Research sites and interviewees**

The local authorities featured here are all West Midlands unitary bodies, i.e. 'single tier' authorities with responsibility for the provision of all local government functions and services within their area. The interviewees represented a range of HR roles and 'levels' within the hierarchy, from 'heads of' and sectional managers, to HR/ personnel officers and senior advisers, with a slight bias to more senior roles. No-one was interviewed from the most junior clerical ranks of 'transactional/processing' HR administrators, primarily because of lack of access, but additionally, because those roles tend to be largely process driven.

Two of the authorities have entered into a 'strategic partnership' with private sector organizations for the provision of some or all HR services, and a number of the interviewees were either post-TUPE employees of the private organization, or had been seconded to the private organization from their local authority employer. One interviewee was self-employed and on a temporary contract as an 'interim manager', working on the 'HR transformation project' of a particular authority.

Access was negotiated through a mixture of personal contacts and direct approaches to the senior managers of the HR functions in question. The request was made for access to be granted to a range of 'HR practitioners', although this was often interpreted by HR directors/managers as a desire to speak to the most senior, and I was reliant on a 'snowball' effect of asking for people to nominate further interviewees from the next tier in their unit. Two potential interviewees declined to be interviewed: one suggested that as a Health and Safety manager, her views were not relevant, and the second offered no explanation. One interviewee requested that the recording equipment be turned off during the interview as she felt she was straying into sensitive areas, and a further interview proved of no relevance to this research as the interviewee was employed by a private sector 'partner' as an internal HR practitioner serving other private sector employees. Perhaps not untypically for the HR profession, only 6 of the interviewees were men, and 3 of

these were in senior managerial positions. A detailed list of participants and codes used for analysis is attached as an appendix.

A number of my former postgraduate students were included as interview participants and were therefore known to me in advance, which may have had some bearing on how they presented themselves during the interview (see below for a fuller discussion of this issue). I was also offered the opportunity to interview existing (part-time) students, but declined because of my concerns that the tutor-student relationship might be compromised.

#### **4.3.5 Interview 'set-up'**

Each of the interviews lasted for approximately one hour, and most were undertaken at the work premises of the interviewee. Those which occurred 'off-site' were often considerably lengthier. Participants were e-mailed in advance to outline the nature of the research and to check their willingness to participate. Additionally, I produced an information sheet outlining the overall aim of the research, which was kept rather general. Although ethical guidelines such as the ESRC Research Ethics Framework (2005) suggest that research participants must be fully informed about the purpose, methods and uses of the research in order that 'informed consent' might be given, I must admit to feeling less than comfortable outlining my aim to subject the talk of the participants to close scrutiny and dissection. Additionally, I did not relish the prospect of explaining and defending a constructionist perspective or the merits of discourse analysis to the participants. Attempts to do so to students and academic colleagues have not always been enthusiastically received, particularly from those with a highly functionalist bias. Perhaps I was also reluctant to project an overly 'academic' image of myself for fear of alienating participants. This issue of self-presentation and researcher identity is considered in more detail below.

A list of 'draft questions' informed by a reading of the literature was produced prior to commencing the interviews (Appendix 2). The aim was to provide a broad set of themes which might prove fertile ground in the interviews, focusing particularly on the role and identity of the function; the 'value' attributed to the activities of the function; the extent and nature of the evolution of the role's function and identity; and the tensions experienced. The purpose of the questions was to invite participants to engage in a form of identity work: articulating their identities as local government HR

practitioners, and the questions were informed by an awareness of the issues and tensions raised within both the HR and public sector/ local government reform literature. For this reason I describe the interviews as 'semi-structured' rather than open-ended. My desire to address the specific research questions, and my own reading prior to undertaking the research inevitably informed and guided my questioning; although my intention was to allow interviewees a free rein in describing their role, I became aware that some questions were particularly fruitful while others yielded briefer responses. Additionally, I cannot claim that I pursued the schedule of questions rigidly. Where a particular theme or question appeared salient or apposite to the interviewee, my preference was to be flexible and to allow the conversation to follow a more 'natural' than rigid course. Similarly, the diverse roles of the participants meant that some questions were of variable relevance. I would like to think that, as Kvale (1996) suggests is possible, I became wiser during the course of the interviews! Although the themes covered in the interviews tended to be fairly similar, some questions elicited lengthier responses and offered opportunities for exploring alternative directions other than those outlined.

#### **4.4 Transcription**

All the interviews were recorded (with the permission of the participants) and transcribed verbatim. Time constraints and lack of keyboard skills did not permit me to undertake all the transcriptions personally. I transcribed 7 interviews myself, engaged the services of a first transcriber who undertook a further 10, and finally a second transcriber who took over when the first became unwell and completed a further 30. I subsequently read all the transcriptions whilst listening to the original recordings to check for accuracy of transcription and to fill in any gaps.

The transcription format includes an identification of the speakers and simple verbatim transcription, rather than a detailed analysis of the micro-linguistic dimensions such as pauses, hesitations, intonation, overtalking etc. which is more commonly utilised in a discursive approach to discourse analysis, where a routine, close and methodical analysis might be undertaken (Fairclough, 2001) . Whilst one of the aims of this research is to attend to the nature of what is said and how it is constructed, the focus is predominantly on how accounts of reality are constructed



through discourse, and what functions those accounts might fulfil (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Dick and Cassell, 2002).

#### **4.5 Analytical approach**

Alexiadou (2001) notes that it is difficult to find exhaustive descriptions of how qualitative researchers have undertaken processes of analysis and interpretation. Faced with what Phillips and Hardy (2002) describe as the 'Herculean task' of analyzing the texts of 47 interviews (a total of a little under 1200 pages and 425, 000 words of transcriptions), their suggestion that discourse analytic researchers should avoid being too systematic in identifying 'categories', focusing rather on the emergent aspect of data analysis offers little comfort. The analytical approach adopted here may not conform to the more 'purist' approach of 'DA', but offers a rich analysis of discourse deployed in the interview context by HR practitioners when invited to articulate their role and activities. In this respect the analysis is very much of identity constructed and situated within a particular scenario.

Drawing on the work of several authors, my analysis was guided by the following three overarching concerns:

##### *Identification of interpretative repertoires*

To identify which discursive resources the participants drew on to account for their experience of work, I employed Potter and Wetherell's (1987) notion of 'interpret(at)ive repertoires', often referred to as 'discourses' (see for example, Dick and Cassell, 2002; Silverman, 2006). A second caveat about the language of research may be useful here. One of the difficulties of accounting for the analysis of texts using DA is the plethora of terms which litters the arena of qualitative analysis. Repertoires may be referred to as discourses or 'semantic orientations' (Iedema et al, 2003). Labels applied to specific repertoires may be referred to variously as themes, categories or codes. I have chosen simply to use the term repertoires.

These repertoires are defined as 'systematically related sets of terms that are often used with stylistic and grammatical coherence and often organised around one or more central metaphors' (Potter, 1996, p. 131). Taylor (2001) suggests that reference to the theoretical assumptions underpinning the research will inform the identification of patterns in the research and thus the coding and categorisation of

data, and inevitably I was drawn to repertoires which had resonance from my a priori knowledge and review of the literature. However, I also sought to identify repertoires and positions within those repertoires which emerged a posteriori from the texts during the process of analysis. Through a reading and re-reading of interview transcripts (the 'texts') and a systematic coding and refinement of codes, I sought to identify clear and common repertoires, and how participants drew on them as resources for constructing their identity. The repertoires identified form the basis of the analysis chapters.

#### *Analysis of positions adopted within the repertoire*

I also sought to consider how participants chose to position themselves discursively within the repertoire, for example deploying the repertoire in a straightforward way, adopting a reciprocal or antagonistic position, or identifying irreconcilable/contradictory demands between this and other repertoires. This stage is informed by Fairclough's (1992) identity function of discourse.

#### Example:

To illustrate how these two considerations of repertoires and positions were incorporated into the analysis, I include below excerpts from S3 and D2, talking about their role in relation to line managers. I suggest that the repertoire being deployed here is one of moral/ethical superiority to line managers, the suggestion of HR as 'moral high ground':

*'S3: HR cannot do their job for them. So it's about driving managers and saying 'Look, don't be a twat, this needs to be dealt with like this, this needs to be dealt ...' And you don't really need to be hard ... well sometimes you have to because there is no other choice, but as long as you can ... you know, you are objective, you're fair, you are consistent, you treat everybody with respect and dignity, then ... you're not always going to like it, you're not always going to make everybody happy or yourself but it is common sense.*

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*'D2: Well, you do get to know which managers can be trusted, and you find out which ones are the more difficult...*

*Sue: Can you explain what you mean by difficult?*

*D2: They are the ones who want to sack everybody at the slightest thing, and you have to explain to them that it isn't right..it isn't a fair way to treat people..it isn't conducive to a decent work environment. But it isn't easy as they don't always listen to us and assume that our view isn't valid or that we are soft, you know, the old HR is touchy feely thing.'*

S3 draws on claims of respect, fairness, objectivity and consistency as a source of legitimacy, even when this involves not making others *or oneself* happy, suggesting a sense of self-sacrifice for the greater good. Additionally the manager is positioned as 'twat' and the HR practitioner as behaving with common sense. By contrast, D2 offers a claim that HR might act as moral arbiter in order to rein in the worst excesses of line management ('it isn't right/fair/decent'), but that this position is difficult to reconcile with a lack of organizational status ('they don't always listen to us'), and might be perceived as evidence of weakness ('HR is soft/touchy-feely'). S3 apparently adopts a straightforward position in relation to the repertoire, whereas D2 offers a problematised position of conflict between lack of organizational legitimacy, low status and a desire to adopt and enforce moral high-ground.

In my analysis of positions within the repertoires I also attended to the textual dimension (Fairclough, 1992; 2001), the discursive/linguistic construction (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) of the utterances, to enable a consideration of how individual speakers were using the particular repertoires.

### *Ideological Analysis*

Additionally, my approach to analysis involved a consideration of the conceptions, values, beliefs or sets of meanings associated with the discourses and repertoires deployed, to which Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) refer as the 'ideational level of analysis' (2000), and Fairclough (1992; 2001) as the 'ideational function' of discourse. Fairclough defines ideologies as '... significations/constructions of reality (the physical world, social relations, social identities) which are built into various dimensions of the forms/meanings of discursive practices, and which contribute to the production, reproduction or transformation of relations of domination' (Fairclough, 1992, p. 87). This concern allows a consideration of intertextuality/ interdiscursivity,

i.e. how the repertoires (or discourses) articulated by the participants draw on other texts and discourses, including in particular the Discourses associated with public sector reform/ modernisation/ NPM and HRM.

Example:

In the above example, the excerpts from both speakers suggest a commitment to the notion that line managers as organizational representatives *ought* to behave in a fair and moral way towards employees, but that their propensity for doing so is variable at best. The position of the HR employee as moral arbiter or 'enforcer' is resonant of a more traditional conception of the role of the 'people management' function as overseer or 'policer' of line management behaviours. The two speaker position themselves respectively as 'driving' managers, and not being listened to by managers, suggesting alternative conceptions of the power and legitimacy of the Hr function, or possibly the empowering or weakening aspect of adopting the moral high ground. The notion that doing the 'right or 'decent' thing by employees in a fair and consistent way is the duty of employers may be more associated with the developmental /humanist principles underpinning the conception of the public sector as 'model employer', arguably an outmoded concept in the rhetoric of the modernised public sector. Finally, the contrast between fairness as the 'soft' option or fairness as a potentially harder route, 'not making everybody happy', including oneself is redolent of debates about the challenges of ethical behaviour in organizations. At this stage of analysis it is possible to identify how speakers are aligning themselves to particular ideological perspectives and to speculate on their reasons for doing so.

My approach to the analysis was not applied in a rigid or linear manner, but I drew on the three aspects outlined above to consider repertoires, positions and ideational functioning/ intertextuality as mutually implicated phenomena. This involved, inevitably, hours of close reading, re-reading, classification, refining of classifications and cross referencing within and between texts-a common feature of discourse analysis based research.

One final point is worthy of mention here. Although the interviews texts were examined in detail for evidence of similarities/differences, of equal importance was

the issue of consistency /variability, ambiguity and contradiction within the texts of individual interviews. Similarly, the identification of common repertoires across a range of participants does not seek to suggest claims of representativeness or generalisability, merely the presence of shared discourses within a particular social context.

#### **4.6 Role of the researcher**

Learmonth (2006) suggests that during interviews both interviewee and interviewer are creating identities for themselves and for others, and Cassell (2005) suggests that the interview situation 'constructs us' and that identities are co-created for both interviewer and interviewee through the research process (p. 175). Given that the interview scenario represents a site for identity work for *both* interviewee and interviewer, a note on my own performance of identity is worthy of inclusion here. The intention is not to become narcissistically fixated on my own importance (Alvesson et al, 2008), but to appreciate how the way my own identity was played out during the research process may have had some bearing on how participants responded, given the relational nature of identity, and the interdependency of subject effects (Learmonth, 2006). As Alvesson (2003, p. 19) notes: 'Interviewers are not simple conduits for answers but rather are deeply implicated in the production of answers'

Prior to the interviews I had already begun to establish an identity for myself through e-mail contact, and was careful to include my role and position ('Senior Lecturer in HRM') as part of my e-mail 'signature'. My purpose in doing so I assumed to be so that candidates would have a clear idea of my role. On reflection, I suspect I was attempting to establish a form of legitimacy with the participants (the title of Senior Lecturer in HRM may still carry some kind of kudos externally, even for a post-1992 university!). Additionally, my association with 'HRM' and with the postgraduate diploma offering CIPD graduate membership may have already created a sense of my identification with the values, tenets and principles of both. Some of the 'pro-' and 'anti-HRM' talk may have been deployed with this in mind, for example:

*'Sue: So where do you get your ideas from about how you ought to do your job and what the priorities might be?*

*L1: Well, of course, People Management (CIPD fortnightly magazine) and the CIPD website are very good, yes, very good....yes, the CIPD...'*

And:

*'Sue: How do you get ideas about what the role of HR ought to be?*

*S1: The CIPD qualification is very valuable and I personally think if you are going to work in HR you should have it, because it gives the service the credibility and professionalism it deserves, so I have absolutely no problem with the qualification, but in terms of you know the journal they produce, I think it's a load of claptrap to be quite honest it's just, you know, it's just people theorising and very often there aren't many what I would call decent articles, the employment law updates, and I like personnel today because you've got some good case round-ups, the legal aspects but that's all I ever read, because the articles are just more of the same all of the time and different people's opinions and shut up and get on with your own job, it just irritates me, I have to be honest. Erm,(pause) I'm trying to be balanced and fair. (pause) I think it is a worthwhile Institute but they need to be closer to the business as in the business that HR deliver on a practical level rather than just academics theorising, at a theoretical level and textbooks, because that's what I feel it is, you know I could read a textbook and summarise it because that's all those articles are, but yes, I do value the CIPD as a body, but I'm glad I did the qualification but the real learning only starts when the qualification is finished at the practical level when you're doing the job and learning the strings and you get battle-scarred and you learn by your mistakes and you kind of, for HR people it's not enough about having HR knowledge, you need the business knowledge.'*

Interestingly, in both these examples the CIPD was cited without my having made reference to them. L1's use of the phrase 'of course' suggests her interpretation of my question as seeking a positive review of the CIPD, although her enthusiasm is rather vague and not substantiated. For S1, the question provides an opportunity to adopt positions on the value of the CIPD as a professional body, the CIPD qualification, professional qualification learning versus 'on-the-job learning', the inferiority of textbooks and theory to practical experience etc. Her response suggests

a particular understanding of and possible antagonism to my own position as academic/pro- theory/pro-HRM/pro-CIPD. This extract is discussed in more detail in the analysis section of the research.

By contrast, former students made reference to HRM theory which may have been discussed in class, for example, having described her role at length:

*'S2: All I feel as though I've talked about is really operational stuff and we're all supposed to be strategic now aren't we? Were all your classes were wasted you ask yourself (laughs)?'*

Her response indicates a pre-supposition that I would expect/prefer narratives of HR's strategic orientation in line with much current writing on the role of the HR function. Clearly in all 3 cases (as with many other participants), my position, background, role may have encouraged particular accounts/responses.

On re-reading the transcripts I was also keen to deploy other identities during the interviews: I performed variously as mother, former job-sharer, former private sector worker, local resident and service user, Newcastle United fan, Northerner, and a potential host of other categories. These have been commented on in the analysis where to do so appears salient.

However, two particular identities are worthy of further comment here: that of 'former HR employee/manager', and 'local authority outsider'. Kvale (1996) suggests that interviewers are well advised to deploy a deliberate conscious naivete in order to encourage more talk on the part of interviewees. On the subject of HR's role, this was somewhat difficult to bring off, given my supposed expertise in the area. I am also aware that I often assumed an empathising position (positivists would no doubt say excessively so) with those working in the function on the basis of my own experience, representing myself as 'lecturer with practical experience under her belt'.

On the subject of local authority knowledge, despite my extensive reading on the subject, I remained an outsider, and was asked by several participants why I should have chosen this arena for my research. I was quick to identify myself as sympathetic to the difficulties which local government has experienced in recent years (budgetary cuts, targets, inspections etc.), and in doing so immediately positioned them as 'victims' in some respect of the worst excesses of Government.

What I conclude from this discussion is a reinforcement of my view that the research interview represents a conversation in which both researcher and participant take part (Dick and Cassell, 2002), and that any knowledge which is produced is grounded within the specific context of the research relationship (ibid.) This perspective highlights the spuriousness of exhortations to remain objective, unbiased, to avoid leading questions, as advocated by much of the mainstream literature on conducting research interviews (Learmonth, 2006).

#### **4.7 Further Ethical Considerations**

The ESRC Research Ethics Framework (2005) suggests that ethical research should conform to the following 6 principles: integrity and quality of research; subjects being kept fully informed about the purpose, methods and uses of the research; confidentiality and anonymity; voluntary participation; avoidance of harm; and independence of the research, with conflicts of interest made explicit.

I attempted to ensure that my research adhered to all of these principles with one caveat to the 'fully informed' principle (outlined previously). Additionally, I did not undertake any 'participant verification', i.e. offering interviewees the opportunity to scrutinise and verify or otherwise with powers to edit or sanction my analysis, as advocated by Wengraf (2001). To do so would have proven difficult and impractical. Perhaps more importantly, my perspective is that the research undertaken here represents a particular co-construction which was then subsequently subjected to my analysis and interpretation and selective re-presentation. To suggest that participants might have a different view of whether the analysis captures 'reality' does not sit comfortable with my view of the nature of the research process. What is represented here is only one set of a range of possible interpretations (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007).

Given that many of the interviews were arranged under the aegis of the most senior HR manager in the organization, there was a potential risk that some interviewees had been coerced into 'volunteering'. I therefore contacted every participant by e-mail in advance of the interview ostensibly to confirm details, but also to provide an opportunity for participants to withdraw confidentially. As already indicated, at this stage, two participants chose to do so.



Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and interviewees have been identified by first name initials only in the research. Additionally, the authorities involved have not been named, as to do so might reveal the identities of some of the individuals participating. The participant list in appendix 1 indicates how the interview extracts have been labelled with abroad indicator of job level and authority only, as well as gender, in order to ensure that more identification of participants is not possible.

This chapter has thus far offered a detailed account of the research and analysis methods undertaken, and of the research sites and participants who took part in this study, as well as a consideration of ethical concerns and of reflexivity in the process, the next chapter turns to the analysis of the interview transcripts themselves.

## **4.8 Analysis**

The final part of this chapter serves as a foreword to my analysis of the interview transcripts and (to a much lesser extent) field notes from the meetings attended. It reiterates how the analysis has been tackled, revisiting the main themes of the research identified in the research questions and discussed in previous chapters. It then addresses some of my main considerations as I carried out the analysis, before outlining how the analysis is presented here. The final and largest part of this chapter is the analysis itself. Although, inevitably, some discussion has occurred here, the main discussion of the issues identified by the research is presented in the next chapter.

In the interests of reflexivity, one of my main aims in constructing the analysis was to allow the words of participants to 'speak for themselves' as much as possible. Although I have sought to avoid Antaki et al's (2003) 'non-analysis' failings of excessive summarising or over-quotation, I make no apology for the number or length of speaker quotations, reproduced here in the interests of verisimilitude and authenticity.

### **4.8.1 Focus of the analysis**

Before commencing the analysis of the research texts, it is worth revisiting the aims of the research. The overarching aim of this analysis is to identify what 'discursive business' is going on as the research participants talk about their role as local government HR practitioners. This 'discursive business' encompasses both the

nature of the talk, that is the particular repertoires and discourses on which the speakers draw, and also the performative dimension of the language they deploy. There are two main Discourses potentially informing participant talk and which are germane to the research questions posed here: firstly the discourses of public sector reform, including discourses of new public management, modernisation and new managerialism, and secondly the discourses of HRM and the role of the HR function.

As speakers draw from the respective 'textscapes' and microtextscapes of those phenomena, the 'myriad intertextual discourses' of which they are comprised (Keenoy and Oswick, 2004, p.141) feature significantly in this analysis, and in informing how the analysis is structured. This is not to suggest that the phenomena of public sector reform or HRM can be clearly or objectively defined: one of the features of this analysis is a focus on the differing ways in which speakers reproduce and contest 'taken for granted' discursive constructions of both.

Clearly, in the extent to which the speakers are being asked to account discursively for their role and to offer their perspective on the nature *of*, the priorities *for* and the tensions *within* the role of the HR practitioner, the participants are invited here to engage in identity work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). A further consideration then is how HR practitioners make sense of and give meaning to ideas about who and how they should be as HR 'professionals', and how they draw on and deploy particular discursive resources from the Discourses outlined above in the construction of their identity. As outlined elsewhere, the perspective underpinning this research is one which acknowledges that identity is discursively deployed and is therefore inevitably fluid, fragmented and potentially lacking cohesion, dependent on the context, purpose and participants at the moment of production. In this vein, one of the aims of this research is to uncover the tensions, ambiguities and contradictions within speakers' talk as they seek to construct a discursive identity for themselves as HR practitioners in the context of a 'reforming' public sector.

However, to simply identify *which* discourses and *where* such discourses are deployed would be to fall into the trap of 'spotting features' (Antaki et al, 2003, p.2) rather than considering the purpose and consequences of their use : what Antaki et al refer to as 'unpacking'. To reiterate an earlier point, Jaworski and Coupland (2006) suggest that the forensic task of discourse analysis is to track both *how* various

forms of discourse and associated values and assumptions are incorporated into a particular text, but also *why*, and *with what effects*. Discourses may be viewed as carriers of 'shared understanding in the creation and maintenance of organizational structures' or as 'communicative action that is constructive of social and organizational reality' (Heracleous and Hendry, 2000, p.1252 ). For Learmonth, the dominant language used in organizations renders the world 'intelligible and contestable *in particular ways*' (2005, p. 618), whilst Keenoy and Oswick, (2004) suggest that organizational discourses may both constrain and facilitate language and behaviour. The aim here is to reflect upon the ways in which participant talk is both constrained and facilitated, the ways in which the world is rendered intelligible and contestable by dominant discourses of HRM and public sector reform. This includes a consideration of how individuals position themselves in relation to particular repertoires, including reciprocal and alternative positioning, i.e. through recourse to opposing positions or to alternative discourses. An important consideration in this respect therefore is the theme of discursive resistance, that is, where interpretative 'disjunctures' occur (Hardy, 2004), and the ways in which speakers appropriate but also subvert, reinterpret and discursively oppose such organizational/ organizing discourses (Thomas and Davies, 2005).

#### **4.8.2 Discourses, themes and repertoires**

To reiterate, after much refinement of themes, labels and categories, the analysis is organized broadly but not exclusively around the two main themes raised in the research questions, that is, human resource management and public sector reform, and a third important theme which emerged from the analysis, that of gender. Whilst these three broad themes form the basic structure of the analysis, each theme contains a series of related discursive repertoires or discourses outlined below. None of the themes is discrete or complete, and the process of organising and grouping specific repertoires was messy, iterative and ultimately imperfect, as categorisation inevitably renders talk more rigid and ordered than the way in which it was originally deployed. I readily acknowledge that a different researcher may have chosen not to organise the analysis in this way or may have used different labels for both discourses and themes.

### 4.8.3 Variability and heteroglossia

Following a lengthy process of reading, re-reading, selecting and categorising from the content of the interview transcripts, individual 'discourses' or discursive repertoires were grouped by association and similarity. The aim was not to be reductive, but to represent more parsimoniously the essence of the participants' talk, allowing it to be organised and reproduced in a (somewhat) systematic way. Equally, whilst this process enabled common and recurring discourses to be identified *across* speakers, the aim of the analysis was also to identify contradictions, conflicts, incommensurability and variability *within* individual speaker accounts, which feature throughout the transcripts.

Incommensurability in this respect may be understood as the Participants evidently slip un-self-consciously between ostensibly irreconcilable, dichotomous discourses. They deploy the same discourses in different ways, and with apparently conflicting interpretations. They seemingly merge language from diverse and disparate discourses with ease, and selectively deploy some aspects of discourses whilst ignoring others. Such flexibility within speakers' talk might be considered a kind of 'discursive dexterity'-or possibly 'discursive promiscuity': discourses become a flexible resource deployed in a way which is compatible with the aims of the speaker. As an example, S1 talks of the desirability of old public service values and the 'halcyon days' of 'model employer' status, whilst at the same time appropriating 'new' discourses of accounting, financial logic and modernisation. Compare for example the first statement, apparently drawing on a 'traditional', 'old public administration' discourse of public service/ public sector as unique and ethical :

*'It's about ...making sure that that's true to the ethos of the public sector..there's the ethics around what we're doing from a public sector perspective'*

The following is from the same speaker, drawing on discourses more associated with the 'modernisation' agenda (people as an 'investment' and 'joined-up' talk, for example), and the 'HRM' rhetoric of 'added value':

*'...sometimes you have to be (the corporate police) because they don't appreciate the investment they have to make in their people as a resource...*

*what's being done is not joined up, and if you want to add value you may have to be unpopular'*

Similarly, despite articulating a desire to preserve the 'old' public sector ethos, the same speaker apparently welcomes an impending change programme with enthusiasm, representing HR as pro-change, proactive and adaptable, even if the rest of the organization lags behind:

*'We need transformation....we've gone a long way in HR to trying to transform ourselves, but there's only a certain extent we can do that without the rest of the organization buying into it you know'.*

This readiness to move from one set of repertoires (old public sector ethos, traditional personnel management values) to an apparently contradictory set (modernisation and joined up-ness; accounting talk as determinant of 'value; HR as pro-change rather than backward looking) may be seen as an inevitable but accidental phenomenon during a period of transition in which multiple discourses flourish. Alternatively the melding of 'old' and 'new' talk in this speaker's account, common to many of the participants in this research, may be explained as the conscious and manipulative choices of a sophisticated and agential speaker seeking to draw on any available discursive resources in order to legitimize her role and function. This might call into question the 'practical difficulties' experienced by speakers in assembling narratives of the self from a range of competing discourses to which Clarke et al refer (2009). The process of negotiation of multiple and varied discourses to which Fairclough (2001) refers appears to be less challenging to the speakers here who incorporate aspects of multiple discourses, than to the reader/researcher seeking cohesion and consistency in their accounts.

#### **4.8.4 Multiply interdiscursive repertoires**

In attempting to classify participants' talk and thus identify common repertoires, I was struck by talk which might be considered multiply interdiscursive: that is, drawing on repertoires which might be located in multiple broader discourses. Such repertoires might be considered to work 'efficiently' on behalf of those who draw on them: they enable the speaker to pursue legitimacy through talk from a number of potential perspectives without having to articulate a clear 'discursive allegiance'. As an

example, speakers often expressed a commitment to the notion of 'consistency' as a desirable organizational phenomenon. See, for example, S6:

*'But I mean from an overview point of view, there are some considerable consistency issues...here it seems to be quite or perceived to be quite Ok and I've been in this post 4 years and there's been a lot of kickback to say don't do that, because in doing that it creates inconsistency'*

Arguably this reference to consistency/inconsistency positions the speaker within a range of apparently conflicting and antagonistic discourses from which 'consistency talk' might be deemed to draw: firstly, the 'primacy of policy', 'public scrutiny' and probity discourses associated with bureaucratic principles and practice, whereby *consistent* practice upholds principles; secondly, the standardisation and 'off the shelf' approach advocated by the 'efficiency' rhetoric of the arch-'modernisation' publication the Gershon review, whereby *consistency* offers a route to cost-cutting and 'more for less'; third, the call to 'joined-upness' and corporacy of public sector reform discourses, offering sleeker, client-responsive public service; fourth, the imperative of legislative compliance, equity and fairness associated with traditional personnel management, whereby *consistency* offers a robust defence of organizational decisions and actions about employee treatment, especially to potential employment tribunal panels; and finally, the internal *consistency* and strategic alignment discourse of HRM, which suggests that a cohesive and integrated set of people management policies and practices clearly aligned to business strategy offers the route to strategic, value-added HRM.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that this theme of consistency/inconsistency featured heavily in the talk of many speakers: it simultaneously offers legitimacy through reference to multiple overarching discourses. Interestingly, many of these discourses have been positioned both in academic and practitioner literature as irreconcilable and conflicting, (for example, traditional personnel management versus human resource management, or old public administration versus NPM and a 'modernised' public sector) yet apparently draw on similar repertoires such as consistency talk, in their struggle for primacy.

One of the difficulties for the researcher, however, is deciding how such talk should be classified, particularly when speaker use offers few further clues other than to reiterate the taken-for-granted nature of the repertoire:

*Sue: So this lack of consistency, and that's a theme that all the folks I've spoken to so far have said they felt a really major issue at the Council. Is that ... what's the problem with a lack of consistency?*

*S6: Well it's about ensuring we're all singing off the same hymn sheet and doing things right otherwise it won't wash and everyone suffers. You know, it's about the need for us all to be consistent across the piece.*

The universal appeal of such 'flexible' repertoires/discourses might explain their somewhat axiomatic presentation and apparent need for no further explanation. The deployment of flexible repertoires potentially circumvents the putative tensions suggested by Newman (2002) which arise when old and new discourses co-exist during reform programmes: through judicious selection, speakers may be seen to be comfortably reconciling the irreconcilable.

#### **4.8.5 Legitimizing talk**

Having signalled previously an interest in the performative dimension of talk, it is worth noting here that the question of legitimacy of the HR function mentioned above featured as an overarching theme across the talk of all participants. It therefore features significantly throughout the analysis. The HR function's access to organizational power and status (or lack of it) was frequently addressed, whether articulated clearly or more obliquely, as was the need for the HR function to establish legitimacy, and to find a means to do so-suggesting that legitimacy has not yet been achieved but is still in process. Participants frequently alluded to the power dynamic of the HR/line management relationship, and to the issue of how different discourses might lead to power and status being conferred on the HR function *by line management*. Interestingly, this suggests that HR/HRM achieves no status on its own merits or by any measure other than line management approval, a popular theme in much of the HRM literature, especially in the work of Ulrich (see particularly Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005), as previously discussed. Nevertheless, numerous speakers drew on alternative discourses, challenging the 'line manager as arbiter'

position, through recourse to talk of objectivity, fairness, independence and ethics as organizing imperatives.

Several speakers talk about the need for HR to be 'sold' to line management (F1, N2, M1), whilst others seek to emphasize the need for HR to 'persuade (line management) through negotiation and listening' (S2) or to 'convince' (S3) line management that HR has value. In this process of persuasion members of the function must assume a sufficiently subservient stance in order to be acceptable:

*B1: She's got to be so diplomatic so she can bring the managers round*

This talk of lack of legitimacy and status, and being subservient to line management is echoed by J2, suggesting that his HR team does not constitute a department with power:

*J2: We're working hard to exert directional influence, but we're subject to the whims of those with power..... The guidelines are only 'should' at the moment. I don't think we can ever move to a 'must'.*

Similarly, HR initiatives may not be welcomed if they appear to be developed by the function alone. Witness these two contributions from a senior HR Manager (to the HR managers at a 'top team' meeting) who cautions against projects in his authority being too heavily branded as 'HR' initiatives to their detriment:

*S4: If we plunge too many people into the project, it becomes an HR driven initiative and it won't wash.*

*S4: We've got to pause it and feed it into the organization otherwise it's just going to look like an HR piece of work*

The same speaker characterises the HR department as a powerless, misunderstood 'victim' within the organization:

*S4: We need the value of HR to be understood. We've got to raise our profile and find some good news to publicise to counter the kicking we've had, and that's a big ask.*

Here the speaker suggests that the function not only lacks credibility and legitimacy, but that association with HR input may result in degradation or dismissal of



organizational projects. For numerous speakers, the cause, and also the possible consequence of this 'lack of legitimacy' talk appears to be a claim that HR has '*no budget*' and therefore '*no authority*' (S1), or of having to go '*cap in hand*' (M1) to line management for resources.

Perhaps it is not surprising that those in a department which has no access to independent funding sources should deploy 'humble' talk, or should cast itself as a function which needs to '*keep pleasing people*' (E3), or as '*servants of the line*' (F2). B1 suggests that this 'serving' process is by no means unproblematic, as legitimacy is constantly reviewed and potentially withdrawn:

*B1: But you can have one incident that can sometimes ... they hold on to that, you know*

Whilst M1 echoes this repertoire, saying:

*M1: So we're getting there but it's had to be really round corners and by stealth and ... and it's taken a lot of hard work and I always say to the girls there's a lot of work to get our reputation, it's minutes to lose it, you know.*

It might be equally unsurprising if speakers choose to identify the humble/service role as the source of HR professionalism if this is what is most readily offered by management. F1, for example several times identifies professionalism with the concept of supporting the line:

*F1: I need to make sure as the HR professional that's been supporting management on this...*

*F1: We are there to advise and support and we are the professionals in doing that*

This issue of 'professional' legitimization talk is revisited below. Interviewees additionally drew on a range of competing, often apparently irreconcilable discourses as legitimizing resources, ranging from 'old public administration' and bureaucratic principles and associated talk of fairness and justice, to managerialist, market and 'performance' related discourses. Whilst the potential allegiance between 'reform' discourses and the language of HRM might ostensibly offer an opportunity for HR practitioners to assert their value to the organization, some speakers either failed to spot the opportunity or self-consciously chose to resist it, drawing more readily on apparently outmoded discourses of bureaucracy/OPA and TPM.

In addition to a wealth of legitimacy-conferring discourses, participants also drew on a range of justificatory discourses, that is, discourses explaining why legitimacy might be withheld, constrained or compromised. As an example, line manager shortcomings were oft-cited sources of HR's failure to achieve 'strategic' legitimacy, the 'Holy Grail' of the HRM function. Ironically, participants talked of talk of line management inadequacy, reluctance, incompetence or inability to manage their own people as the source of HR's failure to free themselves from the 'hands-on' role in order to focus on more strategic work:

*K2: Some of them are quite competent, but most of them don't want to do it, or can't, or claim they haven't got time, or they try it and fuck it up, so we have to go in and do damage limitation and so we're always firefighting and on the back foot, and then they wonder why we haven't been more proactive*

This 'hands-on' talk might suggest an alternative route for the function to achieve legitimacy, yet it is itself presented as an inhibitor, offering a further repertoire by which HR might be condemned:

*J1: ...the more involved you are, the more you find yourself saying no to managers, and the more frustrated they feel with the function as they see us preventing them from doing what they want and we get the old 'policing' label again*

Although these 'legitimacy' repertoires are discussed in greater detail below, the purpose of introducing the analysis section thus is to emphasize the extent to which the theme of legitimation runs throughout all the talk and texts reflected here. To reiterate then, the analysis should be read with the concepts of legitimacy and the question of which discourses might offer greater legitimation in mind. Inevitably this theme is also revisited in the discussion chapter, which builds on the analysis which follows.

## **4.9 Summary**

The purpose of this chapter has been to offer a clear account of the nature of the research study undertaken, including a consideration of the locations where and

participants with whom the interviews were undertaken, as well as a discussion of the approach to analysis and identification of key themes which emerged. The next three chapters are analysis chapters which offer a detailed consideration of the 'findings' under the three main discursive themes identified: firstly, HR's organisational contribution, and particularly the discourses of 'business' deployed to construct the function; secondly the ways in which discourses of public sector context have informed HR's role and identity; and finally a consideration of the gendered and sexualised discourses which proliferate in characterising the identity and role of HR practitioners.

## **5. Analysis: 'Spinning the line': Discourses of Strategy, Value and Business**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In this first analysis chapter I will explore and illustrate through participants' extracts how the business of HRM is talked about through discourses of business, strategy, and value. Of particular interest is the extent to which what constitutes being 'strategic', or 'adding value' remains contested. All but two participants in the research articulated an orientation to strategy through alternative and varied discourses: in pursuit of *claiming* the strategic, value added and performance terrain, particularly through articulating HR as business-aligned, or as business itself; of *rewriting* what might be considered 'strategic', 'value added' through recourse to discourses of ethics and fairness; and of *refuting* the espoused merits of a 'strategic' orientation in favour of an alternative 'pragmatic' orientation. The title of the chapter refers to the words of a senior HR manager self-consciously characterising how HR is required to perform discursively in order to be admitted to the 'top table' :

*S4: I've personally overseen the production of the People Strategy to ensure we're spinning the line and demonstrating our strategic contribution (laughs)*

To set this analysis in the specific context of the HRM literature, much of that literature identifies the key feature distinguishing HRM from personnel management as the capacity to act and think strategically (see especially Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich and Beatty, 2001; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005), and particularly the ability to align HR behaviour and HRM activity to managerially defined 'strategic priorities'. Others have suggested (for example, Jacoby, 2003; Rynes, 2004) that the HR function has had no alternative but to pursue a 'strategic' identity in the absence of an acceptable alternative. The issue of acceptability is key and raises some vital questions for the HR function as a whole, and for those who work within it, and thus is important for the study. The first of these questions is whether the process of becoming 'strategic' (in whatever guise) necessarily leads to greater legitimacy. Secondly, does aspiring to 'strategicness' require those in the function to reject the previous administrative and welfare-orientated concerns associated with a traditional personnel management (TPM) identity? Finally, does this orientation guarantee, as suggested by both academics and particularly those in the HR 'professional' bodies, that the

function will achieve a firm 'professional' footing and the associated power and credibility to which this status might give access?

A strategic identity for the HR function is usually articulated as being constituted through a close association with line management. Prescriptions for the role have advocated working as 'business partners' alongside (although perhaps more realistically subservient to) line management, responding to line manager demands in the pursuit of 'added value' (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). Here the notion of what constitutes 'value' is usually articulated by the 'client' for HR's services (principally those line managers). The supposedly 'professional' HR practitioner is little more than a cipher for management views and requirements, as: 'Value is defined by the receiver ...rather than HR professionals imposing their beliefs, goals and actions on others, they first need to be open to what others want' (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005, p. 4).

Reference to serving multiple stakeholders features in this vision of the 'strategic' HR function. For example, Ulrich and Brockbank (2005, p. 201) demand a 'panoptical' HR: 'HR managers are able to see 'the world through employees' eyes' and act as their representative, while at the same time looking through customers', shareholders' and managers' eyes and communicating to employees what is required for them to be successful in creating value' (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005, p. 201). Evidently, however, certain stakeholders will have greater power, influence and the capacity for offering legitimacy 'rewards', including, for example access to resources. It may be no surprise if members of an HR function in pursuit of these rewards are required to identify themselves as closely managerially aligned, rather than pursuing discourses of serving all stakeholders.

The mainstream HR literature has also been keen to identify evidence of a clear causal chain and appropriate metrics to demonstrate the contribution of HR activity to organizational 'performance' (Boselie et al, 2005; Paauwe, 2009; Tootell et al, 2009; Guest, 2011). The quest for the 'holy grail' of irrefutable evidence to prove that HRM 'adds value' organizationally continues, with narrow definitions of value and performance usually articulated in terms of 'bottom line' or profitability.

The question of how participants have addressed (and rearticulated) what constitutes 'adding value' is considered more closely below. First, I reflect on how

some of the strategic terrain has been claimed by participants, both through identifying HR *with* business talk and distancing it from prior associations with, for example, welfare; and also through rewriting activities of HR itself *as* business, rather than as business adjunct, or as servant of business.

## 5.2 'Doing the business': Talking 'HR', talking 'Business'

As previously indicated, a common theme among the majority of participants was the suggestion that HR activity is not valued on its own merits, and that legitimacy, power and status has to be 'earned' by members who work within the function.

Witness for example the contribution of S2:

*S2: The head of HR used to sit on Corporate Board, which theoretically drives the strategic direction of the authority but they decided that she didn't need to be there, partly I might say because they see her as the little woman from personnel, but also because she would talk about the long-term and about developing an appropriate pool of talent and about nurturing the resource we have for the future of the organization, and what's more strategic than that? But to them it isn't about short term savings and realising efficiency gains in measurable ways, so it's off their agenda.*

The gendered dimension of this talk is considered subsequently. The main consideration here is the way in which the speaker articulates what might be considered 'HR knowledge and expertise' as unpalatable to the senior management body of the organization if it fails to claim a promise of short-term, measurable, financial benefits. The suggestion here is that what constitutes HR talk/HR knowledge may be considered of value only if it is deployed in the pursuit of 'business' objectives and goals, defined by management, in management terms, i.e. 'the language of the business'-in this case savings, efficiency, measurability. The involvement of the head of HR is contingent on her ability to articulate value and contribution in terms dictated by management. Over 30 years on, the pressure to perform as 'conformist innovator' (Legge, 1978), allied to line management and informed by managerial agendas, is articulated as clearly here as ever. Another issue here is the power of other members of the Corporate Board to determine who

should be present at the meetings and thus positioning HR as no longer relevant, a silenced function in terms of contribution to strategy.

In the following three extracts the participants, in different ways, appeared to accept this 'conformist' role and orientation as the inevitable or desirable fate of the function, and suggested that legitimacy is lacking on the part of the function only because of a failure to engage with the appropriate discourse:

*L1: HR in the private sector I think has got much better at speaking the genuine language of business. They don't want to hear about sickness down from 11 to 10%, they want to hear well what is that costing me, what are those on the bottom line? If you implement XYZ, what will that cost and what do you think that will do to the sickness figures and what does that mean to the bottom line? And we seem to be a bit off the pace in the public sector from what I've seen about you know, speaking that kind of language*

The issue here is subtly articulated not as one of HR not being capable of doing valuable work, but merely, in contrast to the private sector, of failing to describe it in palatable, (managerial) attention-catching language. These descriptions feature words like 'genuine' and 'much better'. While the speaker describes public sector approaches as 'off pace' suggesting an aspiration to keep up with the business talk in its attendant 'laudatory aura'. Other participants appeared to have more readily consumed and appropriated 'business language' and incorporated it into their representation of the function's role, engaging in financial talk ('efficiencies', 'bottom line', 'ROI') and associating it directly with HR activity:

*S4: We (HR) are getting better at demonstrating the return on investment*

*R1: Re-engineering will bring efficiencies and once those efficiencies are delivered we can demonstrate some real performance turnaround where it matters, at the bottom line*

In addition to the potential problems of allying HR discourses to the repertoires of managerialist fashion, the suggestion that HR knowledge and associated discourses do not constitute valid organizational repertoires in their own right may be problematic for the HR function, thus perhaps a discursive allegiance is sought. However in seeking to establish greater legitimacy through this discursive allegiance

(an allegiance encouraged by the CIPD, the professional body, in pursuit of augmented professional legitimacy), the HR profession and its practitioners may risk becoming hostages to managerial demands, and risking the very independence on which the prized 'professional' status may depend.

A final repertoire involving 'business' talk entailed the rewriting of HR as business: rejecting marginalisation, challenging the classification of HR talk as 'not-business':

*C1: I went to one of those CIPD events recently where they were launching yet another set of new standards, and they seemed to revolve around talking the language of the business, whatever that might be, as if we already speak bloody Serbo-Croat or some such. What do they mean? I'll tell you what, if getting the right people in and trained and motivated and performing to deliver the services isn't the language of the business, then I don't know what is. And preventing the managers from recruiting their secretary's daughter on the quiet, or sacking them at the drop of a hat without due process so we don't get stitched for acting outwith the policy and landed with compensation or being splashed across the Express and Star again, that's the language of the business if you ask me. And getting references and doing CRB's properly to prevent the wrong folks getting in where they shouldn't and wreaking havoc, that's the language of the business, you know? I mean, what do they think we do it for?*

In contrast to the 'business talk' espoused by previous speakers, here the 'language of the business' is represented by the core activities associated with HR policy and practice (recruitment, training, performance management); the checks that both HR and legislation and governance demand (references and CRB checks); and the avoidance of compensation and adverse (local) publicity. The marginalisation of HR activity is resisted, and HR practice is articulated as business. Additionally, the use of 'yet another' in the context of the new CIPD standards suggests a frustration with the pursuit of legitimacy by the 'professional' body, and a failure on its part to value the traditional activities of the HR function on their own merits as 'business' activities.

The notion of HR's 'contribution to the business' has been most clearly articulated through the 'strategic' dimension of HRM. This 'strategic' orientation has been



identified as the feature distinguishing it most clearly from TPM, and has offered the promise of greater legitimacy to those in the function who are able to articulate a 'strategic' identity. This is most evident in the call for HR goals, policies and activities to be closely aligned to business strategy. In this respect we might anticipate a ready recourse to discourses of 'strategic alignment', to a concern for a 'strategic' identity in terms defined by management outside the HR function (usually reduced to narrow measures of 'bottom line' performance-Janssens and Steyaert, 2009).

Some participants, apparently aware of the expectation that HR practitioners should be aspiring to this more strategically aligned identity explained their failure to completely appropriate 'business-orientation' as the responsibility of other groups: it is not HR which is at fault, but councillors and even managers themselves, who act as barriers to HR achieving that to which they aspire. For example:

*K1: We want to be more business-oriented but elected members won't let us*

*C1: Talking like macho management won't get you anywhere. It's ok for them to do it but if we do it they go all indignant on us and suggest that HR is supposed to have a conscience and do the tea and sympathy*

'They' refers here to line management, and suggests that managers might demand 'business orientation' but nevertheless expect an alternative discourse as the appropriate script for members of the HR function: not of 'macho' management but of ethics or of welfare. The retention of a 'welfare' discourse then is not the choice of HR members but of other influential groups. Others articulated 'business orientation' as desirable but currently lacking in local government, interestingly with the 'people orientation' of line management as the impediment:

*K1: But then I'm not sure if it's people in local authority or maybe it's just in Adults & Communities, they're not business orientated, they're people orientated and I think that's one of the biggest problems for us.*

This participant aligns HR with a 'pro-business' discourse enabling the speaker to distance the function from the excessive people orientation ('touchy-feely', 'pink and fluffy') of which it is accused elsewhere, levelling this accusation instead at line management, generating problems 'for us'.

Somewhat contradictorily, although some practitioners in the function claim they wish to distance themselves from an ethical or welfare orientation, many nevertheless engaged in welfare talk, whilst expressing their reluctance to be associated with it:

*C1: We sometimes get sucked into the welfare bit of it and we have to stop and think no, we've got to think about the business. I think that there's this drive to look at things more strategically but we still keep being sucked into the welfare side by the managers, their behaviour*

This talk of 'welfare orientation' and 'conscience' is reminiscent of the reported criticisms levelled at HR as being '*too fluffy*' (N2), and '*pink and soft round the edges*' (L2), and in direct contradiction to the exhortation of L1 for HR to '*talk like managers*'. The question of why those in the function might still engage in such talk despite these criticisms is complex. Perhaps this identity orientation fits with identity aspirations such as the morally superior 'ideal self' (Wieland, 2010). Perhaps it represents familiar and comfortable terrain for those who have worked in the function for some time. Or perhaps it offers a route to power through presenting a challenge to the dominant managerialist discourses of business and strategy which apparently reject welfare and ethical concerns. This is considered in the next part of this analysis.

### **5.3 'You don't like it, you're up the road': Re-writing 'value' and 'strategic contribution' through fairness and ethical talk**

In contrast to the mainstream literature characterisation of a 'strategic' HRM which aligns the function to managerial goals and objectives, ('HR...joined at the hip to business strategy', Hammonds, 2005, p.2) many interviewees drew on alternative repertoires of what might constitute 'being strategic'. One of the main discursive means by which participants claimed an 'alternative' strategic orientation and contribution was through talk of the avoidance of employment tribunals, or at least of marshalling a robust defence of the ethical and procedural credentials of the organization if faced with a tribunal case. These repertoires emphasized the identity of HR as organizational defender, acting to protect organizational reputation, defending the organization from adverse publicity and unfavourable public or media scrutiny. These 'risks' arise particularly through the irresponsible or unscrupulous

behaviour of line management which might result in employment tribunal cases and associated penalties or legislative costs:

*N1: Do we contribute strategically? Well naturally I would say of course we do. We have only had a handful of tribunal cases in recent years, and we've won all but one, and that's a real achievement compared to our previous track record*

Whilst participants discussed above apparently reject the identity of HR as 'welfare-orientated', others readily defend welfare and people orientation as a route to 'added value'. T1:

*We're at risk of losing the welfare and caring, human side in local government because there's been so much more emphasis on the resource side of things. Things are more productivity driven...I think that in itself has created more problems for the council such as discipline, grievance, less goodwill, which is a shame'.*

The speaker is suggesting that in the sense that these not inconsiderable problems arise from a loss of the 'welfare, caring, human side', retaining such an approach might be considered to constitute sound business practice. The defence here is of TPM/OPA values of welfare and humanism, but as guiding principles in the execution of HR practice, but she suggests that line managers would not share this view as '*they are results-driven generally*'. 'Results' here are not understood by line managers as the absence of discipline and grievance problems, or enhanced goodwill. Results are not equated with 'people-orientation'. For those in HR, however, these preoccupations may constitute:

*S1: a massive contribution....at a time when we are being asked to cut staff numbers, to clawback budget, to freeze recruitment, that's when making the best of the resource you've got really counts*

Similarly, '*people orientation*' may be seen by line managers as as '*anti-efficiency and effectiveness*' (P2). Yet legal and ethical imperatives might present an alternative set of discourses by which value and contribution might be articulated:

*S1: a legal or ethical imperative which we've always held dear is not considered business or financially sound by managers (S1).*

This prizing of alternative success criteria by those in the function is reminiscent of Legge's 'deviant innovator' orientation (1978), whereby the organising imperatives of HR are articulated independently of line manager determined priorities.

Similarly, numerous others articulated a strategic contribution through recourse to discourses of 'reconciling multiple stakeholder needs', rather than of simply satisfying the unitarist demands from line management for 'business' alignment: for example,

*C2: Our main contribution has been to keep the dialogue open, to provide positive terms for negotiation and discussion between the unions and the directorate, because without that they wouldn't have been able to achieve half of the changes they have across the authority*

Again, this suggests an inferior or incompetent line management, unable to maintain a positive relationship with trade unions without the intervention of HR. It also firmly underlines a commitment in talk to a pluralist orientation and identification for the HR function, and one which, far from being naive or un-businesslike, supports the achievement of successful change. Thus strategic value is added by the HR function through the maintenance of positive relationships beyond management for the successful implementation of change.

As this participant articulates, what is valued by both organizations and aspiring 'professional' practitioners alike is not 'strategic' contribution to organizational business goals, but experience and knowledge of how to resolve difficult tribunal cases, Employee Relations and casework:

*F1: that people see that you know, if you're going for other jobs in the future, companies, other authorities will be interested whether you've got that ER background, whether you've been to a tribunal and whether you've done difficult casework, etc. And that's where you're going to get your experience and that's where you're going to be able to grow as a HR professional really.*

Similarly, J1 suggests that since she has been acting head of HR in a directorate she has been operating 'more strategically' than she previously did:

*Sue: And what does that operating more strategically look like in practice?*

*J1: Well its dealing with the knottier cases, the difficult cases, the ones that might blow and come back and bite us*

'Strategic contribution' is re-written in both the previous extracts as the navigation and resolution of legislative, ethical difficulties, rather than supporting the achievement of specific business objectives.

Interestingly, these alternative 'strategic' repertoires liberate the HR function from enchainment to line managers and their 'business goals' agenda, positioning HR practitioners as superior to the line in recognising alternative, potentially more sophisticated interpretations of what constitutes delivering strategic value. These repertoires offer legitimacy to those in the function on independent terms, and proffer autonomy rather than dependence on managerial sponsorship through recourse to broader constituencies. Additionally, since many of these opportunities arise from incompetent or unscrupulous line behaviour, adopting such discourses clearly offers a position of superiority for HR in relation to the line, and a potential dependency of line managers on the HR function, rather than vice versa. The nature of the relationship between the function and line management is considered in more detail in a subsequent analysis chapter.

As part of re-writing what it means to be strategic or add 'value', articulating fairness as an overarching organising imperative allows speakers to claim a range of alternative positions, rather than being reduced to adopting a simple 'line manager servant' identity. These positions enable speakers to deploy talk which reconciles employee-centredness with a concern to be business-serving, whilst asserting both moral and, potentially, commercial superiority to line management. This more complex interpretation of 'business-serving' and 'the language of the business' represents a direct challenge to the rather simplistic 'bottom-line' prescriptions which have been demanded of the function. The potentially opposing discourses of concern for employee wellbeing and fair treatment (the 'soft' talk of TPM and developmental humanism), and the bottom-line, metric-obsessed 'hard' talk of

business-focused HRM are juxtaposed and melded into a third way repertoire. This talk allows speakers to dis-identify from the dominant HRM identity of being managerially and business aligned above all, and to articulate a preferred self, an idealised, more 'authentic' self as custodian of moral standards. However, what is particularly interesting here is that speakers rewrite this (re)claimed ethical terrain not as an alternative end in itself, but as the means and route to strategic contribution, thereby retaining a more palatable route to legitimacy in the eyes of a broad range of stakeholders: HR may be 'pink and fluffy', but is only so in the pursuit of organizational success.

As an example, N1 said:

*When we look at ... when we go through policies and procedures, I mean I'm seen by colleagues as being quite hard you know if you know, somebody asked whether or not they could go and have time off for something. And I've said in the policy groups ... to which I said 'No, no, no', 'Oh well there's a surprise' (laughs). You know, so I am seen ... and I don't just think it's fairness to employees, it's fairness to the Council that you fulfil your contract. We're paying you to do a job and as much as we have to be fair to you, you have to be fair to us in return. And unfortunately not everybody is and unfortunately managers don't always handle that in the right way. But yeah, when we write policies and when we benchmark, the reason why we do that is so that we do put something in that's fair. Not over the top, not generous but fair. And I think ... and that's not necessarily that we're always thinking of the employee, we're thinking if we don't put this in, if we don't put something that's fair in, people will go off sick. If people go off sick, that's going to affect the Council. So I suppose in a way, yes then services won't be carried out but I genuinely don't think we think that far, we think of you know, fairness to employees and to managers so that we can get the job done really.*

The speaker here is keen to author a version of fairness as business-orientation, and to refute the use of the discourse of fairness as evidence of an excessive welfare- or worker- friendly orientation ('*not over the top, not generous*'). Similarly, the speaker is able to demonstrate that she is not hampered by an excessive welfare-orientation ('*I am seen as quite hard*') which might label her as un-businesslike. Fairness here is

presented as a strategic concern in terms of its impact on service delivery and Council performance through (reduced) sickness absence, and the speaker's use of 'we/us' clearly identifies herself/the HR function as representing the interests of the organization, as well as understanding the importance of championing fair treatment for workers. The interests of workers and the interests of the organization are reconciled within the HR function, whilst managers, by contrast '*unfortunately...don't always handle that in the right way*', failing to appreciate the significance of fairness as an organizational performance issue.

This was a common repertoire among interviewees, and represents a direct challenge to the dominant claims of the HRM literature that the role of HR is to deliver what constitutes 'value' as articulated by the customer for HR's services. Managers are not the only arbiters of what constitutes 'value' or performance, and indeed their demands may be presented as running counter to organizational long-term well-being and success.

The following speaker, working in an HR role supporting the employment of council employees on contract to a commercial (private sector) partner organization, captured this claiming of a superior moral AND commercial perspective, which acknowledges and supports a pluralist view of work:

*F2: Some of the managers and supervisors there think the (bin) men should do everything that's asked of them regardless...shifts...working hours...working conditions, and their view is you know, you don't like it you're up the road. And you can't behave like that with council workers, and what's more you're pretty stupid if you try because in the end you shoot yourself in the foot. So we're here to tell them that's not how it is, and they will lose money in the long run one way or another if they can't see that.*

Similarly, S1, refuting the 'policing' role often levelled at HR, positions the function at the heart of a different kind of 'value-adding' role: that of protector of staff and thereby ultimately of the organization against managerial incompetence:

*S1: It's about trying to not police, but trying to make sure we protect the organization from poorly informed managers mainly, to protect staff, you know, worst excesses*

Thus the dominant, taken-for-granted definitions of the concepts of 'value', of 'added value' and of value measurement are called into question by most interviewees. The local government context is characterised as target- and audit-driven (from central government-the 'carrots and semtex' ethos), but with the priorities and focus of those targets and audits questioned as inappropriate and self-serving rather than as meaningful measures of what is important. This calling into question is perhaps not surprising, given that the measures in place evidently fail to value the HR function, marginalising it as a support function, adding only marginal value where 'efficiency' can be 'driven out'. Through challenging the basis on which these very measures are made, speakers are able to refuting the consequences for HR: that they are cast as peripheral, secondary, 'back office' and unimportant. This rejection enables a dis-identification from this subservient and peripheral role.

K2, for example,

*We've got performance indicators and monitoring that's in place to measure what we're doing. Not necessarily that they're measuring the right stuff or that it actually means anything ... I think they monitor us on the stuff that A/ they find easiest to and B/ the things they can meet the targets for. There doesn't seem to be an overarching plan for any of it. And I don't think you're ever able to reflect the benefits of HR as a cost because it's lots of things ... it's not quantifiable. And I just think they focus on the wrong things. They don't ever ring our managers and say 'Right, okay, in terms of this, what do you think about the quality of advice that you have? Has the advice ... okay, we can see you've had a case here, this is what the issues were; did this help you and has it made it better?' There's none of that. And for me, that's what's important, but there's no acknowledgement of that.*

Clearly this resistance to both external and internal measures of performance and 'value' offers an alternative discourse by which 'value', and particularly the value of the HR function might be judged. The discourse of 'quality advice' expressed here establishes the HR function as integral to the successful functioning of local



government, thereby claiming a legitimacy which elevates it beyond an administrative 'back office' identity.

Similarly, S6 rejects the measures by which local government and particularly the HR function is valued:

*and well, how do they justify their existence, by making everybody else feel they're not doing what they should be doing but they don't offer any real help in terms of what you're achieving, being more efficient, being more best value, delivering Gershon savings or whatever it might be and you know i would say, ok, great, if you think we're not adding value, take us out and see how far you get without us because you know, I don't think anybody realises the worth of something until they haven't got it any more. Because people espouse this don't they 'people are our greatest asset' and all the rest of it', and put your money where your mouth is, then, and in terms of recognising the value that HR bring to actually helping you value your people and helping you select the right people, and manage the right people and whatever else, I do think Gershon put us back 30 years to personnel as it was and the welfare bit and the tea and the toilets, oh my god!*

Successive local authority strategic imperatives and initiatives are dismissed ('best value', 'Gershon'-the Gershon review of public sector efficiency) as failing to recognise what is of value in the contribution of the function. The speaker makes it clear that this HR functional 'value' exists but is not properly appreciated or valued, and that it is the government initiative itself which threatens to remove this potentially strategic contribution of the function. Thus the very basis on which the function is identified and evaluated is called into question.

This section has considered the discourses with which participants engage to establish alternative criteria by which strategic contribution and added value might be measured. Speakers acknowledge the need to create and deploy a 'strategic' and value-adding identity for the HR function, but re-write the criteria by which this identity might be established through focusing on ethical and welfare talk, on legislative concerns, on a pluralist orientation, and a concern to see that fairness is upheld. Each of these is presented as a challenge to the discursive dominance of

'business goal' alignment, and as routes to organizational strategic value in their own right.

A final discourse found in participants' talk apparently sought to refute the very notion that 'being strategic' is of concern to the function, effectively resisting calls to engage in strategy talk in favour of alternative, non-strategic discourses as constituting greater 'value'. The final section of this analysis chapter considers such talk.

#### **5.4 'Never mind the strategy....just do it': Discourses of pragmatism and 'real world' orientation**

In this final section of this analysis chapter I consider how participants assume an antagonistic orientation to 'being strategic', resisting and subverting discourses of 'strategic contribution', turning instead to talk of pragmatism and 'real world', and thereby affirming the value of 'old ways', and of the existing 'hands-on' identity of the HR function. The most prevalent metaphors across all the interviews were those of 'hand-holding' (used by 43 of the 47 interviewees) and 'firefighting' (used by 39), suggesting a short-term, support, reactive identity for the function, and whilst this was deemed an impediment by some (*'We'd like to be strategic but we're too busy fire-fighting'*), for others it constituted the means to a form of legitimacy (or at least dependency: *'They'd be lost without us'*).

Evidently most participants demonstrated an awareness of the 'strategic dividend', the value and legitimacy to be derived from talking strategically. Yet for others, the difficulties of articulating 'strategy' or 'strategic behaviour' was evident:

*S7: Well, they **do** the same things they just **think** more strategically about what they do.*

*Sue: And what does that mean in practice?*

*S7: Well, it's just that they have a more strategic mindset, they're more aware of the strategic aims and direction.*

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*J2: We are trying to be more strategic, but we don't really know what that means (laughs)*

The speakers here are apparently aware that 'strategicness' is desirable if elusive. Similarly, when questioned on the key determinants of HR priorities, S2 readily resorted to generalised talk of the local government community development agenda and 'citizen' focus, but with no evidence of how these might actually inform HR activity, other than the rather vague 'adherence' and 'supporting implementation':

*Sue: So how are the priorities for your team determined?*

*S2 (senior HR manager): You know, a lot of it is about the people and the citizens, when you think about a lot of you know, the government agendas, sustainable communities, the transformation agenda, those sorts of things you know, its a lot about the citizens and the people.*

*Sue: And how do they translate into what you actually do?*

*S2: Well its about ensuring we adhere to the agendas and support the directorate management team in the implementation processes.*

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the potential difficulty of offering specific accounts of what a 'strategic' HR function does, some participants rejected the strategic prescription in favour of a more pragmatic orientation, identifying such an orientation as offering greater value:

*F2: All these academics who write about their strategic models and their theories, I'd like them to come and see what is really important here, because I can tell you, it just doesn't work like that because the day-to-day demands are just too pressing*

The adoption of such 'pro-pragmatic' talk may be inevitable if we believe it justifies the past and current role, identity and priorities of the HR function, and given that it is through day-to-day interactions with line management that the dependency and reliance discussed previously might be constituted.

This 'pragmatic' talk is by no means the only alternative articulation to 'strategic contribution' which speakers offered, and others drew on a positive articulation of the (much denigrated) transactional/support expertise to emphasize the legitimacy of the function: through, for example specific 'professional' activities such as recruitment and selection:

*O1: The whole point of me focusing on recruitment and selection alone is so that I can get the best candidate into a job as soon as possible. And I don't think that that's something line managers can do without us, despite what they might think.*

Here the speaker also makes reference to the recurrent theme of line manager inadequacy, and to the inability of line managers to perform what has been traditionally considered as 'HR' activity without the support and intervention of a dedicated HR function. This talk represents a direct challenge to the recent trend of focusing on 'devolution' of HR activity to the line, enabling it to focus on a 'strategic' role (Renwick, 2003; Marchington and Whittaker, 2003). The questioning of line manager ability to undertake 'HR' roles, and the valuing of the much-denigrated operational activities of HR such as recruitment and selection refutes dominant pro-strategic discourses which have been used to undermine and critique the HR function. Interestingly this does not apply to line managers when they take on the 'operational' tasks previously undertaken by HR. Indeed, the very essence of line management is usually captured through discourses of operational excellence. The same evaluation evidently does not apply to an operational HR function.

Similarly, this speaker emphasizes the 'hands-on' focus and immediate contribution of HRD activities without recourse to 'strategic contribution' claims, but by emphasis on immediate and 'efficient' outcomes:

*L1: I've established a coaching register and it has been used to deliver really quick results and at no real cost I might add by tapping into the expertise we already have in the organization. That's about rapid and efficient development solutions that managers can get feedback and support exactly when they need it to do the day job, and yes, I'm proud of it, although the uptake hasn't been as enthusiastic as it could have been.*

This speaker evidently recognises the value of identifying HR activities with discourses of efficiency, cost-control and short-term results, rather than with long-term and strategic initiatives and outcomes. Perhaps through deploying such talk to value the pragmatic nature of the activities and orientation of the HR function the speaker is demonstrating a capacity to tap into the changing mood of the public

sector environment, where discourses of efficiency, and the 'more with less' mantra currently dominate. The subject of public sector talk is considered more closely in the next chapter.

## 5.5 Summary

In summary, in the context of identity work, talk of the perceived value of HR knowledge and contribution may reveal confusion amongst HR practitioners in how they are to respond to the various discursive cues to which they are subject. These discursive cues include; a traditional personnel management preoccupation with excellence in administration, and welfare orientation; the demands of a professional body for a highly qualified, trained, chartered membership body, but whose focus appears to be with 'talking the language of the business' (CIPD, 2010); senior line management demands for a contribution to the strategic imperatives of the organization-but only when the response of those in the HR function is palatable; and line management expectations that HR should (from time to time) act as organizational conscience. Additionally, whilst all of these discursive cues might offer legitimacy, an alternative identity might be forged through resistance, rewriting and the articulation of different versions of what it means to be strategic, to add value, and to deliver performance.

The choices for those in the function appear to be located in three discursive strategies: firstly, to 'line up' behind discourses of strategic contribution, demonstrating through talk the strategic value added by the activities of the function, or the aspiration of those in the function to 'be strategic'. Thus speakers appear to unquestioningly assume Legge's (1978) managerially aligned conformist innovator identity as the route to legitimacy.

The second route constitutes a rewriting of the means by which strategic contribution might be articulated and defined. A strategic identity and orientation for HR might be reclaimed through refuting managerial talk of the 'language of the business' as separate from HR talk: HR *is* business, and HR activities should be valued on their own merits rather than as mere conduits to managerial success and performance. This constitutes a brave discursive strategy whereby legitimacy is pursued through pursuing an independent identity, through liberating those in the function from dependency on line approval. Within this talk, the dominant rhetoric of demand for

bottom-line contribution might be retained as the ultimate goal of HR's activities, but the means by which that contribution might be attained and measured are able to be re-inscribed through recourse to discourses of welfare, fairness and ethics. This is redolent of Legge's (1978) 'deviant innovator' identity, which through talk allied to social considerations and the assumption of a pluralist orientation adopts broader measures of 'organizational success' than more conventional managerialist talk might permit.

Finally, the very notion of 'strategic' contribution is called into question through focusing on and emphasizing the value of operational, short-term, pragmatic activities. The identity of the function is characterised as responsive, solution focused, and additionally as superior to line management in both appreciating the value of and enacting people-orientated activities. Thus the much-maligned operational, transactional orientation of the function is reclaimed, rewritten and rehabilitated. The need for strategic contribution is obviated by HR's short-term contribution, and the existing operational identity of the function is rearticulated as valuable and value-adding.

An additional set of polarised 'discursive cues' to which these local government HR practitioners are subject is offered through the characterisation of the very nature of the public sector and its ethos. At one extreme is a long-standing public sector tradition of a concern for employee welfare and a 'regulatory' orientation, largely evident in the design and enactment of people management policy and practice for which HR has been held responsible. This is juxtaposed with public sector reform rhetoric, which challenges all premises on which the 'traditional' identity has been based. The next chapter considers how participants respond to these conflicting cues.

## **6. Analysis: Betwixt and between: Something old, something new, something...liminal?**

### **6.1 Introduction**

Having considered how HRM and strategic/business talk informs the talk and identity construction of participants, in this second analysis chapter I will consider how participants deploy discourses of 'old' and 'new' public sector. I will also explore through textual extracts how speakers position themselves within and between the identities and orientations offered by those discourses. Given the changed and changing discourses shaping public sector identity, and the discourses *of* change which have dominated the context, it is pertinent to consider how participants respond to these discursive cues.

Previous writers have alluded to the potential parallels of the 'old' identity of public sector (OPA) with a traditional personnel identity (TPM); and of the potential for allying HRM rhetoric with the 'new' (NPM) (see for example, Mueller and Carter, 2005). As previously discussed, the identity of the 'old' public sector personnel function has been characterised by 'developmental humanism': articulating a concern for welfare, for probity, for integrity, and for the upholding of ethical standards in employment practice, as well as for a pluralistic orientation (Farnham and Horton, 1996; Harris, 2002, 2004). In the NPM regime, a new and legitimate identity for the HR function might be forged through crafting discursive allegiance to the goals and concerns of 'reform', and through emphasizing the value the function has to offer both to the reform process and in a post-reform environment. This might include a greater concern for 'performance', an entrepreneurial orientation, and alignment to managerial goals, and a greater recourse to discourses of 'added value' and efficiency.

However, as the previous chapter has demonstrated, participants are not merely 'managerial dupes', consuming and reproducing dominant discourses without question. We might therefore expect to find some resistance to 'reform' talk, through allegiance to 'old ways' talk, or to alternative 'deviant' discourses, which offer a means to legitimisation through alternative routes.

Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly given the transitional state of public sector reported by both academic observers and participants alike, all interviewees here were fluent in a range of discourses associated with both OPA and NPM/Modernisation, and some chose to identify clearly with one or the other. Perhaps more significantly, many participants seemingly embraced both 'pro' and 'anti' orientations to old and new, apparently engaging in a process of re-inscription, merging with ostensible ease seemingly opposing and antagonistic repertoires: a reconciling of the incommensurable (Iedema et al, 2004). It may come as no surprise that identities constructed within a discursive textscape characterised by change, fluidity and ambiguity are constructed through similarly ambiguous, not to say contradictory discursive repertoires. This discursive 'melding' phenomenon is considered in the final section of this chapter.

The first section of analysis section considers 'pro-new' talk, as well as some of the talk which speakers deployed to 'temper' reform discourses. This section is followed by a discussion of how 'old' talk features in the research, before considering 'third way', middle ground talk.

## **6.2 Something New: Pro-'reform' talk**

As previously outlined, those working in environments which are subject to discourses of change may choose to deploy talk which aligns them firmly with 'reform'. Participants here engaged in talk about specific change initiatives, but more commonly about change, reform and transformation in the abstract. This kind of repertoire was especially common among, although not exclusive to, those working in central/corporate roles, including a decidedly evangelical pro-change discourse:

*S6: And we want to be transformed, we really do, I'm convinced it's absolutely the right thing to do, and I do truly hand on heart believe that in 12 months time we'll be delivering a better service*

Here there is no scope for doubt that the 'transformation' will be successful, or that the speaker (and by association, the function) is anything but entirely positive about engaging with the change. Here the pro-change orientation is generalised: the nature or content of transformation is not explained more explicitly. The speaker simply claims the 'change advocate' position. The use of the passive voice ('be



*transformed*) suggests the possibility that change is inevitable and will be delivered unto local government/HR regardless, perhaps questioning the extent to which those involved have any freedom to choose any position *other* than to be zealously pro-change if they are not to be marginalised. Here there is a tantalising promise of legitimacy for HR practitioners who align themselves to organizationally-determined 'reform' priorities, whilst embracing professional expectations and demands as their own choice and presenting a professional identity as a 'project of the self' (Gilmore et al, 2005, p. 4). Others use similarly totalitarian language (SB: *'We are going to fundamentally change everything'*; J3: *'We've been backwards when it comes to engaging with the modernisation agenda and we simply have to re-engineer'*). This talk offers a direct challenge to Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd (2003, p. 526) who suggest that professional groups feel they have been excluded from decision making and that NPM has been done 'to them' and not 'with them'. In this research the 'professional group' (unsurprisingly) appears to deploy talk which suggests that they are not marginalised but involved, that they are open and receptive to the opportunities which NPM discourses offer.

Through recourse to specific discourses of, for example, cost-cutting a legitimate, legitimised identity is affirmed within the 'reforming' context. S7, for example, says:

*'We're responsible enough to recognise that we have to make savings....we recognised there was a money saving from doing that so evidently it was the right thing to do'*

This speaker's pro cost cutting and efficiency talk allows her to claim 'responsibility', and creates the opportunity for HR to be considered mature and trusted partners in the modernisation agenda. Evidently, the speaker might be considered as opportunistic, engaging in what Mueller and Carter (2005) see as the alignment of HRM with managerialism as part of the 'professionalization' project. Some writers have claimed more specifically that HRM and those in the function who apparently deliver its agenda have acted as powerful agents in the delivery of NPM/modernisation (e.g. Bach 2000; Givan 2005; Gould-Williams 2004). Vickers (2006 p. 69) reports that much of the writing about the public sector has been overtaken by 'swathes of management rhetoric'; here speakers appear comfortable to engage with

the 'management rhetoric' of transformation and fundamental change, of re-engineering and restructuring, of technological advances and best practice in the form of a 'model office':

*E2: We set up a strategic transformation unit as part of our directorate and it brought forth a whole transformation agenda for HR as the initial point with a view to doing it, you know, local government-wide, but starting with HR. So we went through a massive restructure, we changed the way we were working, changed our processes, because it rendered us more efficient in what we did and started implementing, you know, quite a lot of different things. We have a whole new model office and there's been a lot of technological advances in there as well so we're right at the forefront.*

Again, pro-change talk takes an evangelical turn; note here the almost biblical language used: 'brought forth', 'rendered us'. We are left in no doubt that the speaker (and the function) has participated fully and enthusiastically ('at the forefront') in the 'transformation agenda'. Again, the legitimacy of the function is affirmed through not only claiming alignment with change but with leading and exemplifying change readiness.

Such pro-transformation evangelism was by no means universal, nor indeed consistently articulated within individual speaker talk. Others offered a more 'realistic', 'pragmatic' and 'sensible' orientation both to the scale and inevitability of change initiatives and claims made for them. Local government employees are presented as able to evaluate change and its benefits, but also to choose whether or not to engage with it:

*M1: And I'm not always saying that it's right to make a massive change but let's at least look at it and if that's the right thing to do, hey let's go for it.*

Several others refuted the notion that change is antithetical to the public sector/local government context, resisting the need for 'transformation' talk through emphasizing the extent to which the environment has always been subject to change:

*L2: So it (local government 'transformation' initiative) will affect us but perhaps this is where the local government ethos comes in, in the sense that you accept that and just get on with it because your whole life is built around the fact that there could be a political change.*

This 'change veteran', identity might offer an explanation for participants' self-conscious manipulation of the language of change initiatives ( *SW: Well it all comes from the CAA, and its workforce development guidelines, so obviously we'll try to capture it in the new strategy, make sure we include the appropriate wording*) or of the apparent complicity in particular talk or actions in order to secure funding, autonomy or approval: (*SS: There's always money for making things work that the government is behind, so yes, we go along with it*). Speakers' talk here suggests that particular discourses and behaviours can be self-consciously mobilised by agential local government HR employees in the pursuit of benefits which follow from identifying as pro-change. These benefits might be tangible in the form of additional resources or penalty avoidance (Wilson's 2003 'carrots and semtex' metaphor), or intangible in the form of status, influence and legitimacy for the HR function.

In addition to the self-conscious 'seen it all before' identity, others suggested a pro-change orientation tempered by a 'realistic' evaluation of what 'new' talk might mean. The speaker here works in a 'market' environment, where HR services are supplied to schools by the local authority in competition with private sector providers:

*L2: Well we have led the way with traded services for the authority, and so there is a pressure I'd say to be enabling under the contract, not to prevent the managers from doing what they want, not to inhibit them. But we all know the consequences in the long-term of letting them act with impunity. And it doesn't actually do anyone any favours.*

Her team has 'led the way' through providing commercially traded HR services, thus demonstrating a readiness to change, to assume an entrepreneurial identity. However, the speaker emphasized the words '*enabling*' and '*inhibiting*' with hand-signed quotation marks, suggesting a view that these words represent euphemistic terms for compromise or acting without conscience. Her talk and actions signal a rejection of the 'managerialization' implicit in the 'traded' arrangement and of the reified contract in which it is enshrined. Her talk resists the claim that supporting managerial freedom to act should be the priority of the HR function, and that doing so is in the interests of the organization. Her evaluation suggests, counter to the claims of 'reform' advocates, that enhancing managerial prerogative might be both undesirable and well understood to be so ('*we all know the consequences*') by those who have witnessed the effects of doing so. The position assumed by this speaker is interesting: she and her team are pro-change but are prepared to resist pressures from 'the contract', the embodiment of the commercialised relationship, to respond to all managerial demands without question. Thus 'modernisation' is enacted, but in a tempered form, and the HR function offers resistance to demands for unquestioned reform. The risk to the speaker and her team is that of only partial legitimacy.

Interestingly, the accusation levelled at HR practitioners that they adopt convenient or expedient discourses in the pursuit of functional power and status (e.g. Legge, 1978) was challenged elsewhere . The following speaker was not alone in attributing superior motivations to the function whose members are keen to engage with 'change' talk in pursuit of the greater organizational good, despite the potentially adverse outcomes for the function itself:

*JL: Yes, yeah. I mean I think I'm really proud of being on our HR Leadership Team because the reality is that we've been turkeys voting for Christmas but we've done it with such grace that we're ahead of anybody else. And I'm proud to have treated it like a challenge and responded in that way.*

This 'selfless' talk constitutes a potential challenge to those who, like Barratt (2003), cast those in HR as 'key agents in promoting ideologies which obfuscate the fundamentally exploitative nature of the employment relationship' (p.1071). The

suggestion implicit is that HR benefits from the role they play in inflicting managerial and capitalist worst excesses on others; the speaker refutes the notion of HR gain in subscribing to the 'transformation agenda' associated with NPM: HR too is the 'victim', perhaps in the service of the greater good.

The dominance of the neoliberal modernisation discourse has arguably created tensions in a public sector which has been characterised as traditionally having a 'public service ethos' (e.g. Ranson and Stewart, 1994; Boyne, 2002). This characterisation of HR's 'professional project' (Mueller and Carter, 2005) which positions HR as 'in league with' managerial worst excesses fails to account for the 'tempering' talk in which speakers engage: articulating 'old' values, defending bureaucratic principles, retaining and defending discourses of probity, equity and public service ethos. Interestingly, some speakers authored a discourse of what might have been (old) public service ethos (PSE) or orientation 'rebranded' as a (new) discourse of client orientation/ community-service:

*L2: Whereas I very much had the view that I'm here for the children in X town and if the decisions are right for them you know, then unless the politicians are going to veto it, that's what my decision will be. But I think a lot of people as well are long-serving in local government and so I think that kind of ethos, that ethos of serving the client, improving the community, you're brought up with it. Do you know what I mean?*

Such talk enables the speaker to 'bridge' the re-writing of an old PSE orientation to a new, more palatable discourse, commensurate with modernisation rhetoric, thus apparently adopting the 'new' whilst simultaneously defending the old. Other speakers similarly adopted new discourses to justify what might be considered 'old' ways, rewriting the old as new. For example, the following extract includes the speaker drawing on a (new) aspiration to be private sector-like, to assume Gershon-inspired 'one best way' efficiency talk, as justification for an (old) bureaucratic principle of corporacy/ consistency whereby policy is sacrosanct:

*SD: What tends to happen is they then bastardise, sorry for the tape, but they hybrid the corporate policy, so you've got all this inconsistency happening across the organization, but we can't be having every team rewriting the policy on a whim. That's not how it works, that's not efficient, and I'm firmly of the belief that strong policy equals strong*

*practice so yes, it is about trying to be, as people would say more aligned to private sector.'*

Such talk represents a multi-lingualism on the part of speakers, able to rewrite old as new, and vice versa, a skilled melding of old and new. Agential speakers draw opportunistically on aspects of both old and new talk to craft a plausible, palatable justification of the old through the new. This 'melding' is revisited in the final part of this chapter. However, having considered engagement with 'new' talk, the next section considers in more detail how speakers engaged in more clearly 'pro-old' talk.

### **6.3 Something old: 'Ancien regime' talk**

Pro-change evangelical talk did not preclude speakers from articulating equally pro-tradition talk: the 'pro-change' S6 (see above) uses the term '*dinosaur*' to describe her public service ethos orientation, but nevertheless defends it as '*a matter of pride*'. More than half of the participants still resorted to 'statutory' talk, (L2: '*We still have a statutory role as a local authority*') and to the previous identity of the public sector as moral standard-setter for employment relationships (S1: '*We are still required to fulfil our role as a model employer*'). Similarly, whilst a small number of participants talked negatively of bureaucracy itself, many more cast it as an inevitable and in some quarters, highly desirable aspect of the public sector/ local government context.

Participants readily defended the somewhat outmoded, denigrated and rather unfashionable principles of bureaucracy, including democracy, probity and accountability. The following three short extracts indicate how each of these 'bureaucratic' principles were claimed and defended by speakers:

L3: *So the question is, is it possible to cut the bureaucracy in local government ... I mean it can't ever eliminate it because by the very nature that you're working in a democracy, that's just the way it is, isn't it?*

Bureaucracy is accepted as an inevitable outcome of democracy, which is, in itself, taken for granted without question as the '*nature*' of the local government environment. There is no trace here of the speaker identifying a threat to the order of things, or of seeking to welcome change to the status quo.

Similarly, S7 readily adopted a position simultaneously 'anti-bureaucracy', (evidently a position considered desirable, perhaps in the pursuit of a greater 'business-

oriented' identity), yet also pro-probity, through recourse to a common theme in participant talk, that of public money, and the responsibility which local government employees have for ensuring expenditure is scrutinised and monitored:

*S7: I do have a problem with bureaucracy full stop....some of that is right where public money is involved and it's important to get things signed off*

Similarly, accountability is also cited through custodianship of the 'public purse'. and accountability to taxpayers for how it is spent:

*O1: And they've got wind of a compromise agreement so they think that's the option they can have and I know it sounds a bit corny but yes, we do ask 'is that really a good use of taxpayers' money, and what would they say if they knew*

In this speaker's account 'they' refers to unscrupulous employees seeking to profit from the authority through negotiating paid departure from the organization in return for a waiver of employment rights and potential future claims. Other speakers decried managers who resorted to such agreements as a costly short-cut measure for removing particular employees rather than pursuing the usual policies and processes. The appeal of the speaker here is to a more legitimate constituency than either employees or line managers: the taxpayer whose money funds the very existence of local government.

Each of these extracts demonstrates a discursive 'cleaving' to bureaucratic principles associated with old local government, and this was prevalent through talk defending public sector distinctiveness in the face of pro-private sector comparisons and prescriptions associated with modernisation talk. Defence of this public sector distinctiveness may be positioned alongside an understanding of the potential problems associated with upholding it, thus adding a further level of insight/commitment, i.e. we know it is hard but we are nevertheless dedicated to upholding it anyway (*LF: Of course it's political. Of course it's difficult. That's how it is. Get over it. End of*). Speakers committed themselves to the distinctiveness, and in the process, articulated a resistance to managerialism and to managerial demands. For example:

*EC: But I guess if I was a manager trying to manage a service, the demands on them, you can see their frustration. But at the end of the*

*day, we do work in local government rather than private industry and it isn't the same, much as they'd like it to be.*

Others resisted threats to the distinctiveness through recourse to public sector/ service ethos in a range of discursive guises (*KB: 'A local authority has to be more ethical and better than private organizations'; J1: 'We are here for the citizens of X, after all'; P2: 'We believe in doing things properly in local government'*) and through discourses of commitment to maintaining the tradition of public sector priorities:

*S8: 'Everything that we do comes back to safeguarding and whatever happens that has to remain our top priority'*

*T1: I do think we've lost the caring and human side and we're more resource and productivity driven, and while I can see the need for that because of funding and budgets I think we might be going a step too far, and you don't want to lose completely that ethical perspective that we've always had here*

This 'ethical' talk is presented not as naive or idealistic (the speaker sees the need for reform) but nevertheless defends the old 'ethical perspective' from an apparently informed and considered position.

The key question here is why speakers might engage in such 'old' talk. If benefits and potential legitimacy accrue from acquiring and deploying 'new'/pro-reform talk, why might speakers choose nevertheless to continue to draw on such apparently outmoded repertoires which fail to offer organizational legitimacy? The answer may be that they have failed to recognise the gains to be derived from cultivating a pro-reform identity, although given that much of the talk suggests that this option has been considered and rejected, this explanation is unlikely. Alternatively, speakers may seek alternative forms of legitimacy through, for example, 'integrity' of self-narrative: authoring a consistent, cohesive identity. Where speakers preserve something of value, in this case, cherished discourses of 'old' public sector values and ethos, a more autonomous legitimacy may be achieved through the cultivation of authentic (Costas and Fleming, 2009) or idealised (Wieland, 2010) selves, independent of organizationally imposed discourses and identities. A final explanation is that speakers may be authoring identities which are informed yet sceptical, naturally mistrustful of the discourses of fads and fashions, having



witnessed them rise and fall in the past. Such speakers may choose instead to preserve continuity through drawing on 'enduring' repertoires of public sector. Thus they position themselves as outsiders, permanently liminal, other, yet wise and superior to those who are seduced by passing discursive trends.

Perhaps the most shrewd speakers succeed in combining 'old' and 'new' talk, which might enable a bridging between organizationally legitimised and authentic/idealised identities. The next and final section of this chapter considers the evidence of speakers engaging in such discursive strategies.

#### **6.4 Something Else: The space between- 'Third way' talk, post-bureaucracy and liminality**

As previously discussed, much of the academic literature surrounding public sector reform has offered polarised debates and discourses of binary and opposing positions. For those working in the context, the experience of navigating the environment and the multiple discourses which abound may require a demonstration of an ability to craft an alternative path between or across discourses. Ainsworth et al. (2009) talk of 'boundary-spanning and cross-spatial self-positionings', which they suggest are indicative of the hybrid roles that workers under NPM increasingly embody. These roles, they claim, are in contrast to traditional perceptions of how the provision and management of public service work is carried out. Participants in this research, through drawing on both old and new talk, suggest the possibility of crafting a hybrid, 'third way' discourse. Such a discourse may offer scope for retaining certain aspects of OPA discourses, as well as resistance to NPM/modernisation talk. It may also provide the opportunity for speakers to locate themselves within a 'pragmatic', 'space between' position, or to express an idealised 'heterotopic' vision (Spicer et al, 2009), either of their own identity, or of the context in which they function, claiming a 'best of both worlds' insight. Participants engaging in such talk ostensibly refute the 'either/or' versions and polarised perspectives which have been prevalent in the academic literature. Speaker identities might therefore be anchored in 'old' talk, but equally open, receptive to the new where this might be appropriate, useful or pragmatic. Interestingly, this 'crafting' of a pragmatic talk which 'straddles' opposing positions offers the potential for speakers to create and take up positions of privileged insight and understanding, able to demonstrate understanding and fluency in 'both sides', to see benefits and shortcomings of both

old and new, and to author, at times, a new 'optimum', heterotopic version of public sector, where 'alternative modes of being and doing' might be imagined ( Spicer et al, 2009, p.551).

This 'liminality' phenomenon is not unusual where identities are being called into question: where identity change is demanded, speakers may find themselves caught between old and new in the process of identity reconstruction (Beech, 2010).

Here, the HR function and, arguably, all local government employees (indeed, all public servants to a greater or lesser degree) are being called upon to re-imagine themselves; identity work is demanded wherever 'reform' and 'transformation' rhetoric is at large, and the context of the public sector has long been the focus of such rhetoric. Public sector workers are subject to the ambiguity created where old and new discourses co-exist, where a range of 'new' versions and reinventions apparently compete for supremacy, and where different political priorities and demands demand frequent re-interpretations. This identity work may result in a form of identity crisis, a crisis especially keenly felt and articulated by a function which has not previously achieved the legitimacy it has sought.

It may come as no surprise that those whose identity is at stake engage in a form of discursively 'hedged bets', and this appeared to be a common feature for most interviewees. They may, as agential selves, see opportunities for preserving aspects of cherished 'old identities' and write them into new visions and versions of how their identity is to be; they may engage in a 'magpie-like' picking off of the most attractive aspects of opposing discourses; or alternatively, confusion may abound as to where they might best locate their identity in pursuit of legitimacy, and a merged, melded, 'middle ground' discourse may emerge.

Witness, for example:

*M1: There's no way on God's earth you could do that here you know,  
it takes you months ... which I'm not saying is wrong;  
somewhere between the two ...*

Similarly, K2 refutes the suggestion that 'private sector values' can simply be used to inform public sector practice, choosing instead to articulate a preference for a 'middle ground' alternative:

*SK: And do you think that the kind of values that might underpin private sector organizations would be preferable to that?*

*KD: Not necessarily. I think ... I mean I don't think there's any such public sector organization where it can happen. I think you need to be somewhere between the two.*

This 'middle ground' position enables speakers to articulate superiority in relation to managers who may be blinkered by NPM target-talk, whereas HR can claim an orientation to 'the bigger picture':

*N2: I do understand the frustration, and I know they are all worried about the targets and I'm sorry but managers getting frustrated isn't a good enough reason for us to be cutting corners because we know what the consequences will be*

Thus 'third way' articulations are deployed as evidence of HR's invaluable role in 'bridging a gap' between old and new, drawing on 'old' insights to inform new practice and principles (*JL: I've been here so long, believe me, there's nothing they can tell me about that I haven't seen* ; claiming flexibility and a reform orientation whilst emphasizing continuity (*JH: 'We know we have to change, and we see the benefits, and we welcome it, we do, but we also know what we do well, and we're no hurry to give that away';*) and championing new ways of working, e.g. 'network' working and a 'networked' identity through relying on old skills, knowledge and experience:

*E3: And who do I listen to because there are so many people pulling the strings now? Well I have to rely on my own judgement and professional knowledge more than ever to do the right thing*

Similarly, middle ground or 'third way' talk might represent a possibility for speakers to author what might be considered a post-bureaucratic orientation. I draw on the concept of post-bureaucracy here not as a particular model or blueprint of organization, but as a discursive trend whereby the principles or practices of bureaucracy are refuted (Garsten and Grey, 2001), what Johnson et al refer to as a 'rhetoric of debureaucratization' (Johnson et al, 2009, p.43). A context of organizational change and reform, populated with 'post-bureaucratic' discourse may

require individuals or subgroups within the organization (e.g. those working in HR), to talk of modifying their role and ways of working and to adjust their knowledge base accordingly (Josserand et al, 2003). Grey (1994) suggests that post-bureaucratic employees must engage in a form of 'self-making', (what might otherwise be referred to as identity work) but with the purpose of staying predictable and trustworthy. This presents a potential tension for workers: to emphasize continuity and predictability in how they perform their role identity, or to focus on modification, reinvention and novelty. Perhaps for this reason, some have emphasized the extent to which the post-bureaucratic era is characterized by hybridity (Josserand et al, 2003). The dilemma of how the post-bureaucratic worker is to construct their identity may be resolved through claiming autonomy and power, mobilising 'professional' knowledge and articulating choice and volition, whilst reconstructing their subjectivity in line with managerial requirements (Johnson et al, 2009).

Talk of the middle ground offers HR the potential to align itself to both old and new discourses, and of articulating a 'balance' not available in current discursive constructions of either/or. This participant captures working with a private sector strategic partner and reconciling tensions between public sector ethos discourses of fairness and employee interests, with marketization and associated discourses of business and profit:

*F2: So it's balancing with them how to treat our employees and to you know ... for them to remember that whilst they are a private organization and theirs is about a business and profit, that's not necessarily how we can treat our employees because they're still Council employees and they've got terms and conditions relating to that. And we understand their business needs you know, we see that is isn't all bad and that we could learn from them, but we sort of try to balance their needs against the needs of the individuals*

This speaker straddles both the 'old' talk of worker needs and the 'new' talk of understanding business needs, and through reconciling both assumes a privileged, superior position: forging a pragmatic route between opposing perspectives. Ferlie et al. (1996) observed as characteristic of the public sector the presence of strong and self-regulating professions, in which professionals had stronger allegiances to

their professional codes of practice than to their organizations. For a 'managerial profession' such as HR (Wright, 2008), still engaged in the 'professional project' where legitimacy remains contested, the potential for articulating allegiance to such a professional code may be more tenuous and risky. A safer position, one more likely to offer legitimacy and status might be to 'emphasize their unique skills in resolving the central problems of the organization', (Wright, 2008, p. 1064). The central problems of the 'reforming' public sector might be to '*find a workable solution*' (S5). Thus HR members author pragmatic identities, identities which are problem and solution-focused, able to deftly juggle opposing discourses, to reconcile the irreconcilable, talking incommensurable semantic orientations (Iedema et al, 2004, p.24) into commensurability.

## **6.5 Summary**

This analysis chapter has considered how speakers draw on discourses of public sector to inform their crafting of identity. I have followed a trend in much of the public sector 'reform' literature and drawn on the rather simplistic distinction between 'old' and 'new' discourses to evaluate the repertoires which participants marshalled to position themselves vis-a-vis 'reform'.

Many participants chose generalised pro-reform discursive strategies, identifying the HR function as evangelically pro-change and modelling 'best practice' in leading and championing 'transformation' initiatives. Fewer engaged in the articulation of specific 'reform' initiatives, whilst others assumed pro-change positions whilst 'tempering' discourses of managerial free rein through recourse to 'ethical' talk. This process of discursive tempering enables the speaker to position themselves as superior to naive managerialism, claiming a more ethical orientation than simplistic market or managerial based discourses, yet retaining the identity of being ready and prepared to change. Similarly, some resorted to a more straightforward discursive defence of 'old' ways (bureaucracy, democracy, bureaucratic values), having apparently considered but rejected the new rhetoric. Unsurprisingly, many sought to craft a 'third way', liminal discourse, where old and new are juxtaposed, melded, rendered commensurable.

Each of these positions offers a form of legitimacy, whether through a simple alignment with managerial and reform talk, or through more nuanced talk of blending

old and new, of tempering the new, or of articulating a third way. It is worth revisiting the phenomenon of within speaker heteroglossia here: many participants veered from 'pro' to 'anti' to 'melded' discourses and back again. In some respects, this may come as no surprise: at times of discursive shifts where 'reform' is lauded as desirable, but represents a major demand for identity work to be undertaken, subjects are likely to hedge their bets. Recourse to old talk represents an opportunity to defend a previously idealised self and highly prized organizational (and social) identity: defender of ethics, fairness, probity. Deploying new talk enables HR practitioners to position themselves as at the forefront of organizational change, as legitimate partners in 'transformation' efforts. Third way, melded and liminal talk enables speakers to assume a knowing, discerning position, whereby the best of both discourses is ostensibly picked off by knowledgeable, informed, agential speakers who can recognise both the value and shortcomings of new and old talk. A clear discursive commitment is made to a pragmatic middle ground which permits identity high ground to be manufactured on the basis of both old-aligned ethics and pro-reform flexibility.

This evaluation may ascribe too much agency to those who are subject to large scale Discursive shifts, and interestingly another significant theme emerged which suggests that agency for HR practitioners may be seriously restricted by discourses to which they are subject. This theme of gendered and sexualised discourses is considered in the next chapter.

## **7. Analysis: HR wives, nannies and whores: Gendered and Sexualised Discourses**

### **7.1 Introduction**

The first two analysis chapters have considered how HR speakers attempt to construct legitimate identities through discourses associated with HRM and public sector reform. In this second analysis chapter, I will consider how the HR function is constructed by its members in a gendered and sexualised way, drawing on participant talk to illustrate the embeddedness of metaphors which serve to reinforce how HR workers' 'professional' identities are enacted in gendered and sexualised ways. As previously discussed, this was a common characteristic of participant talk, but not one which I had anticipated, despite my awareness of both the prevalence of women in HR roles, and the high number of female participants in this research. Both of these phenomena are discussed below. Interestingly, describing the role, activities and identity of the function and its members was not restricted to female participants, although discourses were deployed rather differently by male speakers. Before turning to a discussion of the specific repertoires deployed, I briefly consider some of the literature and issues surrounding the gendered nature of the HR function.

### **7.2 'The lady from personnel': identifying the function as female**

Of the 47 interviews represented here, 41 were with female participants. This is not unusual for either the context of the research (local government) or more particularly for the HR function. The 'profession' of personnel/ human resource management has traditionally been considered a 'female' domain (Legge, 1987): in 2005, for example, CIPD membership was 72% female (Tasker, 2005). Given that members of a professional institute are more likely to hold senior hierarchical positions, we might assume that the lower echelons are even more densely populated by women. This phenomenon is borne out by the participant profile in this research. In the same year, 65% of public sector employees were female (Millard and Machin, 2007) and in March 2010, 75% of English local authority employees were female (LGA, 2010). Women evidently dominate both local authority employment and the human resources function, although this has rarely been addressed in either the academic or the practitioner literature.

Although this phenomenon of female numerical domination of the profession was not specifically or directly referred to by any participant, several alluded to the entrenched notion that the function is predominantly populated by women. Male interviewee O, for example, (whose shortened forename might be used by a man or a woman) observed: *'managers are a bit surprised sometimes when I turn out not to be the lady from personnel'*.

Similarly, just under a third of participants made direct reference to gender as an explanatory factor in the function's marginalisation and lack of legitimacy: a previous section identified the 'little woman from personnel' discourse, and L5, referred angrily to the *'old boys' club'* as the barrier to the HR function achieving legitimacy and status, and to becoming 'strategic':

*'They don't believe in HR, they see it as a little admin function, something that women do, and so it's never going to be integrated or strategic because we just aren't taken seriously'*

This was echoed by S1, who associates budget with authority and explains HR's lack of either as a function of the gendered nature of the organization:

S1 *But you know, we have no budget, we have no authority (laughs) and I don't think we're taken seriously from that point of view.*

Sue *Right.*

S1 *And HR doesn't have a place at the top table, in the sense of the Corporate Management Team. That has never consistently happened. So I think there were a combination of factors and it's about the mentality of the organization, some professional, experienced, senior HR officers who are mainly women, sitting down and saying this is what we think you need. We're not taken seriously by the predominantly male senior management structure.*

Her talk clearly articulates the lack of status and legitimacy of the function and proposes the gendered identity of HR (female) and of senior line management (predominantly male) as the cause.



Similarly, in some quarters, an essentialist language has been used to ascribe a 'feminine' identity to the profession (Legge, 1987; Niven, 1987), an identity associated with a concern for social and welfare issues, or with 'softer' pursuits, as opposed to the 'hard', masculine concerns of negotiation, results and outputs (Brandl et al, 2008): This 'soft' identity apparently does not serve the function well in terms of establishing credentials and legitimacy:

*S5: We don't have the reputation of being fluffy and pink, although we're all women (laughs) in my team but even so, what we have found difficult is maintaining a good reputation*

Such language was used by a number of speakers to characterise the 'soft' identity of the function. Interestingly for this speaker a 'fluffy and pink' identity may be automatically associated with women (ladies?), and automatically considered NOT the basis for a good reputation. Yet despite refuting this identity, her team still fails to maintain a good reputation. Some writers have suggested that even within the profession, both job content and relative influence are determined by gender, with women more likely to engage in service-oriented behaviours, and to have less formal authority and less 'real' influence than their male HR counterparts (Simpson and Lenoir, 2003; Brandl et al, 2008). Of the six male participants in this research, three were at the most senior level in their organization, two at the next tier, and only one occupying a junior 'assistant' role.

The emphasis on 'reputation' articulated above illustrates the extent to which, for the HR function, role legitimacy is presented as relational, and largely expressed through relationships with line managers. For the participants in this research, reference was occasionally made to relationships with employees, elected members and unions, but line managers featured overwhelmingly in 'relationship' talk. This issue is considered in more detail below, but it is worth illustrating here at the outset the ways in which legitimacy is captured through the relationship:

*SH: I think you know, we have over the last couple of years I feel you know, built up a good working relationship with each of the divisions. Because to me, that's key in ensuring that you know, we're delivering what they expect and equally, they feed back to us in what they think we're doing as a service. And to some degree that's the thing that*

*distinguishes our service from the other directorates: that means we are doing the professional job we set out to do, and we are taken seriously as the professionals*

The irony here may be that the speaker articulates the relationship with the line manager as the route to and evidence of professionalism for the function: yet this dependency undermines the very notion of professional independence.

Building on Thomas and Davies' (2002) suggestion that organizations are sites of gender construction and contestation, the next section of the analysis considers, through accounts of this line manager-HR relationship, the gendered and sexualised construction of the function.

### **7.3 Talking duty, talking dirty: gendered and sexualised discourses**

Each of the following sections considers how both women *and* men in HR are constituted as gendered and sexualised organizational subjects. Through drawing on a range of metaphors, participants were effectively positioned within particular identity repertoires, each with consequences for how legitimacy might be achieved. To reiterate, this legitimacy is represented as being conferred or denied *by line managers*, and therefore the roles are constructed relationally, regardless of line manager or HR worker gender. The identity repertoires considered in turn are the organizational wife, the domestic worker; the nanny; the good girl; and sexualised identities.

#### **7.3.1 The good wife: servicing the relationship**

As already indicated, the relational nature of the HR function's role was a prevalent theme in participant talk, with interviewees regularly articulating the primary achievement of the function as the capacity to build and sustain positive relationships. Deployed as a badge of professional success, this 'relationship-building' and 'relationship maintenance' talk was articulated as the continuation of dialogue and positive relationships with line managers. The existence and continuance of such relationships appeared to be used as a measure of HR effectiveness, and as evidence of professional credibility:

*J4: I've worked very hard to establish a proper working relationship with my AD's (Assistant Directors) and I am very proud and I'll do whatever is necessary to keep that going*

Interestingly this (female) speaker suggests that she will do *'whatever is necessary'* to maintain a *'proper working relationship'*. Yet such talk suggests that it is entirely the responsibility of those in the HR function to maintain the relationship, rather than other parties: what might be considered far from a *'proper'* working relationship for other functions.

Similarly, C2 (who referred to the relationship between the function and line management 15 times during her interview) associates the maintenance of *'the relationship'* with professional status and as a source of professional pride:

*C2: Through good times and bad, whatever has happened, however bad things have got, I've always emphasized to the team the importance of keeping the relationship going, and I'm proud that we've managed that, because that's the professional thing to do and above all, that's what we are, doing a professional service, and I think we are appreciated for that*

The language here recalls marital vows (*'through good times and bad'*: for better, for worse) whilst re-iterating the *'service'* dimension to the role. Given the problem discussed previously of HR dependence on line manager approval and acceptance for legitimacy, it may come as no surprise that those in the function seek to curry favour with managers. Equally, it may be inevitable that an HR function in thrall to line management should seek to represent their desire to maintain positive relationships as evidence of professionalism rather than as evidence of inferior status, lack of legitimacy or subservience. However, the responsibility for relationship maintenance work, and the pride taken in the positive relational outcomes might be considered a form of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), with a distinctly gendered dimension, as those undertaking that labour are predominantly women. Drawing on Hochschild's work, Townley (1994) suggests that women are far more likely to find themselves in roles where they are required to deal with other people's feelings and emotions; to be responsive to needs of others, providing a personal response to their

needs. The responsibility for 'the relationship' claimed by the speakers here echoes this claim.

Others talked of the HR function as a kind of 'trophy wife': the '*pet function*', the '*dedicated*' department whose role it is to service and flatter line management, and to function as a 'bolstering' source. For example:

*L2 They (line managers) like to have their own dedicated personnel department. It makes them feel more important. The bigger the better because then they can run round after them and service their every need. I think we've replaced the old fashioned secretaries or PA's. (laughs).*

*S8 I think Directors like to have their own (HR) team, like sort of a pet function because then they can challenge what Corporate say and it gives them more kudos*

However, the prized status conferred by this role may be conditional on HR compliance and passivity: a darker discourse of HR as abused 'victim' similarly emerged:

*J3 HR is knocked back so many times. We suffer from low self-esteem, a kind of learned helplessness. We feel we have so much to offer and we make suggestions and they are completely overridden or ignored. It's like battered wife syndrome.*

Here line manager power is represented as a dark force which oppresses the HR function. The disturbing metaphor articulated reiterates the subservient identity for HR which featured elsewhere: the cost of becoming too demanding, of seeking an autonomous voice, is presented as an abusive '*knocking back*'. A similar repertoire of passivity and compliance featured in the guise of 'good girl' talk. This identity is comprised of being seen to be compliant, there to please, and avoiding conflict. Legitimacy is conditional on doing as one is told, smiling sweetly and not challenging managers. The following two extracts (from one of the most senior and one of the most junior participants) deploy the 'good girl' repertoire:

*L5 She's only there because she doesn't rock the boat too much...her predecessor was seen as a trouble maker (by top management) because she wouldn't do as she was told and a cheer went up when she left*

*P1 Because I've been here since I was 16, they know that I can have a laugh and a joke, and I think they think 'Oh it's P from Payroll you know, she's alright, she does what she's told...' but when I try to get a bit more serious they don't like that so much*

The gendered, and again potentially abusive, oppressive dimension to this talk is evident: approval and acceptance are conditional on articulating palatable and managerially-compliant talk. Interestingly, some participants' talk suggested a self-conscious performance and manipulation of this role, which may be no surprise given the implicit powerlessness of this identity:

*J1 I've been here since I was a slip of a girl so I know the right way round influencing them. Sometimes you just have to smile sweetly and walk away because you know that challenging will be counter-productive.*

Here the speaker (also a senior manager) positions herself as choosing to perform 'good girl' as a deliberate influencing strategy, rather than being cast unwillingly by 'line management' in the role.

The 'marriage' of HR and line management then is not talked of as a relationship of equals: the 'female' partner maintains and services the relationship at all costs, flatters the ego and identity of the line manager 'husband', and risks abuse if she becomes too demanding and fails to perform 'good girl'. Thus the relationship is cast in gendered (and abusive) terms. This is neither a recipe for an independent and legitimate, credible organizational identity, nor talk which appears to offer much furtherance of the HR professional project.

The regulatory and constraining effects of such gendered discourses were in evidence elsewhere through similarly gendered discursive resources deployed in characterising the daily enactment of the role and relationship between individual HR workers and line managers, including the 'domestic' role, clearing up after line managers; and the nanny, caring for, comforting and disciplining the line manager 'child'. The next section considers the first of these: the domestic worker.

### **7.3.2 Dirty work: clearing up the managerial mess**

Participants frequently drew on cleaning/tidying metaphors relating to a domestic 'servicing' role for HR in relation to line managers in dealing with difficult employee

issues. There was frequent talk of 'cleaning up', 'clearing up', 'sweeping up' and 'mopping up' after line managers and their 'messes'. N1, for example, suggests that:

*We end up sweeping a lot of what they (line managers) do under the carpet....you're always picking up the pieces of some catastrophe or other where they haven't dealt with an issue until it has exploded in their face'.*

Similarly, D1:

*You know you've got to try to get them to do what they're supposed to do, to take ownership and be managers, what they're paid for, but most of the time we're reacting, cleaning up after them when they've dropped one.*

Inevitably such talk suggests a subservient role for the HR function, but equally categorises people management activities as low grade domestic work, work lacking in value (Oakley, 1974), perhaps explaining why line managers might be reluctant to engage with such activities. This contrasts sharply with the HR speakers' presented rationale of line manager incompetence.

Interestingly, Townley (1994), in her early Foucauldian critique of HRM, identified that certain kinds of job content is frequently overlooked in 'female' jobs, including domestic labour and, of particular interest here, the management of stress and the emotions of others. Women's less visible domestic labour, she suggests, has been devalued as it is more rooted in the *maintenance* of processes (or of people) than in the *production* of products. Thus the work of the HR function and other similar functions is inevitably devalued. Perhaps unsurprisingly this kind of organizational 'domestic' work has been characterised elsewhere as 'toxin-handling' (Kulik et al, 2009): a rather more industrial metaphor for capturing the 'dirty work' of dealing with employees' (and managers') emotionally charged problems.

Here the cleaning up metaphor is also extended to the 'dirty work' of people management activities involving emotional labour around difficult sickness absence cases. One participant suggests:

*T1 A lot of the managers are men, you're going out to a woman and she's had a hysterectomy or whatever, it's awkward you know, it's difficult isn't it?*

*Sue Mm.*

*T1 Or somebody with cancer, they just don't feel like they can deal with it. And I suppose sometimes somebody from Human Resources, one, you do it a lot but I suppose then you haven't been sitting with that person day by day, year upon year, you're a little bit removed, so to go and perhaps be saying some of the things that aren't the nicest things to say it might be better coming from somebody that hasn't sat with this person day in day out.*

Here she apparently justifies the involvement of HR employees in a more 'hands-on' way sanitising the work of line managers by taking on the 'dirty work' of cancer and hysterectomies, removing the need for emotional labour from the line manager, and absorbing the 'toxins' of the difficult employee scenario. If we accept Townley's (1994) claim, such work will always be degraded, and offers little legitimacy to those undertaking it. It may serve line managers well to jettison such activities in the pursuit of the more 'masculine', 'hard' activities outlined above which are goal and output oriented. The discursive construction of this work may fail to capture the challenge entailed in women's 'soft' work.

An alternative construction of HR work and the relationship-servicing role it undertakes was articulated through the identity of the 'nanny', and the next section considers extracts which featured such talk.

### **7.3.3 'There, there': Nanny's here**

Of all repertoires or metaphors used to capture the role of the HR function in relation to line managers, the metaphor of '*hand-holding*' was the most commonly used across all the interviews. This metaphor suggests a very involved but secondary role for HR in support of a dependent, fearful, unskilled or immature management body. Consider also these extracts from the interview with S5:

*S5 The worst thing is saying to them 'If you cannot justify why you're doing what you're doing, then you're on your own'.*

.....  
S5 *Sometimes you just think I just want to bang their heads together and tell them to shut up. Sometimes you bring parties together and you say 'Okay, why did you do that?' Bring the two parties together; we see the one party by themselves and then the other party, so then you get the two parties and you say 'Why did you say this to him?' So it's about bringing two kids together, not adults. And these are head teachers.*

Similarly, K1 talks of errant managers whose behaviour apparently falls short of acceptable standards, but uses a form of 'parent-child' language to articulate her view:

K1 *Bad behaviour has not only been tolerated, it's been encouraged in this directorate and we have to monitor it and get them to behave properly.*

In each of these extracts, legitimacy turns on the 'firm hand' of those in the HR function resolving childish disputes and disciplining miscreants. The 'adult' HR professional is presented as indispensable in bringing order and harmony through defining and demanding 'proper' behaviour. Yet again, the activity being articulated might be considered emotional labour as the HR (female) workers articulate their role in terms of emotion, of diffusing highly-charged scenarios, and of absorbing stress generated by and through line management. There is within this repertoire the possibility of a 'nannying' role legitimizing a more powerful identity for those in HR: this involves those in the function telling scary stories to the line manager in order to elicit compliant behaviour, especially around the adverse consequences of managerial 'bad behaviour'.

D1: *... where 'If you want to do that, that's fine, but this person here did that and that happened and they went to ET and you wouldn't want to be them ...' You've just got to give them a few little scary stories and they can see your point, you know. 'If you want to stand in that dark hole with horrible ... So we will help you but we're not going to do it like this'. Scare them to death, it always works.*

The nanny here can be relied upon to come to the rescue, to keep the nastiness of the potential employment tribunal at bay, to provide a solution, her solution ('We're not going to do it like this'), to resolve difficult issues and disputes. Thus the HR worker is indispensable to line management.



Alternatively, 'nannying' may be articulated as more nurturing, a supporting role, although represented as a potentially unhealthy symbiosis:

*P1: But at my level, I suppose to one degree I am still a bit of a spoon-feeder because I can't get out of the habit and I don't think the people that I work with can.*

Again, this 'pampering' discourse conjures a sense of co-dependency, potentially a powerfully legitimising discursive resource for the HR function, however unhealthy.

The 'domestic' and 'nannying' discourses used to articulate the daily activities of the HR function illustrate the extent to which this kind of 'hands-on' people management and support work has been degraded. It is far removed from the grand strategic discourses of added value and bottom-line contribution, and, reflecting the kinds of gendered domestic and relationship roles in which women might be cast outside of the organizational context, is low value, low level, and designed primarily to 'prop up' line managers, absorbing the worst aspects of people management to which they might be exposed (*'you can't expect them to have to deal with cancer'*). Legitimacy for HR workers is established, but it is a very impoverished form of legitimacy which offers little status.

A similarly degraded set of gendered repertoires which featured in the talk of interviewees involved the construction of sexualised roles and identities for those working in HR. These are considered next in the final section of this analysis.

#### **7.3.4 Pussies, pimps and prostitution: Sexualised talk**

Numerous participants drew on repertoires which appear to be highly sexualised, particularly given the gendered nature of the HR workforce, and in the context of the power dynamic between those in the function and line management, as previously articulated. Interestingly, the discursively constructed sexualised identity is not new to characterisations of the HR function. In his 1992 typology, Storey represented the low influence, administrative HR function as 'handmaiden', a biblical term for a female domestic servant often used euphemistically to describe a concubine or sex-slave. Nkomo and Ensley (1999) talk of HRM's 'courtship' of strategic management. And Watson (2002) cites Drybrugh's (1973) vision of the powerless and passive 'personnel man' (sic) as a 'eunuch' (p.104).

In this research the HR worker is variously characterised by participants as the passive recipient of managerial sexual attentions; as sexually manipulative or promiscuous; or as a sex worker. Even male HR workers are characterised through sexualised identities of 'pimp' or 'pussy'. The following extracts represent examples of these repertoires.

The repertoire of 'passive recipient', conjuring a graphic evocation of a sex act, and used to capture the compliant HR function is reminiscent of the 'handmaiden' metaphor:

*D3: We're considered something of a good personnel department, although I suspect that's because we roll over and take it*

This extract illustrates how establishing an identity as a passive function which accedes to all line management requests will bring rewards; here the reward is managerial approval and a good reputation. It is interesting that the passive orientation is equated with a 'good' identity for the function. The message is clear: 'do as you are told to keep us happy and you will be accepted/ tolerated'. The submissive, complicit HR function conjured here clearly questions any notion of functional autonomy and independent professionalism.

Others drew on a more manipulative or promiscuous sexualised identity for HR workers: talking of two senior female HR officers, the following speaker captures their behaviour in relation to line managers:

*P1: They're very shrewd; they leave managers feeling like they've given them exactly what they wanted....they've satisfied their needs*

Of course, whilst this might suggest a much more powerful role and identity for those described here, the sexualised performance required to create managerial satisfaction nevertheless suggests an identity that remains in thrall to line management. Again, the goal is keeping line management happy in order to be legitimate. The following speaker articulates a similar discourse of 'working' the line manager relationship drawing on promiscuity as a metaphor, evidently not an endeavour without risk:

*B1 You can usually bring managers round if you work hard enough to let them think...you have to put yourself about but sometimes there's the danger of giving them too much, going too far*

The metaphors used in this extract clearly suggest sexual activity: *'putting oneself about'*, *'giving too much'* and *'going too far'* in the pursuit of managerial acceptance or approval. In the most extreme case the HR practitioner is cast as sex worker in pursuit of the 'wages' of organizational resources and legitimacy, or of continued trade :

*L2 So we have the usual beauty pageant to show off which (HR) department has bent over backwards most, and surprise surprise, they (one particular HR team) always end up with extra resources from their directorate pot. It leaves a bit of a bad taste in the mouth as it feels like payment for services rendered, if you know what I mean.*

-----  
*ES: We still have to keep pleasing people to keep them coming back (traded service)*

The oblique references here are to a prostitution role for HR workers: line managers are the clients, and providing a good service that keeps customers satisfied will ensure access to resources, and future trade (legitimacy). This role of 'servicing' managers is extended through 'pimping' talk. One senior male HR manager, keen to seek line manager approval for an HR initiative, addressed an all-female group of more junior HR officers thus:

*J2 : You need to go back to your directorates and chat up your managers, get them to come round to our way of thinking*

The success of the HR-led initiative is dependent on the promiscuous, wanton behaviour of the female HR workers. More graphically, another senior male HR manager talked of *'putting ourselves about'* to raise the HR function profile: the (women) HR workers solicit in pursuit of functional legitimacy or approval.

Finally, one of the most graphic sexualised metaphors articulated during the interviews was used by one of the few male participants, who suggested that the function has been stigmatised by a particular identity of femininity and weakness:

*L1: There's a bit of a view that its where you go to hide if you can't hack it in the real world, you know, personnel's for pussies sort of thing.*

The term 'pussy' bears not only a sexualised connotation given its slang use to refer to female genitalia or to the act of intercourse itself, but has also been adopted as a pejorative label for timid or weak men who fail to perform their masculinity in a socially desirable way. However we choose to read this statement, it suggests an inferior, gendered identity associated with the personnel function. Interestingly, the term 'personnel' is used rather than 'HR': perhaps unconsciously for the sake of alliteration, or deliberately to contrast the inferior nature of the function with the more macho 'thrust' and 'drive' associated with 'strategic HRM'.

#### **7.4 Summary**

An important consideration here is what work is being done through the deployment of these gendered and sexualised discourses. There may not be one simple explanation, and it is interesting to consider the effect of choosing to deploy each of these gendered and sexualised discourses: each may offer its own route to legitimacy, or may offer to the speaker a justification of why legitimacy and status have not been achieved. Whilst 'good girls', 'wives' and 'domestics' may be considered subservient and thereby powerless but palatable, the 'nanny' discourse might suggest more power for the HR function: as the rescuer, the comforter, the problem solver. There is a suggestion of co-dependency and co-construction implicit in most of them, and one speaker even referred directly to legitimacy resulting from line manager dependency created through HR's 'domestic' role: interestingly, this is the same speaker who suggested that HR can never be strategic because it is *'too busy with transactional and operational issues'*.

Similarly the sexualised discourses of passivity and availability may be contrasted with the ostensibly more manipulative or powerful 'coquettish' or 'dominatrix' repertoires. However, given the inherently relational and dependent dimension of all of the roles, i.e. HR in relation to line management, any power or status conferred might be considered already compromised. All of these discourses suggest that legitimacy is achieved only through line manager approval of HR behaviour, and that those working in the function may be constrained by adopting any of these discursive identities. The talk of some participants suggested a 'false consciousness' around these roles: a belief that whilst some might act as constraining forces in the pursuit of legitimacy and power (good girl; wife; domestic), others might offer genuine status

and influence (nanny, sex worker). N2, for example, talking of a senior female HR manager deemed to be successful by a number of participants suggested:

N2 *S is amazing; she has them (line managers) eating out of the palm of her hand. They think they've come up with the ideas themselves, but only because she's worked so hard to get them to think that way. And ask me which Directorate's personnel team has the best resources?*

Sue *Mm..?*

N2 *Hers, of course.*

'S', for example, a senior female HR manager, is presented positively as shrewd and effective and as possessing the power to manipulate line managers (*'she has them (line managers) eating out of the palm of her hand'*). However, the resources she has secured as a result, the control she has achieved, are conceived as being through her efforts at subtle persuasion through coaxing rather than through deploying unique, expert HR knowledge or skill. One of S's HR management peers observed 'off the record' that the resources she had achieved had been secured through *'corporate whoring'*.

The implication here is that HR's contribution does not stand on its own merits. Professional identity turns on cultivating a positive relationship with line management masters. Legitimacy, credibility, status, are always presented as entirely contingent on line manager approval, and depend on a particular performance from HR incumbents, and alterity implicit in all of the gendered and sexualised repertoires (*wife of; nanny for; sexual services to*). The capacity for HR to garner power relies on the ability of those in the function to play the appropriate (often gendered) role vis-a-vis managers, adopting the appropriate discursive position in order to elicit the endorsement or sanction of line management.

Evidently the subjectivities constructed within the discourses outlined here tend to position those who speak them in a particular way: predominantly as subservient, secondary, always dependent, rarely possessing power, and where that power is discursively wrested, it is a compromised, negatively symbiotic form of power accomplished for example, through scare stories, 'whoring' and sexual passivity. Through their use of these discourses, speakers may be accused of 'playing along'

or 'buying in', and thus of colluding in what is potentially de-legitimising talk, and of reproducing and reinforcing gendered subjectivities. Thomas and Davies (2002a) suggest that while not being determined, the self is regulated, and that gendered subjectivities constitute one of the sources of identity regulation we may encounter as organizational members. Even if we accept that we are (at least in some degree) constrained actors (Talbot, 2010), compelled performers (Butler, 1990; 1997), defined and delimited by discourse, nevertheless as agential selves we have some capacity for discursive resistance. This was only minimally in evidence, and then only in the form of a self-conscious 'working' of the gendered and sexualised discourses in alternative whilst reinforcing ways to the advantage of the speakers. Interestingly, the three roles represented here of emotionally labouring wife, domestic labourer/ nanny and sex worker might be considered a kind of 'triple shift' work repertoire similar to that expressed by Duncombe and Marsden (1995) to account for the gendered nature of women's family/ household role.

We might conclude that the identity work in evidence here may be considered somewhat negative: the gendered and sexualised discourses appear largely unresisted. Speakers appear to reproduce without challenge the very identities which subjugate, denigrate and demean them both as women but particularly as aspiring 'professionals'. Inevitably we might question why speakers might seek to reproduce discourses around their 'professional identity' which downgrade, marginalize and exploit them (Bolton and Muzio, 2008). Perhaps the speakers have learned that the legitimacy which follows from deploying such identity resources, however compromised, may represent the only or optimum route to legitimacy, faced with the potentially futile alternative of articulating discourses which challenge the power of muscular, hegemonic, gendered Discursive forces at large within organizations and beyond.

The preceding three chapters have offered an analysis of participant interviews through the framework of three key 'themes': discourses of HRM, discourses of public sector, and gendered and sexualised discourses. The next chapter discusses these 'findings' in the context of the relevant literature and of the research questions posed at the outset of this thesis.

## **8. Discussion**

### **8.1 Introduction**

The main theme of this research is a consideration of the role and identity of HR practitioners in English local government, with a particular focus on how speakers endeavour to author for themselves a secure and plausible organizational identity. The purpose of this discussion chapter is to draw together findings from the analysis of discourses outlined in the three previous chapters. I am informed by a constructionist perspective on identity, which is that it is fluid, fragmented, multiple and emergent (Pullen and Simpson, 2009), and that conflicts and contradictions will emerge as individuals 'craft' a workable identity situated in their social context (Kondo, 1990; Devine et al, 2011). Dominant discourses will create enticing positions which speakers might take up in the pursuit of legitimacy, or which they may resist, refute, and rewrite as they author identities which seek to challenge hegemonic understandings of the organizational context (Davies and Thomas, 2002; Kornberger and Brown, 2007; Clarke et al, 2009). It is through an examination of the ambiguities, antagonisms and tensions which emerge in talk, and of the ways in which mainstream discourses are deployed and resisted that one might observe the 'doing of identity', the act of identity work in process. It is these ambiguities, antagonisms and tensions which form the cornerstone of this discussion chapter.

I deploy certain terms with some caution, particularly 'significance' and 'findings'. Researching and writing from a constructionist perspective creates a difficulty for the researcher who risks 'essentialising' or making 'truth claims' from what has been constructed through the research process. I use terms such as 'findings' as an understood heuristic from within current research conventions, but with the caveat that they are themselves a construction and therefore open to multiple interpretations and understandings.

The findings of this research as outlined in the three preceding chapters identified how multiple discourses relating both to **HRM** and to **public sector** identities populated speaker talk, and this discussion will consider the significance of these findings with reference to the relevant bodies of literature. What became evident through the analysis was that the issue of securing legitimacy lies at the heart of the discursive efforts of HR speakers articulating their identity. By way of an introduction

to this chapter therefore, and in order to set the context for discussing the key findings of this research, the concept of legitimacy is discussed, particularly in relation to the establishment of the HR function as a profession and as a credible organizational entity. In addition to **HRM** and **public sector repertoires**, I will consider the importance of a third discursive theme which emerged from the analysis and which plays a key role in the constitution of the identity of the HR practitioner and HR function: that of **gender**. It is evident from this research that gendered discourses serve to moderate, mitigate and militate against the successful deployment of numerous other potentially legitimising discourses. Despite its relevance for the identity work of the HR practitioner and the HR function, this important issue has rarely been considered in either academic or practitioner quarters. It is discussed at length at the end of the chapter.

The structure of this chapter is therefore as follows: the question of the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of the HR function is explored, particularly with reference to the professional status of the function. This is followed by a consideration of discursive legitimacy, and of the apparently antagonistic legitimising discourses deployed by the participants in this study. The discussion then considers how legitimising discourses are 'crafted' and interwoven by speakers, with an evaluation of how such discursive 'melding' might constitute identity work for the HR practitioner and profession. Finally the relevance of gender and gendered and sexualised subjectivities for the status and legitimacy of the individual HR practitioner and of the HR function as a whole is discussed.

## **8.2 Legitimising HR?**

As indicated above, there was a clear indication from participants' talk that the pursuit of status, credibility and legitimacy remains an ongoing project for the HR practitioner and for the HR function in local government. This is borne out by the literature, and Ainsworth and Hall (2006) for example suggest that as a field of scholarship and practice, HRM 'appears to be almost constantly in a state of crisis, tension and anxiety' (p. 263). It is therefore appropriate to consider how and why the identity of the function has failed to secure a firm footing, in order to understand the context for the identity work evidently taking place.



### **8.2.1 HR's Identity Crisis: the Ongoing Quest for Legitimacy**

Perhaps the key question which arises from this research is the source of the 'identity crisis' for the HR function which is necessitating the identity work so much called for in both academic and practitioner quarters. An important consideration is whether the HR function will *ever* achieve legitimacy, whatever discursive resources those working within it choose to draw upon. It is almost 60 years since Drucker suggested that 'personnel administrators' (forerunners of the HR function) were engaged in the constant pursuit of a gimmick to achieve status and demonstrate their contribution to organizations (1954). Despite the claims by many in the HR literature that the function has now firmly established itself both in terms of status and of contribution, particularly to 'bottom line' profitability, (e.g. Armstrong, 2007; Shipton and Davis, 2008), much of the practitioner-orientated literature so beloved of 'professional' organizations reinforces the concept of a function still struggling to achieve legitimacy, particularly in the eyes of line management.

What is the evidence that the function is still seeking to achieve professional and organizational legitimacy? There has been a near industry of writers and practitioners seeking to distinguish and distance HRM from PM (see for example Storey, 1992, 1995), with constant calls for HR to 're-imagine', realign, reinvent and transform itself. Chief in this respect is the work of Ulrich and associates, whose work during the past 15 years has been dedicated predominantly to defining and redefining the 'appropriate role' and identity for the HR function, with little consideration of the consequences for those in the function of the identity work demanded. This has been accompanied by a continuing quest for cause and effect 'evidence' that HRM 'adds value' through contributing to organizational performance (Guest, 1987; Huselid, 1995; Delery and Doty, 1996; Guthrie, 2001; Wright and Gardner, 2003; Guest et al, 2004; Boselie et al, 2005; Wall and Wood, 2005; Paauwe, 2009; Guest, 2011)

Closely allied to this, the basis for HR's 'professional' identity is continuously under review with new 'professional' standards regularly re-written and revised by professional bodies such as the CIPD (see for example, the CIPD 'HR Profession map', 2009). Such normative prescriptions for the role and identity of the function have entailed a call to those in the function to articulate the discourses of

management and strategy, or of other 'professional' groups, through, for example, the appropriation of engineering, logistics and marketing 'tools' (Boudreau, 2010). Such calls serve to undermine the legitimacy of what might be considered HRM's own tradition. HR has been exhorted to distance itself from the 'pedestrian' concerns of day-to-day line management support, operations and administration, and HR functional expertise, in favour of articulating the 'value' of the function through HRM 'metrics' (Tootell et al, 2009), and drawing on terms borrowed from the accountancy profession of 'ROI', 'added value' and 'bottom line contribution' (Ulrich and Smallwood, 2005; see Pfeffer, 1997 for a discussion of the dangers of this trend). The message is clear: only if HR's role and activities can be articulated through accountancy or other logic will it shake off its marginalised, peripheral status. Legitimacy and value for the function will not be conferred on HR's own terms.<sup>2</sup>

This phenomenon is reminiscent of Legge's (1978) conformist innovator role: the HR practitioner 'talks the language of the business' (a phrase repeated numerous times in the CIPD's latest 'professional standards' as a desirable behaviour), defining HR professionalism in terms of 'acquiring expertise that will enable him (sic) to demonstrate a closer relationship between his (sic) activities and organizational success criteria' (p.79). This orientation for the function has certainly dominated the literature and remains the 'holy grail' of the 'professional' HR practitioner: to demonstrate that HR is a means to a 'business end' (Wain, 2010). Legge contrasted this role with the 'deviant innovator' identity, whereby the HR practitioner might resist calls to 'fall in line' with dominant managerial discourses, through 'gaining acceptance for a different set of criteria for the evaluation of organizational success and his (sic) contribution to it (Legge, 1978, p. 85). Whilst a number of voices have promoted this 'deviant' identity for the function, notably Keenoy (1999), Delbridge and Keenoy (2010) Janssens and Steyaert (2009), it seems that calls for resistance through 'deviance' have largely fallen by the wayside, thus consigning the HR profession to a state of dependence, with approval contingent on managerial conferral of status and resources. Thus the function remains in thrall to line

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<sup>2</sup> *It is significant to ponder whether 'professionalism' for other occupational groupings might be prescribed in terms of talking language OTHER than the vocabulary and rhetoric traditionally associated with the operation of that profession. Are engineers, for example, encouraged to use HR talk to legitimise their role and functions?*

management, and constantly at pains to establish and maintain legitimacy from the line.

Additionally, the function is under threat of marginalisation, disempowerment or outright abolition in a number of guises. Participants in this research talked of the impending HR 'transformation' on the lines of the 'three-legged stool' model associated with the work of Dave Ulrich, where centralised, standardised HR 'shared services' feature significantly. Such standardised and 'off the shelf' HR services, often delivered through 'self-serve' interactive technology or software solutions are recommended to replace a disposable, 'back office' HR, and shared service HR functions are prescribed as 'best practice' in the pursuit of 'efficiency' (e.g. Gershon, 2004); here the value of what HR have traditionally delivered is reduced to an automated service signalling the low worth attributed to any value previously added by the individual HR practitioner. HR practitioners, keen to embrace 'transformation' and to appear pro-change are apparently encouraged to collude in these and other strategies for divesting themselves of their traditional role and any claims to legitimacy which might follow from it: as one of the interviewees here indicated, 'like turkeys signing up for Christmas'.

One of the other roles which features in the 'three-legged stool' model of HR is that of the 'business partner', working closely with line management, often in the delivery of 'strategic' solutions. Successful acceptance as a profession legally establishes the occupation's autonomy and protects it from competition (Freidson 1970: xvii). Wright (2008) has identified that this role is increasingly populated with people from non-HR backgrounds, rendering the occupational boundaries of entry to the HR 'profession' porous. This phenomenon creates a form of internal competition, whereby those from a 'business' background are favoured over HR specialists who may possess 'HR' (rather than business) knowledge, experience and qualifications (see also Kersley et al, 2006). Indeed, in this study, one of the HR directors was due to be replaced by a new incumbent from an accountancy background, a move welcomed by many in her new team who anticipated greater legitimacy accruing to the function as a result. Similarly the devolution of traditional HR activities to line management which has been advocated represents a threat to the function: it is difficult to imagine another 'profession' seeking to 'give away' its exclusive knowledge base so readily

through 'devolution' of its activities to line management: a form of external competition. Abbott and Wallace (1990) suggested that a particular knowledge base and a clearly defined monopoly over a particular area of work constitute the hallmarks of a 'profession'. Yet the rightness of this strategy of 'devolution to the line' is rarely challenged; it is deemed axiomatic that line managers rather than the HR function should have responsibility for recruitment, selection, appraisal, performance management, discipline and a host of other activities traditionally associated with the personnel department. Interestingly, an HR function which engages in such activities is denigrated as low status, administrative, operational and not 'value-adding' (in contrast to a function which focuses on 'strategic' concerns). Yet such activities in the hands of management are legitimate and commendable, as management can be trusted to deliver them with the appropriate orientation. Apparently HR cannot be trusted in the same way.

Similarly, the threat of outsourcing reduces the activities of the function to a secondary service: not germane to the activities of the organization, disposable, expendable and replicable. Current organizational trends suggest that it is more 'cost-effective' to replace the HR 'servicing' function with an HR 'self-serve' software or intranet service, thereby denigrating the knowledge or insight which might be added to the 'transactional' elements of HR's activities by an experienced or qualified HR specialist. No wonder then that a profession which seeks to 'devolve' its traditional 'bread and butter' activities to line management, which allows 'non-professionals' to join its ranks in senior roles, and which replaces the services it traditionally offers with an online service is cast as experiencing a crisis of legitimacy. Despite attempts to 'professionalise', occupational closure is looking less rather than more likely for the function, which may explain why HR continues to experience trouble in mounting professional legitimacy claims.

Add to this the particular features of the local authority context, where, in common with other public sector environments, the HR function has historically lacked credibility, compared with other more powerful groups vying for resources (Corby and Higham 1996; Lupton and Shaw 2001; Horton 2003; Truss, 2008), and particularly when pitted against the rhetoric of valuing and prioritising 'front line' resourcing ahead of a denigrated 'back office' which includes the HR function (Seifert and Mather, 2010). NPM may present an opportunity for HRM (and HR

practitioners) to find an ontological space (Mueller and Carter, 2005) where they might finally achieve legitimacy and status, if those who practice it both choose to and are able to ally the discourses of public sector reform to the goals and orientations of HRM, thereby configuring HRM as 'a controlling and disciplining labour management device' that is integral to the delivery of the NPM agenda (Worrall et al, 2010, p.130). Alternatively, unless HR functions can mobilise discourses which enable them to gain and maintain control over ever scarcer resources, which they have singularly failed to do in the local authority context, they will find themselves further marginalised and peripheral. Indeed, far from benefiting from the advent of managerialist discourses associated with the rhetoric of neo-liberalism which accompanies NPM efforts, the power and status of personnel practitioners might be diminished as a focus on 'cost control' rewrites the HR function as an overhead to be reduced or eliminated, (Oswick and Grant, 1996) an outcome signalled by successive government 'efficiency' imperatives and the Gershon Review of Public Sector Efficiency (2004), in particular.

Thus the position of the HR function in local government and beyond is at best precarious, and at worst at serious threat poised on the horns of the dilemma of how to marshal legitimacy-garnering discourses from a position of weakness and marginalisation.

Having revisited the context of the research, the next section outlines the discursive strategies adopted by the participants in this research in pursuit of legitimacy.

### **8.2.2 How do you want me? Discourse, Identity and Legitimacy**

A discursive perspective on legitimacy suggests a clear link between legitimacy, discourse and identity. Particular discourses can be deployed in an attempt to establish legitimate identities, and discursive transformations in organizations which follow from, for example, policy 'reform', offer opportunities for crafting newly legitimate identities (Motion and Leitch, 2009) to individuals (and the functions to whom they belong) if they are able to successfully mobilise those discourses. Through drawing on appropriate discourses, 'legitimacy-appreciating identities' might be constructed (Brown, 2001). This perspective offers an understanding of how

individuals faced with an array of potential discursive choices may need to actively identify and select those which offer the greatest promise of legitimacy.<sup>3</sup>

Arguably those working in the local government HR function have faced some simple choices in identifying the discursive path to legitimacy: to opt for a managerialist and commercialised discourse espousing efficiency and performance outputs, and to jettison the discursive trappings of old public administration and personnel management. Davies and Thomas (2002) suggest that the public sector has seen a reduction in professional autonomy by the imposition of managerial controls, with professionals expected to adopt managerial values and to align themselves with managerial concerns. It is potentially opportune for the HR function to do so given HRM's concern for 'adding value' on management's terms.

Legitimacy might therefore be garnered through articulating the dominant discourses, and thus a newly legitimate reformed, modernised, strategic HRM identity might be forged. Yet there was clear evidence of a range of discourses in use by participants, which suggests that speakers may make alternative evaluations of which discourses will confer legitimacy. Before exploring those alternative evaluations, the next section considers how different versions or understandings of legitimacy might arise.

### **8.2.3 Navigating discursive routes to legitimacy**

There has been a tendency in some literature to consider legitimacy as a self-evident phenomenon without considering the processual dimension or the power dynamics which mediate the legitimation of particular discourses. Legitimacy may be considered as an outcome, the successful attainment of secure status or merit, or as a discursive social process which occurs in interaction at the relational level.

Johnson et al (2006) describe legitimacy as 'the construal of a social object (*which may be an individual group, department or organization*) as consistent with cultural beliefs, norms and values that are presumed to be shared by others in the local

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<sup>3</sup> *This perspective suggests that actors have agency in selecting and deploying discourses to consciously construct identities which will secure the clearest route to legitimacy. It may fail to acknowledge the power relations which underpin and are underpinned by 'muscular' discourses which achieve dominance (if not complete closure), which function to structure meaning and subjectivity, and whereby 'subjectivity is itself an effect of discourse' (Weedon, 1987, p. 86). Such an example is the grand or meta-'Discourse' of gender which is explored in more detail later in this chapter.*

situation and perhaps more broadly by actors in a broader community' (p. 57) (e.g. the wider organization; the 'professional' body; society at large). The fundamental assumption of this perspective is that legitimacy is socially constructed, and that this construction will inevitably be processual, and achieved through discourse.

Considering legitimacy as processual enables a more nuanced appreciation of different types of legitimacy and the discursive bases on which they may be founded. For example, legitimacy may be considered in terms of pragmatism, based on the serving of interests; it may be constructed in terms of morality, based on what is normatively projected as 'right' or virtuous; it may draw on regulatory discourses, through claiming authority and control over a particular context; or it may be constructed in terms of cognitive, taken-for-granted notions of validity (Suchman, 1995; Scott, 1995).

For discourses to be legitimacy-conferring, they must therefore already have achieved some level of acceptance or status in order to attain dominance or desirability, usually drawing on one or more of these discursive foundations. Hirschhorn (2006) stresses the need for 'professional' knowledge and legitimacy claims to be articulated in a manner which reflects, is consistent with and simultaneously constitutes the political, economic, cultural and social context in which it is located. This may be through, for example, appealing to pragmatism, i.e. what works or what leads to resource allocation; through moral appeal, i.e. what is right and ethical; or through cognitive appeal, drawing on consensus from the majority, from other, well-established discourses or from societal maxims and norms (see Phillips et al, 2004; Suchman, 1995; Deephouse and Suchman, 2008, Johnson et al, 2006). For speakers seeking to establish 'legitimate' selves, the discourses on which they draw in the construction of their identities may similarly promise the conferral different types of legitimacy.

In this research, as indicated in the previous analysis chapters, participants drew on a range of discourses making varied legitimacy claims, and the following section considers both these claims and the identity work done for both individual practitioners and for the HR function itself through drawing on each of these legitimacy claims. The discursive repertoires deployed are considered as follows:

pragmatic legitimacy, regulatory legitimacy, moral legitimacy, and cognitive legitimacy.

### *'Pragmatic' legitimacy*

Firstly, pragmatic legitimacy was claimed by numerous participants through a refutation of 'strategic' concerns which were dismissed as not being grounded in reality, or too abstract and academic; or through tempering strategic preoccupations through focusing on the solution of difficult day-to-day problems, of fire-fighting, hand-holding and 'rescuing' line management from difficult situations. Through such legitimacy claims, speakers are able to author realistic, practical identities, and to claim both 'moral' and 'added-value' terrain through focusing on the delivery of workable organizational solutions and safe, satisfactory outcomes for all. This position is often claimed as a response to line manager incompetence, inability or reluctance to deal with employees in a 'businesslike' way, and as a means of protecting the organization from exposure to the consequences of poor management. This constitutes a direct challenge to the notion of the line as performance orientated and HR as naive and un-businesslike. The HR practitioner is authored as a competent, practical self with valuable 'procedural credentials' not available elsewhere in the organization (and certainly lacking in line management), particularly in relation to the handling of employees. The HR function is identified as legitimate through providing essential day-to-day support which enables the organization to function smoothly through averting trouble or disaster, and through enabling management to navigate employee difficulties with the minimum of disruption. As a basis for professional legitimacy the work of the function is rewritten as providing an invaluable service: problem- and solution- focused, realistic, relevant and grounded in day-to-day 'business' issues rather than in the vagaries of 'strategy'. This discourse clearly refutes the 'devolution' demands, as well as challenging the notion that the function can only achieve legitimacy if it concerns itself with strategic matters. The denigrated operational role of HR thus becomes the means by which it might be valued.

### *'Regulatory' legitimacy*

Closely allied to this pragmatic basis for legitimacy claims is the repertoire of regulatory legitimacy. This kind of legitimacy terrain was claimed through talk of



upholding statutory responsibilities specific to the public sector/local government context; ensuring legislative compliance in the management of the employment relationship; guaranteeing consultation with stakeholders (employees, trade unions) and in the forming and implementation of HR policies; of safeguarding public standards of integrity and probity (old speak) or efficiency and cost-effectiveness (new speak) in respect to the management of 'taxpayers money'; and of adhering to and championing public policy and government initiatives. Through such talk, speakers position themselves as neutral, apolitical and objective, working as detached 'professionals', concerned only to secure regulatory and policy compliance or to uphold the bureaucratic principles of the organization. Thus individual practitioners might be seen as detached, professional and trustworthy, whilst the HR function might claim an indispensable and significant regulatory authority and role, similar to the regulatory and legislative legitimacy conferred on, for example, the accountancy function. Professional legitimacy is claimed through independence from the day-to-day political and partisan concerns of line management, and through an appeal to extra-organizational meta-concerns and principles.

### *'Moral' legitimacy*

Thirdly, moral legitimacy was claimed through articulating a concern for employee welfare, balanced judgments, fairness and justice, and for ensuring ethical behaviour by managers in their management of the employment relationship, thus closely identifying HR practitioners and the HR function with virtue. Additionally, moral legitimacy was articulated through claims to protect and preserve the PSE tradition and democracy, and through positioning the HR function as defenders of organizational reputation, protecting it from public and media opprobrium. Thus HR practitioners are identified as moral and ethical, and work to reconcile the interests of multiple and diverse stakeholders rather than narrowly serving the interests of line management alone. Their concern is for more edifying, superior and virtuous outcomes than mere short-term efficiencies, exhortations to entrepreneurialism or the serving of managerial prerogative, and as a minimum they will temper the worst organizational excesses through appeal to such 'worthier' logics. The HR function is positioned as organizational conscience, keeper of ethical standards and defender of cultural and ethical norms and traditions, upholding principles by which the public sector should operate, and resisting narrow managerialist 'reforms' which might

damage the long-term integrity of the organization. Professional legitimacy is thus predicated on independence, a concern for higher principles, on defending the ethical terrain whilst retaining an awareness of the traditional and historical imperatives which underpin the management of the employment relationship in the public sector.

#### *'Cognitive' legitimacy*<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, the final basis for claiming legitimacy, the cognitive route, was claimed through recourse to discourses of 'business', strategy and management. This included an ability to identify what is rational, right and valid, particularly in terms of 'reform' and performance, and to draw on repertoires of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, the 'logical' options for the public sector. Such talk positioned HR as offering 'strategic', pro-change inputs, promises of added-value and a pro-'business' and pro-managerial orientation. Thus close links are forged between HRM and performance, contribution and added value, so that the activities of the former might become clearly associated with the latter. This included the rewriting of existing HR activities and concerns, including day to day operational activity and concerns for fairness and ethic as strategic. Thus 'added value' is re-defined in terms more favourable to HR, re-casting marginalised and denigrated HR activities as business in order to validate and legitimise such concerns. Not surprisingly, given the dominance of this theme in the HRM literature, this form of legitimacy was claimed as the current or aspirational HR identity by many speakers, with a self-conscious awareness of the need to appropriate this discourse in order for the function to be at least palatable to management. Such talk establishes the legitimacy of the HR practitioner as strategic, rational, business-minded and managerial, attuned to the 'realities' of the public sector reform landscape, rejecting the negative labels which have been attached to them in the past as naive, transactional or administrative. Rather than risking organizational marginalisation, the HR function is identified as a valued and legitimate partner in the public sector 'reform' endeavour, understanding the necessity and the validity of the change imperative, advocating change, able to

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<sup>4</sup> I reiterate my understanding of 'cognitive' legitimacy not as possessing any inherent sense or rightness, but as a dominant 'logical' choice, offered as the 'rational' route through taken for granted maxims and normative prescriptions

lead and contribute to shaping the future success of the organization, and delivering results which are desirable to management.

Professionalism is thus claimed through alignment with managerial goals through contribution to organizational performance, and through a pro-change orientation. In this respect, professional legitimacy is established by the HR function only when it espouses managerial priorities and when what might be considered as its own concerns are repackaged as business.

#### **8.2.4 'Crafting' Legitimate Selves**

The important question at this juncture is which of these repertoires is most likely to confer legitimacy on the function, at what cost and with what potential consequences, and why, if there are some which apparently offer a greater opportunity for doing so, the HR practitioners in this study nevertheless still chose to deploy others.

In considering how the HR function achieves power and organizational legitimacy, Galang and Ferris (1997) suggested that a useful tactic might be to engage in impression management through the straightforward espousal of managerial values. Discourses of both HRM and NPM demand the 'cognitive' repertoire, with the 'value proposition' exhorted for HR casting the function in a secondary, support role, focused on supporting the achievement of others' (chiefly managers' and investors') goals (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). As early as 1993, Klingner claimed that strategic HRM had instituted a change to the traditional role of HR in the public sector (albeit in the USA). This shift signalled a move away from the difficult balancing of organizational and governmental pressures for efficiency and responsiveness with individual rights and social equity, towards a role much more clearly focused on cost and accountability<sup>5</sup>. The suggestion here is that the HR function has sloughed off its old identity and emerged as a fully formed 'strategic' partner. Thus we might expect HR specialists to define their identity by means of the cognitive repertoire: indeed, this route to legitimacy might be considered an instrumental and pragmatic one, given its dominance as the defining discourse of public sector reform, and the route therefore most likely to lead to status and to resource allocation. As the public sector

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note this narrow conception of 'strategic HRM' where cost takes precedence over performance or contribution

is exhorted to define itself more in terms of managerial and commercial discourses, as outlined above, the 'cognitive' route 'makes sense' as the best chance for the function to achieve legitimacy. Some have talked of the inevitability, for example, of the strategic identity for HR in the absence of a viable alternative (Jacoby, 2003; Rynes, 2004).

However, as outlined above, this research has identified that HR specialists in local government appropriated a range of other repertoires to capture the identity of the HR practitioner and function. This is by no means the first study to suggest that the 'cognitive' legitimacy repertoire based on strategic, managerialist, business and reform alignment has not achieved discursive closure in respect of public sector HR practitioners. Other writers have suggested for example that the migration away from 'old' preoccupations associated with the model employer status of the sector might have been somewhat exaggerated given the ongoing concern of HR practitioners for worker welfare and ethical practice in the management of the employment relationship (e.g. Harris, 2002, 2005, 2007; Harris et al, 2004; Jaconelli and Sheffield, 2000; Teo and Crawford, 2005). Yet this is to reinforce a polarised and somewhat deterministic view of the role of the HR specialist as EITHER strategically and business aligned, OR as concerned exclusively with welfare and ethical practice.

This was not evident in this study. Speakers did not simply adopt one discourse (either strategic/pro-reform or welfare-/operations-focused) and then rely on it solely as a means of constructing identity. The findings of this research suggest that this simple discursive alignment is far from evident, and that the HR practitioners who participated here are actively engaged in the discursive 'crafting' of a more 'melded' identity. Potentially 'antagonistic' and 'incommensurable' discourses (Clarke et al, 2009; Iedema et al, 2004) are juxtaposed, interwoven and apparently unproblematically crafted into a workable identity.

Participants did not author entirely consistent or cohesive accounts of their identity, and slipped readily between multiple discourses and variable positions to articulate their role and orientations. The interesting finding here is not the phenomenon of this within-speaker heteroglossia, which has been documented elsewhere: the more surprising feature is the extent to which the apparently conflicting and discursively dichotomous was talked into a plausible, workable script or narrative by speakers

caught between 'old' and 'new' discursive regimes. Whilst some speakers positioned themselves firmly within one or another discourse, many more adopted a fluid 'discourse spanning' script, where old and new discourses were talked into an apparently unproblematic co-existence, and speakers slipped comfortably and unself-consciously between them. For example, notions of public service and public sector ethos were readily juxtaposed and integrated with talk with of 'reform' and of 'transformation'. Whilst much of the literature on the public sector is characterised by polarised positions and the mutual exclusivity of OPA and NPM, these discourses are blended, merged and reconciled by those working in the environment. The antithetical narratives which abound in the literature of the 'traditional' versus the 'modernised' public sector offer rather simplified 'pro' or 'anti' positions. The discursive enactment of those narratives by the workers in this study, however, suggests a far less clear cut taking up of positions which might be adopted than those narratives suggest. Speakers both praised and criticised the 'ancien regime' in their talk; they simultaneously embraced and rejected 'transformational' change programmes; most interestingly they appropriated and deployed elements of antagonistic discourses. For example, they drew on discursive resources of employee welfare and wellbeing associated with TPM, whilst apparently championing talk of 'adding value to the bottom line', 'achieving a return on the people investment' and contributing proactively to strategic performance, all repertoires associated with the rhetoric of HRM.

Interestingly, the findings from this study clearly suggest that a simple distinction between 'old' and 'new' discourses does not sufficiently represent how speakers talk. What may have been considered 'old' talk is rewritten, reconfigured, redeployed as new. For example, 'old' concerns for the bureaucratic principle of consistency was rearticulated as an efficiency measure; 'welfare' was rewritten as 'ethics'; and 'ethical' and 'fairness' concerns were rewritten as a concern for organizational ethos and employment relationship climate, and thus a conduit to and proxy for performance.

What is evident is that on the questions of both people management orientation and public sector reform, local government HR specialists are apparently engaging in a kind of discursive pragmatism, whereby they align themselves neither to one

discursive position nor the alternative extreme as characterised by much of the literature, but draw interchangeably on apparently opposing discourses. Additionally, they rewrite and rearticulate traditional concerns and practices through the means of appropriating aspects of newer discourses thus legitimising 'old' through 'new'. Thus ostensibly antagonistic and irreconcilable discourses are crafted into a workable narrative regardless of the potentially conflicting ideological positions which might underpin those discourses.

Whilst not wishing to 'essentialise' the discursive choices of the participants in this study, the next section seeks to explore the nature of the identity work accomplished through the practice of drawing on multiple and antagonistic discourses to forge 'melded' identities.

### **8.2.5 Identity work: Workable Identities**

Some authors have alluded in a deterministic way to the influence of the changing public sector context on the possibilities for identity construction of the HR practitioner. Truss (2008) for example suggests that rather than sweeping away the 'traditional' HR identity, new roles and responsibilities have been 'grafted on' to traditional HR roles and functions as the tensions and ambiguities of the public sector context are more complex than those in the private sector.

I prefer to adopt a less essentialist view by suggesting that multiple discourses co-exist, are melded, rewritten, resisted and crafted into new, workable, pragmatic hybrid forms. To assume this position enables the acknowledgement of speaker agency, albeit within the limitations of existing discourses. This section aims to consider what identity work gets done when speakers choose to deploy particular discursive repertoires in articulating the nature of their role as local authority HR practitioners.

#### *Crafting Elastic Selves: Straddling the Strategic*

As indicated previously, the cognitive legitimacy or strategic discourse route holds a seductive appeal as a means of furthering the professionalization project of the HR function-indeed, some writers have equated a 'strategic' identity with a professional one (e.g. Truss, 2008). However, given the need for those claiming this identity to

reconstruct their subjectivities in line with managerial requirements, following such a route might suggest that HR has sacrificed any notion of professional independence, moral credentials or ethical custodianship on the opportunistic way to managerialist legitimacy. This might seem less seductive for a function which has previously concerned itself with 'model employer' status. Equally, this route does potentially spell the demise of the 'professional project' if we consider autonomy, control over one's own work and ownership of a particular body of knowledge to be the sine qua non of professional identity (Abbott, 1988). Allegiance to discourses of managerial prerogative, of organizational performance, and of efficiency, suggest a function which is 'in thrall' to line management, and which may only act as a cipher for the demands of management, with no independent status or merit. Thus those who choose to articulate this repertoire may risk the uncomfortable promise of legitimacy at the expense of jettisoning previously cherished identities associated with ensuring fairness, consistency and other bureaucratic principles. Whilst speakers retain a concern for authoring a moral or ethical identity (as 'ideal' or 'aspirational' selves – Wieland, 2010; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009) they may be less keen to unequivocally embrace this repertoire. Thus melding 'ethical' talk with 'strategic' or 'business' talk may enable speakers to temper the worst excesses of managerialism and unitarism, but also to position themselves as embracing both tradition AND reform, or to locate themselves as pro-reform but anti-managerialism. Additionally, whilst 'old' concerns associated with a PSE are retained alongside an engagement with 'transformation' talk speakers are able to engage to some degree in a discursive existential continuity of self (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002): retaining valued 'old' identities whilst reimagining a legitimate 'pro-change' orientation.

#### *Articulating volition: Resisting compliance*

Similarly, speakers have a vested interest in articulating an element of agency: of authoring autonomous, agential selves, rather than appearing to be determined and defined through dominant discourses, particularly where that discourse marginalises the speaker. Thus we find HR speakers resorting to discourses which indicate scepticism or mistrust of dominant discourses, or which enable them to claim superiority premised on pragmatic, moral or regulatory legitimacy. The appeal to alternative discourses marks the speaker as knowledgeable and insightful, independent and self-determining, hallmarks of a 'professional' identity. Hegemonic

formations are thereby resisted, enabling the construction of superior and autonomous selves, discursively distanced from identities which construct them as secondary, servile or peripheral. Yet for a function which traditionally has no independence it is a dangerous strategy to discursively distance itself too far from all sources of power and legitimacy conferral and risk further marginalisation, particularly at a time when easy 'efficiency savings' are being sought! It therefore remains in the interests of the function to construct an identity which emphasizes how it serves business, organizational, sectoral, public policy or societal interests.

### *Feeling Their Way or Hedging Bets?*

A 'discursive bridging' of old and new talk and melded repertoires might be considered an inevitable and unconscious phenomenon during a period of transition when discursive regimes vie for supremacy. Against the backdrop of the 'discursive shifts' which characterise the public sector context, speakers who draw on antagonistic discourses may be subject to a lack of ontological certainty about the 'desired' identity of the function. Thus the phenomenon of 'melding' may articulate the difficulty of transition from old, taken for granted and reified discourses of public sector and public sector HR identity (where closure was almost complete) to new, constantly shifting, discursive formations which have yet to take hold. The weaving of repertoires may signal a process of shifting from one Discourse to another, of speakers 'feeling their way' through discourse to a new identity.

Alternatively, Green et al (2011) suggest that speakers may be 'sceptically strategic' in their appropriation of particular discourses. Thus a lack of certainty about which route will offer greatest legitimacy to the HR function (pragmatic, regulatory, cognitive or moral) may lead to speakers engaging in a form of discursively 'hedged bets': 'blended' talk may represent a deliberate choice on the part of workers who seek to retain a 'foot in both (or many) camps', to align themselves to multiple potentially legitimising positions, to be simultaneously pro and anti multiple and antagonistic discourses as a self-conscious survival strategy.

### *Naive dupes?*

Finally, a more negative view may cast the disempowered and marginalised HR function as permanently liminal and peripheral, continually seeking to be allowed to sit at the top table, but simply failing to grasp that the safest route there lies in



alignment to the 'cognitive' pro-strategy, pro-reform, pro-business repertoire. Thus 'melded' talk simply represents a form of discursive naivety or 'learned helplessness', whereby speakers have no concept that their discursive choices may further marginalise and disempower them. Simply expressed, HR practitioners do not know that they may be 'written off' through their lack of engagement with 'appropriate' talk.

Interestingly, as already indicated, each of these discursive strategies raises questions over the *agency* of HR practitioners in the processes of constructing and positioning a legitimate professional and organizational identity for themselves and for the HR function. However, just as identity work may be demanded by discursive shifts, it may also be constrained by discursive formations where agency is restricted by, for example, grand Discourses of gender(ed) identity. The final section of this chapter considers how gendered and sexualised subjectivities may constrain the identity-constructing endeavours of HR practitioners in their attempts to craft legitimate organizational selves and a legitimised, 'professional' HR function.

### **8.3 Gendered and Sexualised Identities**

#### **8.3.1 Introduction**

Although not anticipated before undertaking the research, given the prevalence of gendered and sexualised discourses deployed by the participants in this research in articulating their role (and outlined in the preceding analysis chapter), it is essential to consider how these discourses act to position and identify the HR function and its members. Ridgeway (1997, 2001) suggests that gendered processes in organizations produce and reproduce gender stereotypes which may modify the performance of other identities. The purpose of this final section is therefore to consider how stereotyped gendered (and sexualised) discursive formations of HR practitioner and HR function identities act in informing, modifying and militating against the identity work undertaken by those practitioners.

It should, perhaps, have been evident to me as a researcher that gender might feature in the talk of participants given the (continued) unusually high numerical representation both of women in the HR function and of female participants in this research: 75% of HR managers are female according to WERS 2004 (Kersley et al,

2006) and 40 of the 47 interviewees in this study were women. Yet the 'unknowing' and 'automatic' gendering of the function and of the roles and identities of those working in it was invisible to me until I undertook this research and particularly the analysis of participants' talk. The processual and invisible nature of 'doing gender' makes it difficult to observe and study (Martin, 2001, p. 590). This is particularly significant in terms of justifying a discourse analytic approach: drawing attention to otherwise unacknowledged, 'recondite and abstruse' (Martin, 2001, p. 588) gendered and gendering processes in organizations. The analysis of representations of micro-activities of everyday life and the micro-processes of power which reflect socially constructed image of maleness and femaleness and specify power relations among them (Gherardi and Poggio, 2001, p. 248) can act as starting point for understanding both organizational and societal gendered relations (Martin, 2001, p. 593). Thus analysis of participant talk reveals how they as organizational actors produce interpretations and attribute meanings to gender relationships, and how those meanings and interpretations give rise to gendered and sexualised relations and interactions. Examining the discursive practices of organizational actors enables an insight into the discursive processes which constitute and enact gendered subjectivities. It also enables an analysis of how the gender(ed) organizational order is reproduced in a way which marginalises HR, and positions its members and the function itself as peripheral through gendered and sexualised discourses. In the next section of this discussion, I develop more fully my constructionist-informed understanding of the 'performance' of gender and its effects in organizations.

### **8.3.2 Organizations as Sites of Gender(ed) Construction and Gender(ed) Relations**

A constructionist perspective on gender suggests that we are all continuously involved in the work of 'doing gender' (Martin, 2001; Ehrlich, 2006), particularly through the use of discursive resources available to us. It is 'socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility' (Butler, 1999 p. 23) which regulate 'gendered' subjects and define the appropriate linguistic resources by which people might constitute and articulate their identity. The social is constructed in and through discourse, and it is the discursive social world which gives rise to our gendered

subject positions (Ormrod, 1995). Gendered discourses construct positions and set up a series of social obligations and expectations (Gherardi, 1996) and individuals produce themselves as gendered by habitually engaging in certain discursive practices that are linked to contextually determined, cultural understandings of gender (Ehrlich, 2006), although the 'doing of gender' is routine, pervasive and nearly invisible (Martin, 2001, p. 588). This doing of gender extends to the organizational context, where gendered identities are constructed and reproduced through day-to-day and routine social interaction in organizations. Thus the performance of gender is rooted in the process of reciprocal positioning whereby gender identities are relationally produced and reproduced (Poggio, 2006), identities which in turn produce and are reproduced by the 'gender regime' (Connell, 2006) as a 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980) in organizations.

Yet the continual performance and enactment of gender in organizations may be, as in society at large, pervasive, routine, taken for granted and unreflexive (Ridgeway, 1997; Martin, 2006). Pullen and Knights (2007) describe organizations as scenes of constraint where gender often passes unnoticed, 'denied or disavowed partly because it is 'done' routinely and repeatedly unknowingly and with a degree of automaticity that conceals its precariousness and performativity' (p.505). Men and women engage on a continuous basis in acts of categorizing social encounters in terms of gender identity (Fournier and Kelemen, 2001). Thus an individual, group or function may be knowingly or unknowingly constructed as gendered through everyday interactions and discourse with other organizational members, who may nevertheless claim and believe that they are acting in gender-free ways (Martin, 2001). Thus organizational (and societal) discourses construct gendered subjectivities and gendered subjects, who accomplish their identity construction through the consumption and redeployment of dominant gendered discourses. Although resistance and subversion of those discourses may be possible, it may be difficult to enact in the context of organizational 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 1987; Due Billing and Alvesson, 2000) and the 'patriarchal power paradigm' which exists in organizational life (Ledwith and Colgan, 1996).

Gender regimes establish taken for granted rules and rituals by which gender is 'done' (Gherardi and Poggio, 2001) and which may be instantiated through talk and

interaction (Heracleous, 2006). However, due to the 'taken for granted' nature of those practices, they may only be revealed through subjecting the discursive practices of organizational actors to close analysis. The value of undertaking this form of scrutiny enables the observation of gendering processes in action: gender may be revealed as discursively constructed and performed through 'disciplinary' discourses which regulate speaker talk and limit possibilities for action. This phenomenon was clearly identified in this research, which therefore offers a further contribution to the body of literature on the discursive and social construction and performance of gender. As previously outlined, a range of gendered and sexualised discourses were deployed in the construction of HR practitioner identity and the identity of the HR function, although rarely in a self-conscious way. These discourses were overwhelmingly grounded in 'relational' talk, i.e. in constructing the nature of the relationship between HR and line management, with those in the function constructed as serving or servicing line managers in a range of discursive guises. The analysis here has therefore drawn attention to the invisibility of gendered and sexualised subjectivities which are enacted through everyday interactions with line management, and which serve to construct the identity of the HR function. However, what is particularly important is the ways in which those gendered subjectivities construct the HR function as marginal, peripheral and inferior. There are evidently material consequences which arise from these gendered constructions for the HR function and for its practitioners (and for organizations too) and these are considered in more detail below.

### **8.3.3 Men at Work: Valuing Masculinity, Marginalising Femininity**

One of the key issues identified in this study which has already been discussed is the pursuit of legitimacy by HR practitioners both for themselves and for the HR function, and the range of discursive strategies employed in their endeavours. The issue of speaker agency has already been considered, and whilst I would not wish to suggest that speakers are entirely passive, powerless and docile, I wish to re-emphasize the disciplinary power of 'muscular' discourses which achieve dominance (if not complete closure), and which function hegemonically to structure meaning and subjectivity. Gender constitutes one such discourse, whereby subjectivity is an effect of discourse (Weedon, 1987, p. 86). As Davies and Thomas (2002) point out, gender

identities are robust, and the self is regulated through discourse and disciplinary practices which constitute gender differences and gendered subjects. The functioning of gender discourse in defining and delimiting men and women's work, power, legitimacy and identities through 'masculinities and femininities' is therefore of importance here.

Gendered organizational processes and discourses (which reflect wider societal Discourses) typically construct maleness and femaleness as opposites and attribute different roles, skills, behaviour, places and relative status to each group (Ridgeway 2001, Gherardi and Poggio, 2001). In this way, the organizational context constructs subjectivities by which 'men's work' continues to be valued over the work of women (Broadbridge and Hearn, 2008). This includes for example attributing valuable and valued managerial roles, skills and identities to men, and more substitutable, less valued domestic and servicing skills and identities to women. Davies and Thomas (2002) suggest that the modern organization is a discursive arena that privileges images of masculinity and champions the masculine over the feminine, requiring organizational members, managers and groups to perform to these dominant masculine scripts if they wish to be successful.

In considering masculinity and its association with 'legitimised' identity, I do not seek to subscribe to 'dualistic gender essentialism' (Kerfoot, 2002, p. 83), or to the notion of gender(ed) identity as a property of individuals. Instead I draw here on a Butlerian conception of masculinity as an *enactment* of gender identity, performed and constituted in inter-subjective dynamics. Masculinity and femininity are considered here not as representations of binary gender divisions but as fluid and shifting constructions which are reproduced through discourse (Collinson and Hearn, 1994; 1996) and 'linguistic choices' (Ehrlich, 2006, p.304). In this respect, masculinities (and femininities) may be considered as practices, or discourses, that are interpreted as masculine (or feminine) by actors or observers within an existing system of gender relations. Those discourses may be labelled as masculine because of who the speaker is, how they choose to articulate, and the nature of the social context within which the articulation occurs, (Martin, 2001, p. 588). Masculine is not therefore associated exclusively with male speakers, although the performance of 'masculine'

discourses may be more palatable by men than by women, an issue discussed in more detail below.

What constitutes the masculine has become associated with power, control, rationality, measurement, objectivity, competition, sexualisation and the domination of women, (Kerfoot and Knights, 1993; Martin, 2001; Fournier and Kelemen, 2001). By contrast, the feminine is identified as emotional, affiliative, intimate, sexual, more caring and nurturing (Fournier and Kelemen, 2001; Grant 1988), characteristics attributed not only to women, but arguably also to (numerically) female dominated and female-identified functions, that is, functions which have been associated with such a 'feminine' identity: the HR function represents one such function with its TPM history of welfare-orientation. Thus the gender lines are drawn: masculine and feminine signify different values; 'men's work' and 'women's work' is defined and valued differently. This study has confirmed a clear discursive trend for 'women's work' to be considered in nurturing, sexualised domestic and sexualised terms. The day-to-day performance of the HR specialists' work was readily characterised by members of the function themselves deploying such stereotypical versions (articulated through and by gendered subjectivities) of what constitutes 'feminine' identities.

This has serious consequences for the HR function in organizations where what is considered 'appropriate' behaviour coincides with images of masculinity. Those who succeed in constructing professional, managerial and strategic identities are those most able to articulate their identity in terms congruent with the dominant forms of masculinity (Watson 1990). Those who fail to do so, or who ally themselves closely with 'feminine' constructions are likely to be marginalised. Thus repertoires associated with the 'cognitive' discourse identified previously become the route which 'makes sense' because of their appeal to rationality, rightness and objectivity. However, the extent to which the 'rightness' of those repertoires is grounded in the dominance of a certain legitimised version of masculinity remains invisible. This 'dominant masculine' may explain the attempts of participants in this research to appropriate 'desirable' and appropriate discourses such as those which are strategy-reform- and results- orientated, or to rewrite HR activities in such terms as a means by which to construct legitimate identities. This becomes an 'aspirational' identity,

particularly for organizational actors or functions which have failed to secure legitimacy through previous discursive formations such as the moral or pragmatic which may be considered more 'feminine'

Martin (2001) suggests that masculinities are conflated with work relations so that their performance becomes a default repertoire for the workplace 'norm'. Where the masculine is the taken for granted and dominant organizational 'default', light is inevitably thrown upon performances of the feminine as 'other'; if the feminine is not legitimate, those who are identified as such may struggle to achieve legitimacy. For example, HR specialists, whether male or female, may choose to carve out their own space (Fournier and Kelemen, 2001), through for example claiming pragmatic, moral or regulatory terrain (operational, administrative, welfare, procedural), but this may never achieve parity whilst it remains identified as 'female'. Yet this privileging of masculine identities within the organizational 'dichotomous order of gender' (Gherardi and Poggio, 2001, p. 246) occurs under the guise of gender neutrality (Fournier and Kelemen, 2001), whereby strategy, reform and results are inevitably *right*, hence the 'invisibility' of the phenomenon.

Gherardi (1995) maintains that women are 'out of place' in organizations: I would prefer to suggest on the basis of my research that this phenomenon applies not exclusively women but also to feminine-identified functions such as HR. They may be attributed an organizational 'place', but that place is not strategic, not managerial and therefore only legitimate in a support, servicing or subordinate capacity. Thus positioned as 'other' to the dominant masculine, it is this form of gendered alterity which may explain the marginalisation and lack of legitimacy of the HR function, rather than its claimed failure to offer a 'genuine contribution' to the organization. The 'out-of-placeness' of women and of a feminine-identified function was perhaps revealed most starkly in the use of sexualised repertoires to construct the identity of HR, and this shocking phenomenon merits separate consideration.

### **8.3.4 Services Rendered: Sexualising HR**

Perhaps even more surprising than the gendered discourses revealed here was the use of heavily sexualised repertoires to construct the relationship between HR and line management, and the identity of HR specialists. The sphere of management is

one in which the sexual, erotic and intimate are expected to be absent, and yet are a continuous feature of everyday work relations (Knights and Kerfoot, 2004) as sexual power. Additionally, management may be dominated by practices associated with male homosociality, which views women as sexual objects, ostracizing and undermining women whilst perpetuating hegemonic masculinity (Broadbridge and Hearn, 2008). In this gendered managerial context women are defined as 'other', not managerial, not strategic, and feature as objects of conquest. This is evident in the discourses articulated in this study of 'trophy' and 'battered' wife, of whores and good girls. Interestingly, the male speakers in this research appeared to capitalise on the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell, 1995), claiming masculinity through articulating sexualised repertoires of 'pussies' and 'pimping', particularly in relation to their female HR colleagues.

Sexuality may apparently be claimed, appropriated and redeployed as a discursive resource in the achievement of power, for example through flirtatious or coquettish representations of HR relations with line management, or through 'tempering' talk of HR power by the use of sexualised repertoires such as 'chatting up', 'whoring', or 'giving them what they want'. However, this form of power is inevitably compromised where it reproduces the function and HR practitioners in gendered terms, and reinforces gendered relations. Thus such talk which may appear to subvert risks reproducing rather than transgressing gendered practices (Gherardi, 1995; Fournier and Kelemen, 2001).

### **8.3.5 Women's Work, Men's Work: Appropriating and Subverting Masculinity**

Davies and Thomas (2002) draw our attention to the difficulties that female speakers may experience when attempting to engage with 'masculine' identities. Members of the HR function who seek to construct their organizational identity through masculine discourses of strategy, business-focus and performance-orientation reinforce and reproduce the dominant 'maleness' of the organization and the value of this basis for legitimacy therein. There are however risks to women who choose to step out of 'subordinate' positions and seek legitimacy through articulating more masculine discourses and identities (Fournier and Kelemen, 2001): women and those in feminine-identified functions who seek to appropriate 'masculine' discourses risk challenging the gender(ed) organizational order. Due Billing and Alvesson (2000)



suggest that managerial and other senior business roles are defined in 'masculine' terms of autonomy, instrumentality, and results-orientation: characteristics which are 'not particularly much in line with what is broadly assumed to be typical for females' (p144). In this respect a function dominated by women may struggle to be taken seriously when it seeks to articulate more 'masculine' discourses.

The findings of this research support this: the participants here who engaged in discourses of 'strategic', 'business' focused, accounting logics in the construction of their HR identities (or aspirational identities) appeared nevertheless to remain marginalised, subordinate, and lacking credibility, condemned to the HR 'chores' of supporting line management through emotional labour and the 'dirty work' of dealing with employees. Witness not only the subordinating discourses outlined above, but also the example of the (female) HR manager who was told she need no longer attend directorate management team meetings as her contribution was not needed, or the (female) HR manager asked to attend management team meetings only to present her report of HR issues before being asked to leave when 'strategic' discussions ensued. One discursive tactic deployed by participants offered a challenge to line manager 'toughness': HR having to come to the (heroic) rescue to resolve intractable problems is attributed to either line incompetence or to line manager 'softness', with a 'businesslike' HR resolving the ensuing problems. Yet HR is unlikely to claim this masculine 'heroic' identity: the more common discursive formation of practitioners in this role was as cleaners who sweep up after management mess. Hence also comments from line management to an HR specialist who 'talks tough' that this is not the expected or appropriate identity for the HR function.

Some of the interviewees appeared to engage in a form of 'tempering talk': modifying the 'hard' masculine discourses of strategy and results, through balancing them with reference to. This reflects the debate constructed in the HRM literature between 'hard' masculine discourses of strategic HRM which view human resources as means to ends, rather than the 'soft' HRM version which constructs workers as ends in themselves (Guest, 1999; Armstrong, 2006). Interestingly, arguments in favour of this 'soft' version have apparently foundered as the 'hard' version has gained primacy in the literature and arguably too in practice (Lupton, 2000; Delbridge and

Keenoy, 2010). Yet participants here continue to articulate what might be considered the 'feminine' language of 'soft' HRM: worker concerns are given equal consideration to line management in the pursuit of performance as a strategic approach. Yet this subversion and rewriting of the dominant, masculine strategic to a softer feminised version appears also to have foundered. Whilst some authors have exhorted both academics and practitioners of HRM to jettison a blindly 'strategic' discourse and to reengage with discourses of ethics and wellbeing (see for example Kochan, 2004) the possibilities of an 'ethical turn' in human resource management might be somewhat premature, especially if associated with a 'feminine' other.

The message is clear: HR is 'not business', a feminine and feminised 'other', excluded from the legitimising discourses of strategy and management. Whether this failure to successfully claim and deploy masculine discursive resources to re-articulate the identity of the function results from 'straying too far from stereotypes of femininity' (Marshall, 1984, p. 37) or from presenting a challenge to hegemonic masculinity, unsettling the organizational and societal order the result is clear: apparently continued discursive marginalisation and subordination for the HR function.

Thus women may seek to present 'viable public images' which make them organizationally acceptable (Marshall, 1995), but which may throw them into a dilemma where that acceptability is pitted against professional legitimacy. Thus playing down the role, power and influence of the HR function may lead to a form of 'acceptability' for individual HR practitioners in the context of day-to-day relations, e.g. through performing 'good girl', or 'trophy wife', but will do little to establish organizational power or credibility for the HR function. Thus there is a tension between the identity of the individual practitioner who renders themselves acceptable through such discourses, and the aspirational 'professional' identity of the function which is cast as dependent, marginal and subservient, led by the 'little woman from personnel'. The notion of gendered professional identity is considered more closely next.

### **8.3.6 The Feminine Professional?**

Discourses of professionalism (Kerfoot, 2002), of managerial identity (Whitehead, 2001; Collinson, 2003; Devine et al, 2011) and of strategic orientation (Kerfoot and

Knights, 1993) each offer a form of ontological security in organizations. Establishing an identity as a professional, a strategic operator, or as a manager (or as a function which shares these characteristics) holds a seductive certainty and the promise of legitimacy to workers seeking to establish secure identities. Additionally, Kerfoot (2002) suggests that although discussions of 'professionalism' in the traditional literature have largely failed to acknowledge gender, there are linkages between discourses of professional identity and professionalism, and masculinity.

'Professionalism' in this sense is constructed as a particularly 'masculine' domain which privileges rationality, instrumentality, and emotional constraint, and which marginalises talk of ethics, welfare, wellbeing or of pragmatic day-to-operational activities - the basis on which HR has previously established its legitimacy. The pursuit of the 'professional ideal' requires individuals (and aspirant professional groupings) to engage with and deploy the discourses associated with the masculine 'instrumental purposive-rational ideal' (Kerfoot, 2002; Kerfoot and Knights, 1993).

If we accept Kerfoot's association between this version of masculinity and professional identity, we may conclude that the people management function in organizations may always struggle to establish a legitimate professional footing, unless it engages with discourses aligning it to such 'masculine' characteristics. This may in part explain the rush of 'professional' bodies (such the CIPD) to align themselves to the strategic and business discourses offered by HRM writers and to exhort aspirant professional members to 'talk the language of the business', i.e. to acquire the 'masculine' script. Similarly, it may account for the tendency of writers such as Ulrich (who has dominated the literature of HR practitioner role and identity construction) to exhort managerial alignment for HR specialists. Yet it might not be taken seriously if it does deploy those discourses. The masculine *is* the professional, which may mean that a function or aspiring profession that remains feminine-identified either numerically, by historical association, or through the discourses which articulate at least some part of its role will always struggle to establish professional legitimacy.

### **8.3.7 Gendered Discourses and Functional Legitimacy: The Gendered HR Function**

In order to draw together the key findings in relation to the gendered construction of the HR practitioner/ function, this final section summarises how the issue of gender

has been handled in relation to the role and identity of the function, and what the findings of this research might mean for the future of the function. Somewhat surprisingly, despite the prevalence of women in the function, gender has rarely featured in the HR/HRM literature as a property of the HR function, or as a potential route/barrier to legitimacy. In the wider management and organizational domain, issues such as the gendered divisions of authority, based on both role and position have been explored (e.g. Marshall, 1984), and several writers have considered the gendered nature of job segregation and 'ghettoization' within the HR 'profession', namely the predominance of men in the more 'masculine' industrial relations roles, whilst women are consigned to servicing and emotional labour roles (see for example, Simpson and Lenoir, 2003; Brandl et al, 2008). Like the discursive phenomena identified in this study, this gendered division of HR labour draws heavily on gendered societal discourses of male and female skills and characteristics: women's 'natural skills' of nurturing, servicing and supporting are of low value, and do not constitute a basis for achieving organizational recognition or power (Rasmussen, 2001). Similarly, the low status attributed to this servicing and emotional labour work does not constitute the basis for achieving 'professional' status, failing as it does to establish an autonomous function whose members exercise control over their own work.

However, few have considered the gendered construction of the identity of the HR function. Two notable exceptions are Legge (1987; 1995; 2005) and Townley (1994). Legge's (1987) important discussion of the gendered nature of personnel management (which pre-dated the widespread adoption of Human Resource Management rhetoric and the HR/HRM labels) clearly articulated the 'taken-for-granted subordination of women in employment specifically and in society generally' (pp.33-34). It was only the very peripheral nature of the function itself, maintained Legge, which allowed women to gain a foothold and dominate the personnel function whilst remaining significantly under-represented in other managerial roles. As the function achieved 'some measure of power', she argued (p. 46), women's influence in the function declined. Legge predicted that the further ascendancy and 'managerialization' of the function might spell out the continued demise of women's dominance, and an increase particularly in the numbers of male incumbents in senior personnel roles. 'Women's position in personnel management will inversely reflect

the power the function is seen to exercise in organizations' (p.50) suggesting that a powerful personnel (or HR) function will be dominated by men. Alternatively, the continued presence and domination of women might mean a function which has failed to secure power and influence. In order for the function to prosper in the hands of male HR specialists, Legge maintains, it will be necessary for it shake off its feminine image (2005).

In 1994, Townley suggested that gender was inherent in the constitution of the personnel function as a subject for study, and that the language, constructs and concerns of personnel management were 'heavily gendered' (p. 15). The adoption of HRM as an overarching framework for labour management offered the opportunity for 'reinventing' the people management function; through associating HRM (and by implication, the HR function) with discourses of planning, control and strategic management, HRM might be clearly demarcated from the old administrative and welfare orientations of personnel management. This putative new association might enable those in the function to distance themselves from the gendered language and concerns which had contributed to personnel management's previous association with 'marginality, ambiguity and lack of status' (Townley, 1994, p 15). In a similar vein, Kersley et al (2006) talk of the low status connotations and 'Cinderella' identity attributed to the personnel management function.

The conclusion of this research is clear. If the talk of local government HR practitioners is representative, little has changed for the HR function since Legge and Townley were writing. Certainly, the continued efforts by the CIPD at 'reinvention' through articulating new strategic and, as one speaker described it, sexy 'business-partnered' identities, would appear to reinforce this view.

Yet it is this largely ignored gendered (and sexualised) identity which might offer some explanation for the failure of the function to achieve professional and organizational legitimacy. The gendered and sexualised discourses which feature here cast the HR practitioner as servile, subservient, 'nurturing', or as sexually available in a variety of ways. If we accept that gender acts as an organizing principle in managerial workplaces, structuring and privileging particular masculine versions of management and organization (Knights and Kerfoot, 1993), then we must account for material consequences of the operation of such gendered

discourses on the HR function and HR practitioners. The function may be doubly condemned in this gendered context: firstly in being identified numerically as a 'female' or 'feminised' function and secondly in terms of HR's association with the 'feminised' concern of social justice, and the 'welfare' legacy of the personnel function from which it evolved. Given that femininity may be identified as more suited to lower grade service work and emotional labour (Simpson and Lenoir, 2003), a function which undertakes 'women's work' and continues to deploy feminised discourses will always risk being undervalued, marginalised, liminal.

It may be no surprise that speakers thus excluded from dominant and legitimacy-conferring discourses seek to legitimise alternative formulations of HR's identity through, for example, recourse to operational/pragmatic or moral/welfare and ethical discourses. In this respect the 'pragmatic' discourse outlined earlier represents a double bind: HR practitioners who articulate it as a means of 'carving out' a discursive niche retain their identification with low grade, domestic, operational and administrative work and therefore present no threat to the gendered organizational order through attempts to claim the 'cognitive' strategic/management terrain. Additionally, they offer the promise of a function which will deal with the domestic 'dirty work', thus freeing up managers to pursue more 'strategic' concerns. Ridgeway (2001) alerts us to this phenomenon whereby a dominant group is dependent on the subordinate group and thus has an interest in maintaining the status quo. A kind of legitimacy is therefore, available, but it is a denigrated legitimacy grounded in co-dependence on line manager need and approval, and certainly does not construct an autonomous 'professional' identity.

Some writers have suggested that the advent of 'reform' discourses to the public sector context may offer hope to the aspirant HR function, given the shared linguistic terrain between HRM and NPM (e.g. Mueller and Carter, 2005). However, the final section of this discussion challenges this perspective through a discussion of the gendered discursive nature of modernisation and reform talk.

### **8.3.8 Public Sector Reform: the Next Gendered Frontier**

It is important to consider the context of public sector reform in which this research is located. NPM and the modernisation project have been heralded as providing the

perfect opportunity for HRM to flourish in the public sector, which might suggest that a 'reforming' public sector offers fertile ground within which the 'profession' of HR might be successfully (re-)constructed. Indeed, NPM and HRM might on the surface appear to be compatible bed-partners, with their shared discourses of performance, output, unitarism and managerialism. However, this perspective fails to acknowledge the gendered dimensions of both new managerialism and HRM.

According to Thomas and Davies (2002), a core tenet of NPM has been the promotion of new professional subjectivities. Those subjectivities are manufactured through the linguistic enactment of the new managerialist paradigm which has sought to sweep away the old public administration and associated public sector identities. Public sector managerialism is characterised by extreme examples of male dominance and masculinism, and with its 'masculine' preoccupations and language, is gendered in ways that work against women (Whitehead, 2001; Ozga and Walker, 1999). Under the guise of gender-neutrality (or invisibility) NPM embraces discourses of performance measurement, accountability, control, output- and outcome- focus suggesting impartiality, rationality and objectivity. New managerial/professional subjectivities are constituted around dominant masculinities of self-realization and entrepreneurialism, of competition and aggression (Collinson and Hearn, 1994, 1996; Halford *et al.* 1997; Rose, 2001; Davies and Thomas, 2002), and of hard-nosed, hard-hitting business leaders who can take 'tough' decisions to 'drive through' change in the public sector. With an increased focus on managerialism and managerial prerogative, these subjectivities embody the 'largely concealed' connections between masculinity and management (Kerfoot and Whitehead, 1998, p.436).

Thus neo-liberal reform talk reinforces a hyper-masculinist model of management (Devine et al, 2011) and the reform of the public sector has been characterised as 'a recuperative project of patriarchal power' (Mahony, 1997, p. 100, in Ozga and Walker, 1999). This 'reform' project does not bode well for a function which has traditionally been marginalised as 'feminine' and which remains constructed in gendered and sexualised terms.

Interestingly, despite the claims to a more 'feminine' developmental humanism in the public sector context, (and particularly in the orientation of the people management function, Farnham and Horton, 1996; Truss, 2008), Thomas and Davies (2002) suggest that a gendered organizational regime in the public sector is not new, and that the long-established 'professional-bureau' power relations of the public sector have in the past promoted masculinized norms. This may in part explain why (largely female) HR practitioners form a feminine-identified HR function who have sought to appropriate the 'regulatory' discourses of legislative and statutory compliance have nevertheless remained peripheral. Ridgeway (1997) maintains that despite espoused gender equality claims in organizations, established taken-for-granted interactional processes will rewrite gender into new institutional arrangements, thus re-establishing gender inequalities in new structural forms. If we accept that the old regime was gendered in both discourse and enactment and that new discourses rely on gendered conceits, it seems inevitable that existing gendered processes will be reproduced and possibly augmented in a post-reform public sector. This suggests the futility of attempts by HR practitioners to claim legitimacy through deploying 'new regulatory' talk of adherence to new public policy and government agenda.

What we might therefore conclude for NPM and other reform projects which rely on hegemonic masculine subjectivities, is that far from opening up the ontological space within which HRM might flourish, they represent a continued and intensified threat to the status- and legitimacy-seeking identity work of HR practitioners, and that a female dominated and feminine-identified function may be further denigrated and marginalised. Whilst this phenomenon is indeed already in evidence through initiatives outlined at the beginning of this chapter such as HR transformation activities including the introduction of 'back office' shared services, 'self-serve HR', outsourcing etc, it has rarely been explained through considering the gendered construction of public sector reform and of public sector organizations.

#### **8.4 Summary**

This chapter has considered the key findings of the research undertaken here. The HR function is experiencing an ongoing and arguably intensifying crisis of legitimacy, particularly in the UK public sector context where it continues to be constructed as 'back office', and to face demands to 'transform' itself. The conclusions of this study



are that the 'logical' legitimising route is through engaging with discourses which claim legitimacy on a 'cognitive' basis. This includes appropriating and deploying strategy, business and reform talk, and articulating a performance and results focus for HR's role and contribution. This route to legitimacy conforms to dominant views of organizational priorities, and taken-for-granted articulations of those in the function should construct and conduct.

However, whilst HR practitioners in the public sector seek do seek legitimacy on these 'conformist' terms, this is not the only discursive resource on which they draw in the construction of their individual and collective identity. Rather, they engage in a form of crafting of their identity which draws on multiple and arguably antagonistic discourses. This includes the 'melding' of apparently irreconcilable discourses of strategy with a 'moral' concern for worker wellbeing and fairness. The polarisation of these discursive repertoires, and the marginalisation and devaluation of the latter by the former has been well-documented in the literature.

Yet this polarised 'strategy versus welfare/ethics' debate is far too simplistic a representation of how local government HR practitioners construct their role and identity. The claiming of a 'moral' dimension to HR's role extends beyond simple constructions of employee welfare to a defence of the organization and its reputation (often articulated as a long-term strategic and performance issue), and of the traditional public sector ethos and its commitment to democracy. Additionally, HR practitioners in local government claim a 'regulatory' legitimacy in the form of upholding legislative and public policy compliance, of maintaining statutory requirements, and of defending probity and trust in the spending of 'public money'.

Perhaps most significantly, HR practitioners in local government also articulate their role and identity in terms of 'pragmatic' legitimacy, whereby the day-to-day problem-solving and 'hands-on' activity of the function is articulated as business. This is particularly important given the denigration of this type of activity as transactional, administrative and 'not-business', particularly compared with 'strategic' activity. This recourse to the 'non-strategic' may represent a deliberate attempt to discursively distance those within the function from the dominant discourses of HRM which are deployed in pursuit of managerial objectives and which 'legitimise the inequalities of power' (Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010, p. 801).

Galang and Ferris (1997) suggest that the 'symbolic actions' used by the HR department are designed to create and maintain a perception that HRM is a '*critical and strategic* concern' of the organization' (p. 1409, my italics). This study has concluded that HR practitioners in local government do indeed appear to be in pursuit of legitimising discourses which might establish the criticality of the function, but that the question of what constitutes being a 'strategic' concern may be debatable. Thus professional and pro-strategic, pro-reform and 'business' identity are claimed in a range of discursive guises, which may represent the efforts of members of the function who are struggling with uncertainty and liminality; who are confused or strategically 'hedging bets' during a period of transition; who are seeking to resist the imposition of 'new' subjectivities and to articulate a continuity of self through retaining valued 'old' identities; or who, through an ability to identify the safest discursive bet, are like the 'turkeys signing up for Christmas' alluded to by one participant.

However, the gendered nature of the organizational context which constructs individual and, I would argue, functional identities through gendered and sexualised subjectivities plays a significant role in mitigating, moderating and militating against the identity work endeavours of HR practitioners.

The material consequence for those in the HR function is that whatever discourses they deploy in the pursuit of a legitimate identity may fail. A female dominated and feminine-identified function which seeks to appropriate 'masculine' discourses of strategy, reform and business-focus may be offer an unpalatable challenge to the gendered organizational order. Where members of the function resort to alternative discursive resources of morality, regulation and particularly pragmatism, they will be condemned through the gendered construction of what is valuable, desirable and appropriate in organizations. This discursive phenomenon is magnified in the context of a public sector reform project conceived and enacted in heavily masculine terms.

Thus HR practitioners are condemned to a role and identity which is constructed through gendered and sexualised discourses as subordinate, passive, sexually available and domestic. The HR function serves and services line management, and through gendered subjectivities the activities, status and legitimacy of the function are denigrated and demeaned as low grade, servile and substitutable. This does not

bode well for the future of the HR function which seeks to establish itself as professional, credible and a 'strategic partner' on an equal footing with line management.

## **9. Conclusion**

The aims of this final chapter are threefold: firstly, I wish to revisit the objectives of the research. Secondly, I wish to outline the contributions to both scholarship and practice offered by this research. Finally, I consider the limitations of the research and potential future research opportunities which are suggested by the findings.

### **9.1 Aims and focus of the research**

#### *Discursive identity*

The aims of the research were to explore the discursive resources on which local government HR practitioners draw as they construct their identity in talk and interaction. Informed by a constructionist perspective which views identity as fluid, multiple and discursively constructed, I employed discourse analysis on the transcripts produced from 47 interviews conducted with participants from 5 English local authorities in the Midlands. The focus was on how the speakers, all HR practitioners from a range of levels and roles, deployed, reinscribed and resisted discourses of HRM and of public sector reform. A key interest was how those discourses of 'reform' and of HRM function hegemonically to construct HR practitioner subjectivities and define notions of 'appropriate' identity both for individuals working in the function, and collectively for the HR function. Additionally, a primary concern was how HR practitioners in local government deploy specific discourses in the pursuit of organizational and professional status and legitimacy.

#### *A critical perspective on HR/M*

My research was also informed by a critical perspective. Numerous authors have suggested that the HRM literature fails to embrace a critical perspective (e.g. Keegan and Boselie, 2006; Alvesson, 2009; Watson, 2010; Keenoy, 2009; Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010) with much research focusing instead on the increasingly narrow 20 year justificatory project of establishing a causal link between HRM and performance<sup>6</sup> (Marchington, 2008; Janssens and Steyaert, 2009; Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010; Guest, 2011). For this reason, perhaps, Watson suggests that it is necessary to 'counter the tendency for HRM academics to act as legitimacy-givers to

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<sup>6</sup> With performance frequently narrowly defined in narrow financial terms of returns to investors, profitability, and cost reduction

corporate interests' (Watson, 2010, p.). Whilst seeking to fulfil Watson's call to research arms, in the spirit of Janssens and Steyaert (2009), who call for HRM scholarship to suspend this performative stance, a parallel aim was not to be merely anti-performance (see also Marchington, 2008). The research was therefore intended to build on and contribute to the development of critical HRM scholarship, rejecting a managerialist approach whilst encouraging alternative, more progressive forms of management (Fournier and Grey, 2000; Alvesson, 2009; Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010, pp.800-801). This aim was enacted through efforts to hear how HRM might be alternatively conceived, to reconsider what might constitute performance, and to explore a range of discourses through which the contribution of HRM might be talked about and valued.

The approach to HRM adopted here was to view it as a particular discourse (or set of discourses), deployed for particular ends. The aim of exploring the discursive resources on which HR practitioners drew through discourse analysis was to 'denaturalize': to uncover and unsettle the taken-for-granted and unreflective adoption of managerial language and managerial definitions of reality which has become associated with HRM (Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010) and with epochal 'reform' talk in the public sector context (Du Gay, 2003). Truss (2008, p.4) has suggested that the role played by the HR function 'in the NPM agenda is ripe for further research'; her concern seems to be whether HR has freed itself from the shackles of administrative responsibilities to offer a genuinely strategic contribution. I sought to adopt a more reflexive approach through exploring *not* how effectively such discourses have been enacted, but whether and in what ways such prescriptions have taken hold and been resisted. The question here was therefore whether discourses featuring in the talk of local government HR practitioners reflected the shift to a more managerially aligned role and identity for the local government HR function; to consider the 'hegemonic struggle' which might occur (Keegan and Francis, 2010) as newer, dominant discursive formations of HRM and public sector reform compete to frame meaning and marginalise 'old' discourses associated with traditional personnel and public administration.

### *Marginalised voices, lived experiences: 'We are HR'*

Thus the research aimed to sidestep the preoccupation of mainstream HRM scholarship with causal explanations and justificatory research, seeking instead to connect with the lived experiences of HR practitioners, not as a means of measuring the progress they have made on the way to reform and transformation for the function, (for they must surely transform or die! Schuler, 1990), but to understand what is accomplished through the discourses by which they identify their role, activities and priorities.

Scant attention has been paid to the voices of those charged with the enactment of HRM in organizations (for an exception, see Keegan and Francis, 2010), as the HRM literature has focused predominantly on normative prescriptions of the ideal role for the HR function.<sup>7</sup> The aim here was therefore to 'resist ideologies and identities unreflexively arrived at' (Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010, p.), and to explore the voices of HR practitioners themselves, providing a polyvocality and 'multi-storied narratives' previously lacking in HRM research (Janssens and Steyaert, 2009, p. 152) through hearing the voices of HR practitioners. The focus of the interviews was on how those practitioners seek to construct a plausible and palatable identity as they go about their role, and this focus on the performance of role and identity constitutes an important aspect of the research.

Despite the 'stickiness' in the academic and particularly the practitioner literature of Ulrich's managerialist work on the 'ideal' role and identity for the function, few have considered how and whether the 'strategic', business partnering prescription has taken hold in how practitioners characterise their role. A central aim of the research therefore was to engage with the subjective experience of HR practitioners as they discursively accounted for their role and identity, both individually and collectively.

### *Desperately seeking legitimacy*

In recent years, mainstream HRM literature has tended to adopt somewhat one-dimensional claims to how the function might cast off its old, denigrated status, and

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<sup>7</sup> Those in the function rarely take centre stage in HRM research, and when they do, the speakers are usually at the level of director or senior manager offering a very particular view of the function

achieve legitimacy through added value claims articulated via strategic, performance and business discourses. Whilst some have claimed that these discourses offer a clear route to organizational legitimacy (with Ulrich and colleagues as the chief culprits in this respect, advocating that HR becomes an organizational ‘player’), there is limited evidence to suggest that legitimacy is guaranteed. The research was therefore also focused on the legitimacy-claiming and legitimacy-conferring potential of particular discourses.

### **9.2.1 Contribution of the research: to scholarship**

#### *Discursive identity work in action: ‘crafted selves’*

There is little research focusing on the *enactment* of HRM (Paauwe and Boselie, 2005; Marchington, 2008; Truss, 2008) and particularly on the *discursive* construction and performance of HRM in organizations. Alvesson (2009) has drawn attention to the usefulness of listening closely to those involved in HRM, yet few studies have considered the identity work demanded by continuously changing prescriptive constructions of how the HR function ought to redesign and transform itself. This research adds to the growing body of critical HRM literature which seeks to understand HRM not merely as a recipe for organizational success, but as a particular set of discursive choices dominated by normative managerialist prescriptions, and to consider how it informs the identity of those charged with its delivery. My research focuses on an HR function in discursive transition, at a time when ongoing calls for public sector HR to ‘transform’ (or die) are demanding identity work on the part of HR practitioners in local government. Thus the research critically considers identity work at the HRM/NPM nexus and contributes an understanding of how identity is discursively crafted. The findings support the work of others (ledema et al; Clarke et al) that identities are not only multiple and fluid, but frequently ‘messy’, crafted from conflicting discursive strands.

#### *Challenging the hegemony of HRM and ‘strategic’ legitimacy*

Through exploring the talk of HR practitioners themselves, the research offers an empirical view of HRM in action, through exploring ‘HR’ as a particular discursive identity. This represents a significantly different (although not unique) approach to mainstream HRM literature where the ‘strategic’ formation reigns and the quest to establish the HRM-performance link dominates. Alternative constructions of the

identity of the HR function are offered here, with a call to reconsider the narrow strategy-versus wellbeing debate, and to re-evaluate denigrated operational and administrative HR activities as constituting a pragmatic and valuable problem-solving role. In the context of the 'strategy' debate, it may be more appropriate to conceive of HR not as a strategic function, but as an entity which, like other organizational areas, has some strategic functions. However these are not the only activities which offer 'value' to organizations. Future research might build on this contribution through exploring how HR practitioners elsewhere, line managers and employees at large (who are, after all, the focus of HRM activities) perceive and value the function, but through a close analysis of the discourses deployed to capture the role and legitimacy of the function. Where this kind of research has been undertaken previously, it has often failed to capture the nuanced discursive formations deployed by speakers.

#### *Public sector identities*

Similarly, the research has observed public servants in action as they seek to craft new and plausible identities within the context of demands for transformation and reform, and at a time when public sector identity and performance is under close scrutiny. It has provided a view from close quarters of the experience of public sector workers as they attempt to account for and make sense of discursive shifts from old to new formations of public sector identity, and offers a challenge to the claim that OPA and its associated values has been swept away: perhaps explaining the very need for 'reform' initiatives to be regularly reinvented, relabelled and reinvigorated.

#### *A Gendered HR identity*

Alvesson and Due Billing (2009) talk of the need for ambitious interpretive work which aims to bring out the 'nuanced aspects around how people construct themselves and their work worlds' as gendered (p,92). This research offers such a contribution to the organizational gender literature through examining how gendered relational subjectivities construct the gendered and sexualised identity of the HR function. Through hearing the voices of a largely female workforce from a gendered, feminine-identified function, and perhaps, most importantly *naming it as such*, the research potentially puts gender firmly on the agenda of the identity construction and legitimacy-seeking concerns of the function. Whilst the gendered identity of the HR



function has featured marginally in the HRM literature through the work of Legge and Townley, this aspect of the lived experience of HR practitioners has rarely, if ever, been empirically explored. The findings here suggest that gendered subjectivities around the identity of the HR function are worthy of much more research.

### **9.2.2 Contribution of the research: to practice**

This research has identified that despite claims to the contrary, the pursuit of legitimacy is still an ongoing project for HR specialists. Kulik and Perry (2008) have suggested that the HR function needs to recognise which strategies might be most effective in transforming their reputation. Whilst trends in the academic and practitioner literature advocate greater business, performance and output focus for HRM and for a 'professional' HR function, the practitioners here resolutely draw not only on these repertoires, but on a range of others which are less managerially aligned. The research therefore contributes to a more nuanced appreciation of the actual role and practice of HR practitioners than that suggested by, for example, the CIPD, whose primary concern has been to ensure that HR specialists 'talk the language of the business'. Given the alternative articulations here of how value is added, the current tactic of the CIPD to advocate following a managerialist and 'strategic' agenda may be short-sighted. The contribution of the research in this arena is to suggest that those who represent the function as a profession may need to reconsider on what terms legitimacy is to be pursued. The professional body might be well-advised to resist the gendered 'labelling' and 'ghettoization' of aspects of the function's traditional role, and to reclaim some of the non-strategic, non-business partnering linguistic HR terrain, and to rehabilitate it as value-adding. Rather than seeking to reinvent the function, a reconsideration and positive reworking of the function's traditional roles might be more apposite. Rather than colluding in the fragmentation of the function and attempts to devolve and outsource its work, this may liberate HR from continued managerial control and begin to establish some measure of independence. This may in turn promise greater professional legitimacy for the function, rather than remaining a semi-profession in thrall to management.

Similarly, senior managers (both HR and line) who demand a strategic contribution from the HR function would be well advised to consider whether the denigration (if not downright abandonment) of other contributions (moral, pragmatic, regulatory)

might be premature and ultimately short-sighted, given the risks of undervaluing or obviating those concerns as organizationally important.

### **9.3 Limitations of the research, and possible future research directions**

#### *Methodological limitations*

Although interview scenarios offer an opportunity to invite participants to engage in identity work, they nevertheless provide only a limited opportunity to observe the discourses deployed by HR practitioners. Further research might build on what has been observed here and explore the HR function in action, particularly in relation to line management, through a more ethnographic approach.

#### *Participant limitations*

The aim of the research was essentially to hear how HR practitioners construct their identity. Some would argue that this constitutes a very one-sided representation of HR identity. An additional dimension would have been provided through interviewing line managers to explore their discursive construction of the HR function, or employees whose daily working lives may be affected by the role and identity of the HR function. Additionally, as previously mentioned, several participants were known or introduced to me through existing relationships where I was identified as the 'academic' or custodian of 'HRM' knowledge. This may have to some degree influenced the discursive social performance and choice of repertoires deployed by some speakers.

#### *Researcher Limitations*

It is worth commenting here on my identity as a female researcher: Whilst I cannot claim definitively that my identity influenced the responses of the participants, it is possible that my gender enabled or encouraged interviewees (both male and female) to engage in gendered talk in constructing their roles and relationships. Equally, my own gendered experience (and indeed my experience as former HR practitioner and lecturer in HR) have undoubtedly contributed to the particular lens I have brought to the undertaking and analysis of this research. Other researchers may have elicited different responses, and identified different issues and areas worthy of discussion from the interview 'data'. This is not to suggest that this research may not be useful (and here I risk adducing 'unreflexive functionalism' (Cunliffe, 2003, p.990)), but to

refute any 'truth claims' which might appear to be inherent when citing potential research contributions.

### *Limitations of context*

The Midlands urban local government environment represents a very specific context. I make no claims to generalizability, although hope that my observations may inform potential re-interpretation and application in other contexts beyond simply the confines of the UK local government landscape. It would be useful to explore whether similar discursive phenomena inform the identity formation of HR practitioners in other public sector but also private and third sector contexts.

### *Timing limitations*

The research was initiated at what might be considered a 'moment of transition' for the HR function in local government, as it was exhorted to 'transform', to restructure, and reinvent itself as a strategic partner in the public sector reform project. In the relatively short time since the interviews took place a significant discursive shift has occurred with the election of the conservative/ LibDem government, whose rhetoric around the public sector has arguably shifted from the epochal to the cataclysmic. As one of the participants observed to me recently, since the current round of cuts to local government budgets was announced, 'all hell has let loose', with particular threats to the HR function and other 'support' functions cast as 'back office' as pressure increases to operate more efficiently, 'do more with less', and 'release resources to the front line'<sup>8</sup>. Arguably, in the current discursive climate where efficiency and cost-cutting logics dominate, the HR function has become even more in thrall to managerially defined priorities. This is worthy of further exploration, particularly to consider whether the 'low-road' people management philosophy apparently espoused (redundancies, pay freezes, training and development embargos) has again rebranded the identity of the HR function as managerial hench(wo)man, and to what extent it is plausible for HR practitioners to resist this formation and yet survive intact.

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<sup>8</sup> As I write this conclusion, another e-mail has dropped into my inbox inviting me to attend a public Sector 'Lean Management' seminar, where the focus will be how to 'deliver a first class service with fewer resources' through 'streamlining', and 'doing things differently'

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## 11. Appendix 1: Interview Participants

<b>Code</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Position*</b>	<b>Authority</b>
A1	F	Senior HR Adviser (D)	D
A2	F	HR Manager (C)	S
A3	F	HR Officer (D)	Wa
B1	F	Senior HR Officer (C)	D
C1	F	HR Officer (D)	T
C2	F	HR Manager (D)	W
C3	F	HR Officer (D)	T
D1	F	HR Manager (D)	W
D2	F	HR Manager (C)	W
D3	F	Principal HR Officer	S
E1	F	HR Officer (D)	D
E2	F	HR Officer (C)	Wa
E3	F	HR Officer (D)	Wa
F1	F	HR Manager (D)	W
F2	F	HR Officer (D)	W
J1	F	HR Manager (D)	W
J2	M	HR Manager (C)	T
J3	F	HR Officer (C)	W
J4	F	HR Manager (Interim)	T
K1	F	HR Manager (D)	W
K2	F	Principal HR Officer	S
L1	M	HR Manager (C)	W
L2	F	HR Manager (D)	D
L3	F	HR Officer (D)	W
L4	F	HR Manager (D)	D
L5	F	HR Officer (C)	W
M1	F	HR Manager (D)	D
M2	F	HR Manager (C)	T
N1	F	Senior HR Officer (C)	D
N2	F	HR Officer (Grad Trainee)	D
O1	M	HR Officer (D)	S
P1	F	Senior HR Adviser (D)	D
P2	M	Senior HR Officer	Wa
P3	F	HR Officer (D)	S
P4	M	Head of HR (C)	T
R1	F	Principal HR Officer (C)	S
R2	F	HR Officer (D)	Wa
S1	F	Principal HR Officer (C)	W
S2	F	HR Manager (D)	D
S3	F	Senior HR Adviser (C)	T
S4	M	Head of HR (C)	D
S5	F	HR Officer (D)	Wa
S6	F	HR Manager (C)	W
S7	F	HR Manager (D)	W
S8	F	HR Officer (D)	Wa
T1	F	Senior HR Adviser (C)	D
T2	F	HR Officer (D)	S

\*Role titles varied between authorities. 'C' denotes a central/corporate role, 'D' a directorate role

## **Appendix 2**

### **Outline interview questions**

1. Can you tell me a bit about your role?
2. And how is your time divided up in terms of the activities you engage in?
3. How has it changed in the time you have been doing it?
4. What have been the biggest changes for the whole HR function in that time?
5. What impacts have those changes had on you personally?
6. How does the role differ from what you anticipated it would be?
7. What are the most enjoyable aspects of your role?
8. What are the most challenging aspects?
9. How do you anticipate your role changing in the future, and why?
10. What are your main priorities?
11. Who determines those priorities?
12. How is your performance rated, and who does your performance reviews?
13. What are your most important relationships at work?
14. How do you think the HR department is viewed by the rest of the organisation?
15. What do you think the role of the HR department should be?
16. How does the reality in your organisation compare with that ideal?
17. What do you think the department could or should be doing differently?
18. What HR department activities do you think are most valued-internally and by the rest of the organisation?
19. What role does the CIPD play in determining what HR does or how it should behave?
20. What are the biggest changes on the horizon for you? ..For your function?..For HR in general?