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# Sherlock Holmes and the Adventure of the Rational Manager: Organizational reason and its discontents

Jerzy Kociatkiewicz  
Essex Business School, University of Essex  
kociak@kociak.org

Monika Kostera  
University of Warsaw  
monika@kostera.pl

## Abstract

Rationality has since long been one of the central issues in the discourse of management. Among the classic voices propagating a reductionist rationalism dominated and there are still many contexts where such a view is taken for granted. On the other hand, critics since the times of classics have been arguing for a less linear approach to management and management thinking. However, little attention has been paid to some of the different dimensions of management rationality, such as imagination. This paper sets out to address this gap in knowledge through presenting a narrative study focused on a literary character well known for his rationality, Sherlock Holmes, and revealing that this, to many, very epitome of rationality is actually an example of an extended type of rationality, including imagination. Following the fictional protagonist of our study, we consider some aspects of its relevance for management thought and practice.

Keywords: Rationality, narratives, detective stories, imagination

## Introduction

Rationality has been an important issue in the discourse of management. Starting with Frederick Taylor's (1911) description of both managers and workers as eminently rational beings (albeit not realizing their potential to the fullest extent), through Kepner and Tregoe's (1965) explicit invocation of the ideal of the rational manager, to contemporary attempts at correcting the irrationality of managerial practice (e.g. Loughlin, 2002), there is a strong tendency to present rationality as the preferred basis for organizational practice. On the other hand, critics like Gibson Burrell (1997) have highlighted disastrous and outright deadly results of linear applied management rationality, while others, such as Case and Phillipson

(2004) have pointed out irrational roots of popular management practices.

Both the enthusiastic and the critical appraisals of managerial rationality tend to assume the view, rooted in the Cartesian tradition, that rationality consists of the systematic use of reasoning and logical deduction (Descartes, 1996). But rationality need not be conceived of as one simple phenomenon. It may include quite different motifs and directions for action (Weber, 1978; Feyerabend, 1987; Habermas, 1984). While criticisms of rationality have opposed it to imagination (Burrell, 1997; Clegg, 2006), little attention has been paid to exploring any possible linkages between the two and, indeed, to analysing dimensions of management rationality beyond the limiting concept of linear thinking. To address this gap

in knowledge we have carried out a study analysing narratives juxtaposing the two notions of rationality and imagination. We examine the complex construct of what we call the extended Holmesian rationality as presented in the narratives of Arthur Conan Doyle, and compare it to rationality apparent in management literature. This allows us to foreground the pitfalls of ignoring the complexities of the notion of rationality, the importance of considering connections between rationality and imagination, and to propose the extended Holmesian rationality as a relevant concept for management thought and practice.

In this paper we embrace the perspective on rationality from the organizational sensemaking point of view. Our focus is on the actor's role and we use the narrative resources of fiction writing to address it (Philips, 1995). We start out by reviewing the ways in which rationality has been conceived of in social sciences and how it is typically presented in relation to management and organizing throughout the years, as well as the accounts of different influential views on rationality and its limitations in organizational context. In particular, we point to Karl Weick's (1979) idea of paradoxical rationality: a much desired aim albeit only to be found *ex post*. We then make a case for imagination, and through the fictive character of Sherlock Holmes we show how it can be seen as part and parcel of rationality. According to Barbara Czarniawska (1999) management writers are like writers of detective fiction: they deal with similar plots, where a seemingly obvious symptom lies at heart of a non-obvious problem to be figured out and solved. Famous fictive detectives such as Sherlock Holmes and management researchers use similar methods and often surround themselves with a similar mystique. We argue that managers, too, resemble Holmes, not in the least because they, too, refrain from revealing their real procedures and methods of action but prefer to resort to mystifying statements: "elementary" says Holmes and then refers to something outrageously complicated. Garley (1920) introducing "Elementary Time Study" claimed that the rationality of the new system was superior as it allowed for less waste and more happiness, while Ackoff's famous saying contended that "the only managers that have simple problems have simple minds" (see e.g. Triarchy Press, 2009). Indeed, managers, like Holmes, have problems to solve, problems that may sometimes look banal on the surface but are non-obvious and linked to a

number of issues in a number of ways unexpected for the uninitiated. After exploring these similarities and some differences in detail, we come to reflect on possible lessons for managers from Holmes' imaginative rationality, using Bateson's (1972; 1979) ideas of a non-linear ecosystem which embraces nature and human culture and which humanity needs to respect in order to survive and blossom. This ecosystem cannot be grasped by the means of reductionist rationality but demands a way of thinking that is at ease with complexity and paradox.

### Pure rationality

For Durkheim (1982), rationality consists of following procedures, methods and reasoning logic. The right (scientific) set of procedures adopted in a right sequence is, according to such a point of view, what guarantees rationality. Max Weber (1978) famously held a different view identifying many different pursuits as rational. In his writings, he distinguishes between four different types of rationality. The first, *Zweckrational*, is focused on the aim that one wishes to reach, as defined by expectations about the behaviour others and other things. The actor makes calculated choices in order to reach those aims. The second type, *Wertrational*, is related to values and beliefs. The motifs for the actor's choices and actions are rooted in value systems which can be of varying strength and nature. The third type is based on emotions, meaning that the actor pursues certain outcomes based on his or her emotional states. The last, fourth type, is linked to tradition, and implies making choices based on training. Weber regarded these types as ideal types, not occurring separately in practice, but usually as a mixture with some more dominant than others in each case. Jurgen Habermas (1984) criticized Weber's typology as decontextualized and proposed his own definition, rooted in the social perspective. According to him, rationality is an outcome of communication, and is inherent in the interpersonal communicative process as such. Communication has an intrinsic aim which is mutual understanding and the capability of bringing it about is placing rationality within the communicative structure.

Theorists of management have also long been looking for rational rules that managers could follow all the way to inevitable success. Frederick Taylor's (1911) notion of scientific management took as its starting

point the rationality of interest of all the organization's participants, proceeding to propose a scientific technique which, not unlike ratiocination, could be used to solve all the managerial conundrums one might conceivably encounter. Fifty years later, Kepner and Tregoe (1965) postulated rationality as the explicit goal a manager should strive for. Their project of *The Rational Manager* was attractive enough that almost fifty years onwards, new editions of what is now *The New Rational Manager* (Kepner & Tregoe, 1997) and derivative works such as *The Rational Project Manager* (Longman & Mullins, 2005) continue to be published, and associated training workshops still find eager audiences. In these writings rationality is seen as a uni-dimensional logic, enabling the manager to make the best decision.

Authors embracing the bounded rationality perspective suggest that this view is too simplified and that there exist, in fact, many kinds of rationality. Research in decision making, notably such authors as Herbert Simon and James March (Simon & March, 1958; March, 1994), showed that managers make decisions based on a bounded rationality, not searching for the "best possible" outcome but choosing the "satisfactory alternative", even though managers try to make fully rational decisions. Michael Cohen, James March, and Johan Olsen (1972) proposed the garbage can theory of organizational choice which describes a situation where decision opportunities resembles irrational "garbage cans" from which managers draw random elements of decision making. Sometimes solutions appear before a problem arises. Nils Brunsson (1982; 2007) distinguished between an impossible methodological rationality which managers often believe in and the more down to earth and realistic action rationality which they adopt in real life. He claims that there are other more vital dimensions of decision making than rationality, such as mobilization of action, distribution of responsibility, and, more generally, organizational legitimization. The ideal of rationality is thus far from sensible for managerial practice: sometimes good managers may act according to systematic irrationality.

An additional dimension of rationality, the social one, follows Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), claim that rationality (as well as reality) is socially constructed. Societies need rationality and regard it as a vital concern. As shared meanings are propagated through culture, one of the important aspects of culture

is therefore to provide rationality for its participants, as a guiding line and a frame of reference for social actors in their everyday interactions. According to Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell (1983), organizations strive for rationality because it gives them legitimization, they "constitute a recognized area of institutional life" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p.148). Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges (1992) added that rationality is a crucial product of contemporary organizations, contingent with the basic kind of utility that the society and its organizations wish to achieve. Gustafsson (1994) elaborates that the foremost use of rationality is in creating seriousness, a feature strongly desired in contemporary organizational settings.

Rational belief and thought are not without their paradoxes. While it is possible to imagine a logical system which can be conceptualized and thought through, there is a limit to what can be rationally scrutinized in that way. It always contains a contradiction, a point which can be accessed only via external arbitrary decision. In other words, there is always a set of axioms or assumptions that one must adopt and take for granted in order to undertake such a rational scrutiny. Claes Gustafsson (1994) likened absolute rationality of thought to the philosophical stone which many seek but which remains elusive; a pursuit that, whatever its merits, can hardly be thought of as rational. Furthermore, he argued, if rationality is seen as a relationship between thought and reality, it becomes an even more elusive and uncertain idea. Not even the natural sciences are capable of such an exact representation of their object of study, so much less so the social sciences and social actors such as managers; the exact knowledge about things: what, how and where they are, is just not possible.

For contemporary management practice, however, the most crucial notion of rationality relates to action, not thought, though the two are sometimes linked. Rational action is based on a conviction about its direct linkage with external reality; by enacting this belief one can expect an interaction with reality to take place in a meaningful way. As it is the managers' beliefs that are usually prominent in organizational discourse, managerial rationality relates primarily to the meanings ascribed to managers' actions. It should be noted, though, that talk is also an action, as is reflection.

To walk around and think thoughts not related to rational action would thus mean irrational behaviour of the manager.

Rationality is thus always tested against the living practical reality, quite regardless of its possible underlying intellectual asperity and stringency. (Gustafsson, 1994, p. 59)

Finally, there is another important dimension of management rationality that authors interested in managerial sensemaking are interested in – one related to perception. Karl Weick (1979) pointed out a paradox – while people tend to perceive rationality as something to be aimed at, or created prospectively, what indeed happens is that processes of organizing as rationalized *ex post*. For the ideals of management this means that while rationality is one of the crucial issues and perhaps even a central focal point of the managerial role it is by its very nature quite elusive and paradoxical. The manager needs to work towards an aim of rationality, he or she needs to hold on to rational standards and aims but it is only *ex post* that he or she is able to know how and if indeed the actions undertaken were rational. Weick (1979, p. 5) distilled this approach into the general sensemaking recipe, “how can I know what I think until I see what I say?” Taylor’s scientific management as a methodical problem solving approach and, later, academic science, can thus be better framed as a *promise* of rationality, a systematic approach to the complex and often paradoxical practice that would enable a straight, planned and fully controllable order (Jacques, 1996). In Roy Jacques’ narrative of the emergence of modern ideas of organization, the managers themselves were a consequence of the business order of the industrial era and the “remapping of authority from occupations to organizations, from foremen and owners to ‘management’” (ibid., p. 148). From this order followed a kind of knowledge, where common sense was replaced by rational concepts of efficiency and productivity. It was “a numeric, not a sensory, domain” (ibid., p. 148). The ideals of rationality directed attention away from practices and towards the web of perceptions.

### Rationality and imagination?

While rationality has been consistently foregrounded in studies of management and organizing, another very significant factor has also received considerable

attention in social science, if not always in management studies: that of imagination. Already Immanuel Kant (2008) considered imagination as a vital (albeit blind and thus presumably not rational) function of the mind. Adam Smith (1799) appreciated the importance of imagination in philosophy and in the social sciences. C. Wright Mills (2000) famously depicted the value of imagination as quite central. According to him, sociological imagination is the ability to connect individual experiences to an understanding of one’s place in social structure and history. Imagination helps to transcend the limitations that make the individual a pawn in the play of structures and trends, as it enables an understanding of the relationships between different perspectives and levels, such as the individual and the societal. It creates a bridge between the everyday life and the greater historical dimension. The imaginative person can achieve a distanced view of his or her life within a much broader context and may act upon this vision, thus also practically transcending the limitations that would otherwise have defined his or her fate. Mills (2000) understood imagination as a state of mind, an awareness and a striving to make sense of what comes one’s way. To develop sociological imagination, one should pose oneself three kinds of questions: regarding social structure, the place of society in history and the role of individuals in that society. Thus imagination can be seen as the ability to link different phenomena, levels of perception and abstraction: aspects usually not regarded as logically linkable.

Gareth Morgan (1993) considered imagination crucial for the way people manage and deal with organizations, as participants or more generally, stakeholders. He defined imagination as the ability to transcend the mundane and stereotypical, in mind as well as in action and distinguishes between theoretical and practical imagination, for reflection and for action. Both are important in and for organizations. Imagination can and should be developed, for example through mind-games or the testing of unusual ideas, but perhaps most importantly, through metaphorical thinking. Metaphor is an “attempt to understand one element of experience in terms of another” (Morgan, 1986, p. 13) and consists of making links between two things based on difference and similarity. Metaphorical thinking is an ability to conceive of one thing in terms of another – or to make unusual connections. For contemporary organizations this ability is perhaps

more important than ever before – as these change so rapidly and so much depends on our capability to face and to proactively embrace change, Morgan (1993) argued. We agree with this view and we also believe that imagination is needed in all managerial and organizational practices, among them those calling for rationality.

Significantly for our argument in this paper, imagination has often been opposed to rationality, or presented as incompatible with it. Stewart Clegg (2006) defined imagination as the “capacity to conceive a difference” (p. 849) and regarded it as one of three bounds of rationality (the two others being history and power). He viewed rationality as a linear process, all-encompassing in its knowledge claims but, in practice, limited by the existence of uncontrollable phenomena the interpretation of which depends on sensemaking processes and context. In line with Feyerabend’s (1987) discussion of Reason (capital R) as a reductive, limiting form of a much more palatable and inclusive notion of reason (and, thus, rationality), and Denny’s (1991) assertion that Western rationality is but one among the many available possibilities, we do not share Clegg’s limiting view of rationality. Thus, while we hold a similar view on imagination, we do not see the two as necessarily opposed.

In describing imagination (and the imaginary) in literary discourse, Tzvetan Todorov (1975) celebrated the moment of vacillation between rational and imaginal explanations of observed (or read about) phenomena, holding it up as the foundation of the literature of the fantastic. In our paper imagination is the ability to make unusual connections between people, things, perspectives and experiences, and it flourishes through the embracing of the sense of wonder or through being in touch with inspiration.

### **Fiction, the detective novel and the study of organization**

Study of imagination required choosing a methodological approach that would enable us to capture its multifaceted richness. Narrative studies offer such a possibility and, indeed narratives are nowadays increasingly recognized as method and substance of research in social sciences and management studies (Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 2004). Enacted narrative is the most common form of social life, communication

and sensemaking (MacIntyre, 1981). Experience invariably takes narrative form, if the narrative is regarded as temporal embedding in the sense that Kenneth Gergen (1997) used the term. Yiannis Gabriel (2000) advocated using the term narrative much more narrowly, as needing a clearly delineated plot. He pointed to the usefulness of stories that exist spontaneously in organizations. Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges (1995) was among the first to advocate stronger links between management writing and narration. She saw merit in a more widespread use of narrative knowledge in social sciences and humanities, and particularly, in organization studies. The traditions of the discipline are connected to narratives, such as case studies, studies of organizational stories and various interpretative approaches. Scientific ethos (*good scientific writing is true writing*) can thus be abandoned, and we can embrace ideals of beauty and use. Representation from relational truth comes to mean political representation: “Theories do not ‘represent’ reality; theoreticians take upon themselves to represent other people and even nature” (ibid., p. 27). There is a need for a conscious and reflective creation of a specific genre, which recognizes tradition without being paralyzed by it, which seeks inspiration in other genres without imitating them, which derives confidence from the importance of its topic and from its own growing skills (ibid.). Elsewhere, Czarniawska (1997) explored the links and relationships between the elements of two what she sees as genres: fiction and scientific realism. She maintained that organization science has much to gain from a conscious blurring of genres, especially in times when boundaries are being questioned. Authors should explore how the boundaries are being constructed rather than taking them for granted.

Writing management can be seen a genre of writing, and as such there is lots to learn from the masters: the novelists, poets and dramatists (Czarniawska, 1999b). Fiction as a way to tell stories about organizing has a great potential. Karin Knorr Cetina (1994) argued for introducing fiction into social sciences. Fiction can explain and illustrate things that we want to put forward as theories. Pierre Guillet de Monthoux and Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges (1994) wrote of the value of studying literature for management learning and for the enhancement of our understanding of organizations and organizing. The book edited by them and containing a collection of stories about

known literary works and the lessons for management that can be learned from them is not only a great read, but a really useful book in the teaching process. Nelson Philips (1995) claimed that fiction and fact literature tend to become one: „the barriers between fiction and fact, and art and science, have become increasingly difficult to defend” (p. 626). Furthermore, „social scientists often do what writers do: they create rather than discover, they focus on the unique and individual, they use illustration and rhetoric in an effort to make their case” (p. 626). Writers, on the other hand, often do what scientists are supposed to do. The boundaries become indistinct and the demolition of them could, if not „move us closer to the ultimate truth”, create an interesting space for organization studies. Philips then goes on explaining different narrative praxes and categories, and their use (and possible use) in the studies of organization.

One of the genres that can with advantage be used to explore ideas about organization and management is the detective story (Czarniawska, 1999a). The protagonist of such a story must disentangle a puzzling social context, not unlike the social researcher. They both take interest in the social and both are dedicated to problem-solving.

The narratives are constructed in a similar way: there is something amiss, it is neither clear nor obvious what it is (there are many false clues), this “something” must be explained (the problem must be diagnosed) and – although this is optional in both detective story and in organization studies – the way of solving the problem ought to be prescribed. (ibid., p. 19)

The plot of the detective story is similar to that of the text about organization, according to Czarniawska (ibid.) - they both have two parallel stories, one hidden and one explicit. The tale of the crime and/or the problem is the hidden one, and it is unravelled and brought to light by the second tale of the investigation. The way that knowledge is acquired is following a strict method, but can be difficult to grasp for the reader. In the detective story, this is, by the way, the point. Nonetheless, he or she must be able to see at the end of the tale how the detective – as well as the researcher – methodically and in a rational way solves the problem at hand. Sometimes a third story is used to throw light on the second:

A naïve observer, like Dr. Watson in Sherlock Holmes, who can indulge in stating the obvious since he has a professional status to save him from a

suspicion of lack of intelligence, or a researcher who tells the story of investigations made by a true hero – usually a Leader. The researcher becomes thus a Dr. Watson who is protected by the scientific method, and who can safely be in awe of Sherlock Holmes – the practitioner. (ibid., p. 20)

Furthermore, both social science and the detective novel offer insights about the commonplace, the everyday life of people described in detail against the interruption of an exceptional event (murder or research problem). For both, this interruption allows the author to reveal the structure of the context which usually may be not obvious or not visible to the observer. They adopt “logics of discovery” which can take different shapes, such as deduction, induction, and abduction, but always need to involve both rationality and suspense.

From Czarniawska’s writings we retain the notion of the similarities between organizational tales and detective stories. But instead of positing the researcher as a detective, we would like to point to the similarities between the latter, and the manager. Malcolm Goodman (2000) made a step in that direction by imagining Sherlock Holmes (who is also the protagonist of our story) as a management consultant, brought in to discover the culprits behind organizational problems. Gerardo Patriotta (2003) showed the usefulness of framing organizational problem-solving as a detective story, focused on finding, performing and finally explaining the problem for the benefit of the audience. He did not name managers as necessarily the protagonists of these stories, but other authors such as O’Loughlin and McFadzean (1999) or Van Bruggen and Wierenga (2001) placed problem-solving at the heart of manager’s role. We also need to point out that Sherlock Holmes appears particularly suitable for this substitution because, as Knight (2004) pointed out, so many of his cases were already dealing with issues of lost, stolen, or endangered property.

Before we turn to the Great Detective himself and more parallels between his practice and that of management, we need to sketch out the history of the genre before his appearance. That said, establishing definite points of origin for any literary genre is an invariably futile and somewhat pointless exercise, and roots of the detective story can be and have been traced to Gaboriau’s (1977) mid-nineteenth century policeman protagonists, Walpole’s princes of Serendip (Merton & Barber, 2006; first mentioned in 1754) or Voltaire’s

(1961) Zadig, first published in 1747. For the purposes of this paper, the forerunner, or perhaps even the first practitioner of the modern detective story, Edgar Allan Poe, is of particular interest. The hero of his three short stories, Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin, not only solved seemingly impossible mysteries, but did so through a thoroughly methodical process (castigating, as would also be the habit of later detectives, those who did not favour a similarly structured approach). It is thus not surprising that Poe chose the word ratiocination to describe Dupin's inquiries. And indeed, the results were often truly spectacular: in *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (Poe, 1982), Dupin is shown to be able to decipher thought processes of the stunned and admiring narrator simply by looking at the minute physical symptoms each thought brought about. However, neither the history of the genre nor the perceptive Monsieur Dupin form the focus of this paper. As already stated, our attention is fixed squarely on the central figures of our chosen narratives: the eponymous hero of Arthur Conan Doyle's detective stories and the manager of contemporary discourse.

### The rational detective and his managerial credentials

Sherlock Holmes, consulting detective is the supremely rational character who has been described as having "*expanded the definition of rationality beyond a narrow, means-ends instrumentalism to include the imagination*" (Saler, 2003, p. 604, our emphasis). The protagonist of 56 short stories and 4 novels by Conan Doyle as well as numerous pastiches and derivative works by other authors, Sherlock Holmes is an immensely popular figure, and also the protagonist presented by Czarniawska (1999a) as the model detective-researcher.

Holmes routinely astounds the reader by his ability to discern the truth by careful examination of the seemingly innocuous details and principled analysis of the available data. The world he inhabits appears baffling and incomprehensible to most of its inhabitants, but thoroughly rational and eminently explicable to a skilled observer and thinker. As the detective himself notes, "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth" (Doyle, 1981, p. 111). His method, the investigative approach he describes as (the science

of) deduction, is intimately tied to the popularity of the character. Shepherd (1985, p. 20) went as far as to describe the detective as "the representation of a method embedded in a myth." Other authors, not satisfied with the mythical status of the Holmesian approach, attempted to tease out its principles or trace its predecessors and inspirations. Thus, numerous contributors to Eco and Sebeok's (1983) *The Sign of Three* argued that the process should be more properly termed abduction, following Peirce's (1955) typology of the forms of reasoning, while Ginzburg (1983) pointed to an Italian art scholar Morelli and Doyle himself (1924) to his medical mentor Joseph Bell as Holmes' real-life intellectual prototype. It might thus turn out useful to note some of the intricacies of both the character and his inquiries, as well as to compare it to those of our other hero, the manager.

One of the most striking features of the detective is his single-minded dedication to the solving of criminal cases. Upon getting to know Holmes, Doctor Watson is simultaneously astonished by the power of Holmes' deductive method and shocked by the vast areas of the detective's ignorance and helpfully delineates the extent and limits of his friend's knowledge for the reader's benefit:

1. Knowledge of Literature.—Nil.
2. Philosophy.—Nil.
3. Astronomy.—Nil.
4. Politics.—Feeble.
5. Botany.—Variable. Well up in belladonna, opium, and poisons generally. Knows nothing of practical gardening.
6. Geology.—Practical, but limited. Tells at a glance different soils from each other. After walks has shown me splashes upon his trousers, and told me by their colour and consistence in what part of London he had received them.
7. Chemistry.—Profound.
8. Anatomy.—Accurate, but unsystematic.
9. Sensational Literature.—Immense. He appears to know every detail of every horror perpetrated in the century.
10. Plays the violin well.
11. Is an expert singlestick player, boxer, and swordsman.
12. Has a good practical knowledge of British law. (Doyle, 1981: 21-22)

This curious amalgam quite unlike the mix of knowledge expected in a Victorian gentleman of Holmes' standing, but the detective steadfastly refused to learn anything he did not consider useful. "He said



that he would acquire no knowledge which did not bear upon his object. Therefore all the knowledge which he possessed was such as would be useful to him" (ibid., p. 37). Moreover, he considered an excess of useless knowledge not just as a distraction, but as a positive threat to his investigative abilities, as he explained to his baffled friend:

I consider that a man's brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose.... Now the skilful workman is very careful indeed as to what he takes into his brain-attic. He will have nothing but the tools which may help him in doing his work, but of these he has a large assortment, and all in the most perfect order (ibid., p. 21).

The approach is clearly relentlessly reductionist, and relies on the ability of delineating a priori the extent of knowledge useful for criminal investigations. This brings out parallels to management and organization theory where reductionism has long been the dominant stance. Yehouda Shenhav (2000) traced the roots of management as a distinct profession and body of knowledge in engineering journals at the turn of the 20th century, showing the profound influence of narrowly rationalist mechanical concepts in shaping what came to be known as management knowledge. Gibson Burrell (1997) argued that these influences are still prevalent in the field of management theory, cautioning that "linearity kills," i.e. that reductionist frameworks can and do bring about deleterious, and sometimes deadly, consequences. And while the term reductionism usually carries pejorative connotations (and is thus virtually absent from self-descriptions), Dmitry Vostokov (2010) called up the very notion of a reductionist manager to present the lessons he believes software design theory and practice can bring to understanding managerial problems.

Holmes' fear of cluttering his brilliant mind with useless knowledge, and managerial insistence on finding the actual cause of a problem among its many apparent constituents both point to the same understanding: the methods used can be relatively straightforward but real skill (or even genius) lies in their correct application. Holmes routinely dismisses his extraordinary feats of (what he terms) deduction as "absurdly simple" (Doyle, 1981, p. 511) or "simplicity itself" (p. 91), noting that "it is not really difficult to construct a series of inferences, each dependent upon its predecessor and each simple in itself." At the same

time, Sherlock's brother, the equally astute Mycroft Holmes, is the only person in Doyle's stories able to match the detective's deductive powers.

In the field of management, Delbridge, Gratton, and Johnson (2006) argued that although there is a large number of professional managers, only the exceptional ones, who manage to master the difficult skills of good management, are able to make a difference in their organizations. These skills, much like Holmes' methods, appear deceptively simple:

Many of the insights about 'best practice' may at first sight appear obvious. However, we have found that in reality there are many pitfalls in the path of managers seeking to import advanced new practices into their business (Delbridge et al., 2006, p. 138).

Observation is an important component in both detection and management. Holmes castigates Watson that he sees but does not observe, while a contemporary successful human resource manager gives his readers the following advice for learning about an unfamiliar organization:

It is useful to pay attention to literally everything: the building, information given in the reception, the way employees' dress. This way we can learn much about organizational culture, the way employees are treated, and the firm's trustworthiness. When in the corridor we pass employees who pay us no attention, loudly comment on their work or do not talk to each other at all, we can presume that the environment there is not the best. (Wisniewski, 2011, np).

Such close observation can enable quick and precise assessment of people and situations. Holmes easily figures out people's profession, personal history, and character traits of the people he meets, and another successful manager from the same article describes his own astounding feat of inference:

The meeting with the CEO was postponed for a few hours. I thought that if it was the norm to force a candidate for a key post to wait for an interview, it might also turn out to be the norm that the CEO believed the market would wait for him to improve his products. I was not let down by my intuition – today this company is doing decidedly worse than ten years ago and was taken over in order to save its liquidity (Wisniewski, 2011, np).

At the same time, it should be noted that such accomplishments rarely form the centrepiece of a story, detective or managerial. They establish the character's mastery, but do not provide a template that ordinary mortals such as the readers of crime stories

or management literature, can ever hope to emulate. Following an established structure,

many of the [Holmes] stories begin with this interpretative magic as Holmes decodes a hat, a watch, a stick, even just the appearance or clothing of a visitor. These sequences create a famous brand image but it is striking that, as with Dupin, they never in fact reveal the mystery of the story: they are only detective flourishes, used for characterization and aura alone (Knight, 2004, p. 56).

The process followed by the detective in solving the actual crime described is invariably more mundane and straightforward, offering signposts along the way and relying on direct evidence, be it material or verbal. Management manuals such as Kim and Mauborgne's (2005) guide for choosing winning market strategies tend to follow a similar format. The book opens with the story of Cirque de Soleil, a successful performance group combining theatre and circus. This serves as a comprehensive illustration of the power of value innovation, the key concept of the authors'. In subsequent explanations of how to define hitherto unknown market the authors provide a number of examples, but the stunning success of Cirque de Soleil is never sullied by such a mundane explanation, nor is it particularly useful in charting a path for would be value innovators to follow. It remains aloof as proof of brilliance of the concept, much like the introductory show of detective's ability.

But the strongly reductionist position outlined above does not present a complete picture of Sherlock Holmes or his investigations. The detective sees himself as committed to the pursuit of wisdom. He equates the latter with the ability to draw correct inferences from scarce data, and with making imaginative links: in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, he describes his own approach as involving "the scientific use of imagination" (Doyle, 1981, p. 687). When he fails to reach that ideal, the detective berates himself, seeing even a delay in reaching the correct conclusion as a partial failure: "I confess that I have been as blind as a mole, but it is better to learn wisdom late than never to learn it at all" (ibid., p. 342).

Similarly, the gaps in Holmes' learning noted above became much less evident in later stories and, indeed, the detective has been shown to exhibit a range of interests with few obvious links to criminal detection, ranging from beekeeping to opera. Possibly, this reflected the experience of variety in encountered

criminal cases, or a broader commitment to seeking wisdom; the issue is not explicitly raised in any of the subsequent narratives, so the point must necessarily remain just a conjecture.

The note of uncertainty echoes the hesitation regarding mainstream management literature's approach to managerial knowledge. While most of the textbooks and handbooks we have seen, in line with the original approach of Frederick Taylor (1911), stressed only the very narrow technical knowledge as necessary or important for manager's work, some of the management classics, such as notably Chester Barnard advocated a more intuitive and imaginative approach to management than did most of his contemporaries (Novicevic, Hench, & Wren, 2002). Slightly more recently, another well known mainstream management giant, Joseph Litterer (1970), claimed that a more general education was necessary for future management, including both exact sciences and humanistic knowledge.

### Rationality rendered un-linear

Regardless of how one should describe his methods, Holmes' success is an undeniable feature of most of his stories (even as Watson mentions a number of failures among the detective's cases). The astounding success rate owes much to Holmes' brilliance, yet it is also the result of the determinacy of the world that surrounds him: reality turns out to be legible to a discerning enough mind. But that is not enough to keep the great detective going—instead, his successes are interspersed by regular bouts of lethargic depression.

The outbursts of passionate energy when he performed the remarkable feats with which his name is associated were followed by reactions of lethargy during which he would lie about with his violin and his books, hardly moving save from the sofa to the table. (Doyle, 1981, p. 386)

Also, Holmes' rational method is not as linear as it seems at a first glance. This trait of Holmes' is a significant characteristic, central to the character and intricately bound with his method and outlook on the world; for it is the very transparency of the surrounding world we have just noted that causes Holmes the greatest discomfort. Devoid of the intellectual challenge of an unsolved case, he invariably descends into melancholy, depression, and drug abuse. Only the promise of inexplicability offered by a fresh mystery can keep him

from the cycle of self-destruction.

"My mind," he said, "rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation. That is why I have chosen my own particular profession, or rather created it, for I am the only one in the world." (ibid., p. 89-90)

Holmes comes alive through unsolved mysteries, needing them to relieve the tedium of existence. The promise of an unsolved case (or perhaps even of an insoluble case) is what caused him to become a consulting detective, and each solution he arrives at sends him back to the bleakness of a comprehensible world. Upon completion of one successful case, he explained why he was willing to partake in the investigation that offered little hope of a material reward, and his disappointment at the unravelling of this diversion:

"It saved me from ennui," he answered, yawning. "Alas! I already feel it closing in upon me. My life is spent in one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence. These little problems help me to do so." (ibid., p. 190)

Our own world rarely turns out to be as fully explicable as that of the great detective. While many managers have been, and indeed, still are, seeking for an ideal, perfect rationality of decisions, it is not a practically reachable aim, which an abundance of empirical research shows, beginning with the already mentioned studies of Herbert Simon and James March (Simon & March, 1958; March, 1994; Cohen et al., 1972). Time and many other practical factors turn managers' work into a much more intuitive pursuit than what has been proposed by Taylorists, indeed making prolonged decision making processes, aimed at perfect rationality – irrational from a practical point of view (Brunsson, 1982; 2007).

Much as the managerial rationality can be shown to be the creation, if not the fevered dream, of managerial theorists, so the distressing explicability of Sherlock Holmes' world can also be traced back to the detective himself. After all, we have already noted that he consciously chooses to limit his understanding in order to hone his detective skill, mirroring Paul Feyerabend's (1999) appraisal of the Western science, limiting the abundance of our surrounding world in order to promote its narrow goals.

There are a number of facets to this process of self-limitation, and as we believe they are illustrative of corresponding processes in management theory, we would like to try and enumerate them. Firstly, we have already discussed how Holmes restricts his knowledge to the issues he deems relevant to his pursuits. Secondly, the detective limits his observation only to the aspects he deems relevant to the investigation. This is not immediately obvious, as the details the detective deems important might not strike the casual observer (or reader) as immediately identifiable as notable, thus leaving the impression that Holmes insists on accounting for every minute detail uncovered in his investigations. This is not the case; at one point he cautions Watson on what he believes is the proper way of presenting the encountered data, clearly highlighting the active role of the viewer as the active editor of reality (cf. Berger, 1980):

Some facts should be suppressed, or, at least, a just sense of proportion should be observed in treating them. The only point in the case which deserved mention was the curious analytical reasoning from effects to causes, by which I succeeded in unravelling it. (Doyle, 1981, p. 90)

Thirdly, and perhaps the most importantly, the very choice of crime detection limits Sherlock Holmes to perceiving, and thus unravelling, only a particular (and not necessarily the most complex) strain of mystery. When in one of his black moods he craved for anything of interest,

by anything of interest, Holmes meant anything of criminal interest. There was the news of a revolution, of a possible war, and of an impending change of government; but these did not come within the horizon of my companion. I could see nothing recorded in the shape of crime which was not commonplace and futile. Holmes groaned and resumed his restless meanderings (Doyle, 1981, p. 913).

There is little reason to presume that criminal cases are particularly challenging to demystify. After all, Sherlock Holmes' equally astute civil servant brother, Mycroft, appears to find sufficient mental stimulation in dealing with the apparently non-criminal complexities of public governance. Indeed, as he has never been shown to suffer from the mood swings or depression plaguing Sherlock, it might be that the more world of socio-political relations managed to provide sufficient complexity to keep ennui at bay. On the other hand, Mycroft's obesity might be a sign

that some psychological problems plagued the older brother as well.

It is possible, then, that the world inhabited by Sherlock Holmes was explicable and rational only insofar as the detective chose to observe it as such. That choice, while allowing for the showcasing of great analytical skill, simultaneously encased Holmes in the unbearable setting unable to offer sufficient intellectual challenge to stimulate the genius mind. This description echoes Freud's (2002) notion of the unbearability of subjugation of the human psyche to the mores of the rational society (and while we have not encountered this particular comparison, parallels between Freud and Holmes have indeed been drawn by Shepherd, 1985 and Ginzburg, 1983), casting humans as the architects of their own suffering. This interpretation is further corroborated by two much more recent Holmes pastiches, both probing the limits of not just the detective's rationality but also, ultimately, his sanity.

Nicholas Meyer's (1985) *The Seven Percent Solution* (later filmed under the same title), postulates a nervous breakdown on part of the detective, brought about by the cumulative strain of overwork and cocaine addiction. This culminates in a rising obsession with the otherwise innocent mathematics teacher, professor Moriarty, and leads to long recuperation overseen by none other than Sigmund Freud (covered up by spurious stories concocted by Watson to disguise the detective's absence). Jeremy Paul's (1996) play *The Secret of Sherlock Holmes* suggests Moriarty as the detective's alter-ego, accusing Holmes of perpetrating the very crimes he later sought to uncover.

The resulting picture appears rather bleak, with Holmes as the creator of the insufferable rational world, and managers compelled to at last declare a belief in the impossible and perhaps harmful ideal of rationality.

The lecture of detective, and indeed, managerial narratives allows us, however, yet another position we can consider, as neither Holmes' narrow focus nor his horror of complete knowledge necessarily mirror the experience of the reader. Kissane and Kissane (1963, p. 360) describe one of the novels featuring the detective, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, as a ritual of reason, "the comforting drama of reason asserting its power in a natural world to which it is perfectly attuned." This is what Barbara Czarniawska and Carl Rhodes (2006) term a strong plot, an idea from popular

culture which, through its popularity and persuasive power is able to influence social practice, including management practice. We strongly agree with that observation, although in our opinion the word plot needlessly prioritizes narrative structure rather than ideas embedded in the text. But this reading is not the only one available for the story: Pierre Bayard (2008), considering only the evidence already provided in Arthur Conan Doyle's text, argues that Holmes' solution was completely mistaken, the titular dog was not the instrument of crime and its owner not the bloodthirsty murderer divined by the detective.

### **Conclusions: Lessons for managers from Sherlock Holmes' imaginative rationality**

What, then, can management learn from the extended, narrative presentation of the pursuit of rationality and, in particular, from studying the account of Holmes' pursuit? The answer, as we hope to have demonstrated, lies in presenting its strong links with imagination. We have already presented Gareth Morgan's (1993) view, that imagination is highly desirable for managers and organizational participants. For Morgan, its most prominent use is in creating extended metaphors that help one make cognitive leaps through creating new context for managerial problems. This may bring awareness and an openness to genuine change and help managers to avoid the pitfalls of stereotypical thinking as well as extend their readiness to embrace responsibility. It is also an exquisite tool for learning. Organizations would benefit much from a more extensive use of imagination. Imagination can also empower individuals and make them more intellectually courageous to deal with organizations. Thanks to Morgan's (1986) evocative image, we often picture organizations as elephants. We propose to imagine them as dragons – enigmatic, dangerous, mythical beasts that can be approached only by those of us who are not afraid to face them. In other words, imagination can, we believe, be useful for individual human actors, managers, participants and stakeholders who want to grasp the complicated patterns of information of the organizing processes and unveil the integration of what Gregory Bateson calls ecosystems (1979). It is thus one of the organizational "steps to the ecology of mind" (Bateson, 1972).

But imagination needs to be coupled to more traditional modes of sensemaking, most notably the rational mode of thinking espoused by the prevalent management discourse. This requires a more nuanced understanding of rationality than the linear, reductionist view. This is where we believe studying the conduct of Sherlock Holmes turns out to be particularly useful. As we hope to have shown, the detective's rationality is far from straightforward and uni-dimensional, even though it seems to be preoccupied with a desire to reach reductionist ideals of "pure reason". Yet Holmes' reasoning is never pure in terms of its ends: it always serves to facilitate acting, and his method is, at heart, a pragmatic approach as envisioned by Peirce (1955): the detective's knowledge and understanding of the world is confined to the spheres of his action: the detection (and, sometimes, prevention) of crime.

Moreover, embedded as it is within the rich narrative of the stories, the reductionist streak of Holmesian rationality can be seen as the source of terror for the mind faced with the disenchantment of the world (Weber, 1963), as a comforting ritual (pronounced as true with utmost finality and yet available for later reinterpretations and misreadings), and as a proposed interpretation that need not lay any claim to universality. As we have shown, this complex rational process embraces all the time a strong element of imagination. It is this ambivalence and complexity, coupled with extreme popularity that makes the Holmes canon a useful resource for investigating the role rationality plays in genres beyond the detective story – in our case, those of management. Poe (1976), whose work spanned a dizzying array of genres, insisted on the importance of imagination for any process of inquiry, scientific or artistic, and accordingly described Dupin as a person characterized by "the wild fervor, and the vivid freshness of his imagination" (Poe, 1982, p. 143). Similarly, the more incisive studies of managerial competence, while often retaining the commitment to rationality, do not hail it as the solution to all problems and certainly tend to describe it as a complex process.

The dark side of Holmesian rationality drives the hero to the use of narcotics and so often makes him waver on the brink of depression. This makes yet another proof that Holmes' mind is non-linear: what is unidimensional does not cast a shadow. Indeed, the dark tendencies we find in Holmes, are the consequences

of a vivid imagination, supporting reductionist reasoning processes: the need for complication, making unexpected connections, the relentless quest for intellectual stimulation. We propose Holmes, an admirable and heroic figure undercut by reductionist views and destructive impulses as an exemplar of the promise as well as the threat of rational management and of extending rationality with imagination, both as a reflection of the ongoing debates and as an inspiration for further inquiries.

Holmes thus embodies, in our argument, the joining of the rational and the imaginative, complete with paradoxes and inconsistencies embedded in both ideas. The product of this union, what we call here the extended Holmesian rationality, can be seen as a powerful, creative and constructive way of organizational thinking, in line with Bateson's (1972; 1979) ideas about the ecology of mind. Bateson argued that contemporary philosophy is concentrated on purpose and means. This way of conceiving of the world, which we recognize in the reductionist managerialist theories and models, many of which are in use up to this date, contributes to the creating and upholding of an unbalanced system in society as in nature. Reductionist thinking creates a urge to control, and an illusion that it can be fulfilled. Management becomes an autocratic rule aimed at changing the organization and the environment to fit to the plans and predetermined aims. This puts the ecosystem, broadly understood to include both nature and human culture, out of balance and makes dependency and competition the only working regulators. However, there are many natural flows and regulators within the system that could be used to manage in accord with them. Instead of forcing the actors and resources to cooperate, a management more aware of the complexities of the ecosystem could use what is already present in the system. The system does not work in a linear way and to control it, one needs humility, based on the recognition that consciousness and reason alone cannot provide all the answers. A unity of reason, traditional managerial rationality and imagination – or what we call extended Holmesian rationality can provide what Bateson (1972) saw as *complete knowledge* needed for the management of complex organizations. As the example of Holmes shows, this rationality is not devoid of its flaws and shadows, but we do not believe in a shadowless world

under the sun.

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