Multiple roles or rural human service managers in a cascading change context.

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ABSTRACT

Managers of health and community services in rural areas, like their urban counterparts, were facing new demands during the 1990s as a result of changes in the social and community services industry. At the forefront of managers’ daily thinking and activities was organisational change that saw community based agencies becoming ‘community businesses’, the cut and thrust of organisational amalgamations, service downsizing, contract and tendering, and the development of service partnerships. For managers with approaches located in professional value systems, these changes required not only new skills, but also the ability to assume multiple roles and identities according to the subtleties of their complex environments.

This Paper is based on research undertaken for a Ph.D. that used in-depth interviewing to collect the narratives of eight rural managers of social and community services across a two year period between 1997 and 1999. The managers participating in the study identified issues related to rural community living and to the expectations placed on them as managers of change. They reflected on the multiple roles they assumed in the course of managing change in the organisational setting, and on the choices they made in response to managing their own change over the period of the research. Drawing on the ‘insider’ data relating to managers’ understanding of self, and their experiences at a personal, professional and managerial level an understanding of the impacts of multiple roles in a rural context is developed.
INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses one aspect of a PhD research project investigating the lived experiences of rural managers working in Social and Community Services (SACS). It was carried out during the latter part of the 1990s - a period of rapid political, fiscal and structural shifts, demands for greater accountability, a tendering and contracting environment and concomitant uncertainty about the future of organisations in the business of human service delivery (Hough 1999). Neo-liberal and managerialist approaches coupled with the rural recession, a focus on globalisation and significant agricultural re-structuring, precipitated a veritable cascade of change in the SACS industry. The ideologies and approaches underpinning these changes are well known to us and have been discussed and debated at length by health and welfare policy experts (Considine 1988; Ernst 2000; Hancock 1999a, 1999b; Walker and Walker 1998).

In the SACS industry managers have been expected to take up corporate management models and focus on economic efficiency, accountability, strategic planning, quality frameworks, and risk management within a competitive tendering context. This was often in the face of diminishing community and government contributions to the funding base of the organisation. The implications of these wide ranging shifts for rural Australia, and the particular impacts they have been having on rural communities, have been well documented (Alston 1996, 2000; Lonne 1990, Lonne and Cheers 2000; Passfield et al 1996; Sawyer and Munn 1998; Sjostedt n.d.).

While much has been written about the management of organisational change in recent years (Bridges 1995; Handy 1995; Hilmer and Donaldson 1996; Vaill 1989), little, if any, research has focussed specifically on the nature of the experiences of managers in the rural SACS industry, or on how these managers understand and experience their role as managers of organisational change.

My particular interest was focussed on developing an understanding of the nature of the experience of rural managers. The primary research question was ‘What is the nature of the experience of professional managers of community based, health and welfare services who are responsible for the management of organisational change?’.

Additional questions were related to the relationship between organisational change management theory and the practice experience, the factors that affect managers in their performance of managing organisational change, the particular issues that these
managers face in moving their programs to a ‘businesslike’ structure and operation, and how these managers understand their role within their management context.

The research strategy involved a qualitative approach with an emphasis on deep description for the development of understanding. Features of the strategy included ethnomethodological orientations to the defined group with some action learning aspects (Czarniawaska 1998, Denzin and Lincoln 1998, Prideaux 1990). I used in-depth interviewing as the primary form of interaction with the participants, and found this to be effective in capturing the narrative accounts of managing organisational change. I also kept a detailed diary of my own experiences and reflections of a change management role and my ‘learnings’ throughout the period.

The eight participants included myself and were located in rural Victoria and South Australia. We were responsible for implementing significant organisational change in health/welfare agencies serving rural populations of up to 200,000 spanning 15,000 square kilometres or more. All participants were designated managers, directors, or chief executive officers of small to medium sized community services, with the role of manager defined as the senior (or next to most senior) person in an organisation responsible for the day to day oversight, planning and development of services. All organisations had annual budgets of less than $10 million dollars per annum and employed up to 100 Full Time Equivalent staff. Rural was defined geographically as being outside of accepted metropolitan boundaries and regarded as part of a rural region by the government of the day, though the notion of ‘rural’ is problematic as discussed by Briskman (1999).

All participants had tertiary qualifications in human sciences or humanities. They had worked within their professional discipline for a number of years prior to taking up a management role. It was anticipated that there may have been issues associated with dissonance between professional and managerial values, and with adjustment to the managerial roles as described by Prideaux (1993). In addition, all participants both lived and worked in the geographic region in which they were employed (as defined by the Department of Human Services, Victoria, or Family and Community Services, South Australia, regional boundaries) and most lived in the rural town in which the ‘head office’ of their organisation was based.

Six (6) perspectives were chosen through which to analyse and discuss the data as follows:
Perspective One  An overview of the organisational and role-related events impacting on the managers participating in this research.

Perspective Two  The themes and issues associated with the management of change raised during the interviews with participants.

Perspective Three  Engagement in Research as Learning and Theories and Frameworks underpinning the management of change.

Perspective Four  The underlying concerns, emotions, understandings and meanings associated with managing organisational change which can be drawn from stories of their experiences as told by the managers.

Perspective Five  The Shadows of Change Management

Perspective Six  The Researcher’s Reflections - from the Diary

Throughout the period of the study a wide array of activities was being carried out simultaneously by the participant managers who reported that their work required the achievement of change in major areas of organisational operation including:

- governance structures – including management and memberships of organisations, legal status, governance responsibility and delegation

- partnerships and alliances – joint initiatives and support that promoted the security and well being of the agency

- employment arrangements – changes to employment conditions and contractual arrangements, enterprise agreements, workplace agreements and salary arrangements

- financial base of agency – funding agreements, increase in funding through providing more services, attempts to secure solid financial basis of organisation, increase of capacity to achieve ‘critical mass’

- organisational structures

- roles of professional staff and their qualifications

- attention to quality assurance issues, accountability across an array of agency operations
This data highlights the extent of the changes that were occurring throughout the study period and gives some clues to the impacts these changes were having on managers and others with whom they worked (for example - staff, volunteers, local community members). The changes were essentially driven by shifts in government policy and new demands of funding bodies in readiness for competitive tendering – for instance, the introduction of quality improvement, strategic planning and risk management regimes. It was evident that organisational change was taking place at many levels within the organisations concerned in conjunction with related changes in the external environment. Managers were placed at the interstices in this cascade of change.

**MULTIPLE ROLES IN A RURAL CONTEXT**

The managers participating in the study were acutely aware of the impact of specifically rural factors on their working lives. This led to frequent discussion of features of rural contexts - both the positive and negative - throughout the course of the research. Like many rural people who state a preference for living in country communities, the participants were committed to living and working in rural locations in spite of the perceived constraints. However, this choice meant being significantly mobile both within the catchment area of their organisation and beyond. It was common for managers to travel to other facilities or offices of their organisation on a weekly basis and to a metropolitan centre at least monthly.

Of the range of issues associated with being located in a rural setting, the following were identified from the data as most important in terms of a change management role:

1. Career and job mobility constraints usually referred to the limited number of equivalent or more senior positions available in country communities for which a manager might aspire, and in terms of the level of mobility needed to develop a career in management. For most of the participants a change of job meant having to move house and community, or choosing a lifestyle that included extensive commuting from home. Two managers were frequently away from home overnight and all regularly worked hours in excess of 60 per week in order to cope with the ‘ordinary’ travelling demands of the job. Three managers were particularly reluctant to move from their home town with one clearly articulating
the difficulty: “I want a job here [voice emphasis added] . . . I’m unable to move from this town.”

ii. The connections between family, community and employment are much stronger than in urban settings. As one participant stated: “It all happens in the same place and time frame.”

iii. All managers experienced a high level of visibility in their country locations which meant that all their activities and relationships – as manager, as family members, as members of groups, and as community members – were noted. One manager explained the constraints succinctly: “Every aspect of my life is under observation.”

iv. In association with (iii) above, the participants spoke of the multiple roles they were aware of in their daily lives. The implication was that all roles are under scrutiny within and outside their employing organisation. This leads to a sense of increased pressure to ‘fit’ within the range of acceptable role behaviours.

v. In relation to the change management role, the participants commented in their individual interviews on the nature of decisions which were often about service delivery that had to span large geographic distances with small resources: “It’s about service delivery across large areas with tiny staff resources.” They also described management in the rural context as being responsible for dispersed services and staff, and multiple locations in communities different to that where they lived and had their work base.

vi. Small rural agencies experience multiple forms of isolation through the impact of distance, the size of the organisation (that is, lack of size results in a greater sense of isolation), and because of issues of trust and relationships with other organisations. In addition, isolation was described in terms of distance from funding bodies and sources, and access to intellectual support and training, the lack of time and the costs associated with travel, accommodation and training. In particular, the lack of formal training in organisational change management either prior to assuming a management role, or subsequently, was noted.

The social role theories of Mead, Turner and Goffman draw attention to ‘role taking’ and ‘role making’ together with the impacts of culture and social norms on role enactment using a symbolic interactionist perspective. In addition, Goffman suggests that social life can be divided into ‘front regions’ in which encounters are
characterised by formal roles, and ‘back regions’ in which individuals are – as it were – behind the scenes. This was evident in the narratives of managers who told many of their stories ‘off camera’, giving access to roles which lie behind or beyond the ‘formal’ and the ‘social/familial’. Formal roles can be described as those which are defined and public as in a Job Description or given by managers as an explicit and rational account of the role tasks they undertake. Social or familial roles are defined by social membership as in neighbour, volunteer or school committee member or through reference to family relationships as in daughter or mother.

I was interested in the roles that could be drawn from the stories of managers – the roles that are implicit, embedded, undiscussed and unidentified, but played out by managers as they go about their work. The stories about change were told by managers as accounts of their activities and experiences, and they included descriptions of context and characters as integral to the development of meaning and understanding. The roles identified were not tagged with any value judgement or seen as carrying pejorative meanings – they just ‘are’ – as an account of managers’ actions in response to complex situations and constantly shifting nuances of meaning that require perpetual re-interpretation.

I was drawn to Rodham’s (2000) approach to the investigation of role which allows consideration of the activities and performance aspects of role, as well as the interpretive element. This combination had the opposite outcome to reductionist approaches allowing recognition of a considerably wider range of roles that reflect the particular circumstances, antecedents and potential outcomes of the role activity. Further, this approach exposed the tensions, dilemmas and issues faced by managers in performing intra, inter and extra-organisational work.

Table 1 provides a list of roles identified from the transcripts of stories of managers engaged in the study. Unlike earlier authors - for instance Mintzberg (1973 and 1998) and Lupton (1883) - I deliberately expanded the list and in many cases I have used the participants’ own expressions. However, in developing this Table, I have not attempted to be exhaustive. Nor have I included the formal roles of managers which were provided explicitly in position descriptions or by the managers when consciously giving a description of their roles. The effect is to give greater credence to managers’ descriptions and meanings of what they were doing, and to role nuance. It also illustrates how the context, specific influences on the individual manager, and interrelationships are embedded in the role descriptor. This provides a deeper
understanding of the meaning of the role to the people concerned and also offers insights into the relationships with rural role sets.

**TABLE 1: Roles Identified from the Transcript Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accreditee</th>
<th>Organisational enhancer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alliance builder</td>
<td>Organisational glue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banger of heads</td>
<td>Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behind-the-scenes worker</td>
<td>Partnership developer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budgeter</td>
<td>Peacemaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenger</td>
<td>Performer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleague</td>
<td>Planner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitor</td>
<td>Power broker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controller</td>
<td>Power-seeker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>Predictor/anticipator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De-briefer</td>
<td>Protector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developer</td>
<td>Public face/profiler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnoser/assessor</td>
<td>Re-appraiser/re-evaluator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educator</td>
<td>Re-framer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire builder</td>
<td>Result seeker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groundbreaker</td>
<td>Risk-taker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hirer and firer</td>
<td>Seeker of expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information manager</td>
<td>Standard-setter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediary</td>
<td>Subordinate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeper of confidences</td>
<td>Sustainer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner</td>
<td>Tenderer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiator</td>
<td>Thinker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunist</td>
<td>Value manager</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It can be seen from Table 1 that some roles have the potential to be conflictual - for instance, protector and banger-of-heads which were drawn from accounts involving agency staff. Some roles are more likely to complement one another as in the case of organisational enhancer and seeker of expertise; while others appear unrelated to what is traditionally considered to be a manager’s role (for example customer and accreditee). In addition, the roles can also be considered as ‘layered’ in that they interlock as change management activities are carried out. Or perhaps a more fitting metaphor is that of a globe containing all possible roles from which a manager can select. As the context in which the manager is acting triggers a move from one role to the next, the chosen role lights up and takes precedence over others.

A further intention in the development of Table 1 was to expose the less often acknowledged roles undertaken by managers of organisational change. To illustrate this I have included the following extract from a transcript.
“I’m unable to be directive, I need to be collaborative. So, I’m unable to go to this meeting with this idea without at least talking to a) the chair person that I want to nominate, um, or b) um, without the person who is the chairperson of that committee or of that, of that group. It’s only a sort of, you know, a, a liaison group. Um, but in terms of the issue in relation to meetings and stacking, I mean that’s part of the integral process. You can’t really get away from it, but what you want to do is, you can use that in a way that’s negative, um, to the sense of empowerment of participants or you can, um, do your homework by discussing it with different players to enhance your own knowledge and impression of where the group is at and work through getting the best outcomes by going in with some, some extra knowledge. And I think that’s OK.”

Roles drawn from this extract of the data could include: collaborator, initiator (of idea), nominator, and information seeker by ‘keying in’ to a frame that acknowledged the formal roles and relationship of the manager to the meeting membership. An alternative interpretation of roles could include: behind-the-scenes worker, planner, knowledge seeker, learner, diagnoser/assessor, power broker, and result seeker by ‘keying in’ to another frame. This acknowledges the importance of ‘frame’ in determining whether or not the use of specific roles is seen as legitimate. For instance, in the eyes of some of the stakeholders present at the meeting some roles would not be acceptable or made explicit given the sensitivities of the parties.

Role and identity are closely aligned and have provided fertile ground for research in psychology and sociology. Social identity theory proposes each of us have many social identities which are related to our social memberships and at least partially composed of the roles we undertake (Pratt and Foreman 2000). As individuals, we constantly integrate aspects of role and social membership and hence maintain our sense of identity moving between identities according to the expectations of our social context. For managers, this can prove hazardous due to role discontinuity, role conflict and role distancing (Handy 1993, Kahn et al 1981).

The enacting of management inevitably draws a range of responses from organisational members and external stakeholders with the individual manager sited at various systemic and interpersonal intersections as change takes place. The interview data revealed examples of these sites on a frequent basis as participants commented on the difficulties such as:
i. coping with the ideologies of ‘community’ organisation and community ‘business’ (“you’d get out if you really wanted to run like a business.”) – role discontinuity;

ii. the realisation that declaring a conflict of interest or abstaining from a vote or discussion may be paramount to a declaration of competitor status – role conflict;

iii. carrying out change activities using managerial rhetoric to publicly demonstrate preferred characteristics of a leader whilst experiencing this behaviour as at odds with professional and personal principles and self image – leading to role distancing.

As a general comment it was evident from the research data that managers were constantly battling with task-related and emotional workloads of organisational change and their need to retain some sense of integrated self, purpose and control within their rural context. As one of the participants commented: “We’re moving into, we’re living out a very different model of organisational life than perhaps we were a decade or half a decade ago.”

The participants had varying degrees of awareness of the number and complexity of roles they were undertaking and the impacts of these roles on their identity. However, they were clearly aware that their circumstances had changed dramatically and of their need for management development. At the present time formal training in management (or change management) is optional and not highly regarded or valued by managers in the context under consideration. However, the participant managers articulated the value they placed on the learning they achieved in the course of being engaged in the project which was qualitatively different to that experienced in short courses. These sentiments have been echoed by managers in metropolitan areas who have had the opportunity to attend specific courses with focus and encouragement of reflective practices and lifelong learning capacities.

Comments made about the research process as ‘active learning’ included references to the interview time as an opportunity to exchange information, to reflect on one’s own style and practices, a time when one’s worst fears and worst case scenarios could be discussed, for talking about the underlying meaning of behaviours, and as personalised therapeutic time. Managers explored their own ideas and responses to change, their rationalisations and their needs. While some accounts of reflective
practice are too long to be included in this paper some of the comments indicating the value of this form of learning include:

“Well it’s probably been healthy, it’s probably good for me to sit here and babble on and not make much sense to you, but . . . it does make sense actually! Its good because its like somebody that you can actually talk to about it [management] and you don’t get that just in your day to day work. ....... I like the process.”

“I had an experience recently with a manager who, whose modus operandi basically was to put you off guard – make you feel insecure . . . . . and I found that incredibly insulting and, um, provocative . . . . I think that some people without intending to might be intimidating. Sometimes, for example, my size is intimidating to people and I can be, I’ve been sort of .... volatile.”

“some people lean forward and speak very softly when they’re actually being very threatening, or when they’re actually constraining the space to manoeuvre in. He would do that, he would be doing, you know, this sort of leaning on the arm of the chair or whatever and then when he’s actually going to pin someone to the wall he’ll actually lean right forward and he’ll lean on the thing and he’ll just speak very softly, but he’ll really hold their gaze and it’s like his whole being has come into a, you know, very narrow, very narrow focus, you know, we’ve had the openness, we’ve had the relaxed exchange now, this is down the line sort of stuff. Yes.... yes, so I suppose we all use .... I know my eyes drift away if I’m thinking. I actually find it quite hard to hold eye contact when I’m trying to draw out some more abstract concept from in my head. And then I find that when I’ve thought about it, I’ll come back to the person and kind of address the thought to them.”

These excerpts illustrate the reflection that participants used to develop deeper understanding of themselves and their behaviours as change managers. It indicates the need to embrace reflective practice as a key element of teaching and learning approaches. This means constructing management development opportunities based on approaches similar to those described by Boucher and Gardner (2000) who found
that reflective practice included both reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action, with learning, itself, an emancipatory and empowering experience.

The use of competency management models and formulae for undertaking complex tasks – for instance SWOT analyses, marketing plans and organisational culture surveys – need to be challenged. Managers rightly suspect these are too simplistic to be of much use at their ‘coalface’. They would be better encouraged to find ways of achieving deeper understanding of the issues that impinge on their activities or develop their own frameworks for use in their work. This conclusion is similar to that reached by Gardner and Boucher (2000) who commented:

“It appears that the issues faced by these managers (such as value clashes, complex environments, doubts about rational, mechanistic models of management and the gap between management theory and their experience) mean existing competency models, while of interest, are not particularly helpful in identifying what a particular manager needs to learn.”

Attention to the management development needs of isolated managers is limited with pursuit of training and support opportunities usually due to the initiative of individuals. Of the eight managers in this study over two years, one engaged in post graduate development, one had attended TAFE training in management and one attended a short course in management and was dissatisfied. In addition, it continues to be difficult to recruit and retain skilled managers in rural human service agencies. Of the eight participants in the project, only two are in their original management position and, of the others, two have left management, and two have re-structured their roles to exclude management tasks. The impacts of such turnover are costly ones.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I have attempted to sketch a picture of the complexity and subtleties of role and identity for rural managers who perform change management activities as an integral part of their daily lives. The findings of my study challenge the apparent simplicity of managerial roles as described by Mintzberg (1973, 1998) and Lupton (1983) and highlight the need to connect role, identity and context when considering the development of management education. The ten (10) management roles of Mintzberg or, alternatively, three (3) main roles of “social engineer, organizational clinicians
and leaders” proposed by Lupton are too reductionist and do little to contribute to understanding the ‘ground’ from which role and identity need be explored. More relevant is Rodham’s (2000) proposal that role is “a dynamic interaction between role incumbent and role set(s) and vice versa.”. She uses Goffman’s ‘Frame Analysis’ as a means for exploring the complexity of role and role set(s) interrelationships for the purpose of moving “towards an explanation and understanding of the processes which produce the outcomes.”

Our increased understanding of role in rural contexts, and the knowledge that rural managers favour opportunities for developing reflective practice, need to underpin the design of management development opportunities. At the present time such opportunities are little more than spasmodic and haphazard. Further, I suspect it is not in the interests of key stakeholders to be serious about developing rural managers lifelong learning capabilities and reflective practice in spite of the long term benefits to organisations, communities and managers, themselves. The challenges that accompany exploration, reflection and deep learning can be uncomfortable. Rural managers are clearly not a useful source of revenue to training providers and they may be easier to control by funding bodies if they suffer doubts, uncertainty and role overload. A further irony is that managers much prefer to control their governance bodies than to be constrained by them – and actively work to achieve this as a means to reduce an already high role burden.

However, these barriers are surmountable. There are opportunities for key stakeholders to work in concert, to develop shared values in relation to continuous learning for managers and clear expectations as to what this means in practice. Establishing the preconditions for engaging managers in developmental learning through addressing access, time commitment and costs could also be achieved. For example, agency governance groups could provide resources to managers and ‘locate’ their expectations of the benefits this affords the organisation through including continuous learning expectations in employment contracts and performance appraisal processes. This would need to include attention to processes of learning rather than outcomes. Funding bodies could attach continuous learning for managers to funding and service agreements, quality assurance frameworks and program requirements as they do already in some cases where there are specific qualifications required of service staff. Training institutions could review the nature and the costs of delivering
training to rural managers using the experience of pilot programs that encourage commitment to achieving lifelong learning capabilities.

Most importantly, management development needs to be delivered in a manner that assumes complexity and multiplicity of roles and the concomitant dilemmas that emerge for the identity of managers. It needs to be delivered by teaching staff who have developed exceptional skills and who are confident and competent to work collaboratively with sophisticated and often disturbing material including emotional distress. Educators need to maintain relationships with managers that endure over time and offer flexible responses encompassing coaching, mentoring, debriefing, support and a sense of mutual searching for understanding. Coming to grips with the notion that one’s identity can be challenged, under stress and be subject to unexpected alteration should be regarded as a normal part of the change management process and experience.

It is my contention that the material used in training of rural SACS managers needs to be drawn in a clear and powerful manner from the SACS field, and generated from the lived experiences of managers, rather than relying on corporate management and business knowledge bases. This would promote examination of the ideological, the personal, the professional and the nature of rural. Training and support approaches must acknowledge that the roles of managers are ‘slippery’ – they are of a chameleon nature and often evade easy interpretation. It is active learning and reflection that need encouragement through discussion and recognition that change management in SACS is ‘acting on multiple interstices’.

In conclusion, the nature of rural communities with their additional demands, conservatism, lack of privacy and the enmeshment of role and identity poses dilemmas that demand attention. It requires far more than a distance learning package, offering of one-off subjects, occasional workshops, setting up video conferencing and using the Internet. It means using all of these techniques and more – but essentially it demands the preparedness to provide time, excellence of teaching and a commitment to personalised, mutual learning all of which are vital to managers in isolation.
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