

In Search of ‘Managerial Work’: Past, Present and Future of an Analytical Category

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Based on a comprehensive review of literature, the paper examines how ‘managerial work’ as a fluid analytical category has been approached methodologically, theoretically and empirically for more than 60 years. In particular, it highlights the existence of competing scholarly understandings regarding its nature, performance, meaning and politics. The authors suggest that subsequent empirical investigations have too often worked, methodologically and theoretically, to slot in, and thus effectively reduce, the term to a particular pre-existing box, rather than exploring open-endedly the what and how, but also the why of ‘managerial work’ as a distinct mode of situated ordering. Having represented the concept’s past and present by identifying four distinct research approaches reflected in representative publications, the authors suggest that more attention should be devoted to a mode of analytical departure that promises to address directly the suggested shortcomings in the literature. Specifically, it is argued that much could be gained if contemporary notions of practice were brought into the study of managerial work. To this end, the authors outline the contours of a practice-based approach as a sensitizing framework for understanding managerial work by highlighting the situated, relational, sociomaterial, meaning-making and consequence-oriented analytical foci the approach suggests, and suggesting a number of conjoint research questions, as well as acknowledging subsequent limitations.

Introduction

In 2001, reflecting on critical next steps for organization theory, Barley and Kunda (2001, p. 90) warned that ‘the dearth of data on what people actually do – the skills, knowledge and practices that comprise their routine work – leaves us with increasingly anachronistic theories and outdated images of work and how it is organized’ (see also Akin 2000). Though Philips and Lawrence (2012) argued this absence has since

begun to be addressed, for example when examining identity and institutional work, the diagnosis still notably applies in relation to managerial work. In this area of study, known in North American literature as ‘managerial work and behavior’ (see Tengblad 2012), attention to ordinary managerial activity in its processual, material, relational and historical iterations has often been missing, or reduced to and substituted by abstract categories. In particular, empirical realities of managerial work have too frequently been analysed via the same set of dominant categories, thus making the task of developing novel insights and moving the field forward more challenging. In this paper, we discuss this state of affairs by tracing how the specific analytical category – ‘managerial work’ – has been defined, ‘operationalized’ and studied for more than 60 years. In doing so, we identify and outline

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four research approaches, represented by key works and encapsulating certain analytical and theoretical assumptions, which act as continually prominent reference points ordering later engagements. These also represent the notable ways in which the category continues to be ‘sliced up’ analytically, occasionally despite authors’ intentions to the contrary.

Such historical reflection is particularly important in the context of managerial work because so much of the field remains highly influenced by notable past works. It is also vital, given that relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to this topic in recent decades, and almost thirty years have passed since the last dedicated reviews (Hales 1986; Martinko and Gardner 1985; Stewart 1989; Willmott 1984, 1987). This is in spite of increasing centrality of both managers and managerial discourse (Cunliffe 2009; Grey 2005; Kotter 1982), the wider implications of management done ‘badly’ (evidenced by the continued plethora of corporate scandals), and the coinciding quest for efficient or ‘good’ management, of which the recent debates concerning evidence-based management are but one notable expression (see Kepes *et al.* 2014; Pfeffer and Sutton 2006; Rousseau 2006, 2012). While some recent reviews were produced, most are either focused on niche topics such as distinctiveness of managerial work as a field (Noordegraaf and Stewart 2000), managing in small firms (Floren 2006) or managing internationally (Andersson and Floren 2008), or limited to examining a smaller number of key contributions. For instance, Tengblad and Vie (2012) restrict their focus to 21 notable studies, thus omitting other relevant perspectives, such as labour process (see Cunliffe 2009). As a result, the field of managerial work as it presently stands lacks an up-to-date wide-ranging account of scholarly foundations upon which engagements can be based and further developed (Boote and Beile 2005).

With such considerations in mind, this paper presents a chronological account of the field, specifically of the period from 1951 to 2015. Given limitations of space, it focuses on what Tengblad and Vie (2012) call the ‘management and work behaviour’ literature, but considers further notable perspectives, chiefly labour process. It also introduces a theoretical lens – practice-based studies (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011; Miettinen *et al.* 2009; Nicolini 2012; see Lounsbury and Beckman 2015) – as a promising means of addressing some of the shortcomings of existing approaches, aimed at facilitating the making of novel connections. We suggest that this

approach stands as a flexible theory–methods toolkit suitable for analytically engaging situated insights, toward furthering rich, empirically based understanding. In doing so, we present a research plateau to work from, by consolidating existing research, establishing thematic and empirical connections between disparate literatures, and identifying valuable opportunities (but also subsequent limitations), which follow from the practice-based approach as a sensitizing framework.

Unlike previous reviews concerned with identifying shared categories to enable generalization (e.g. Hales 1986), we prioritize including a range of perspectives over scholarly concerns regarding replication, with the aim of providing a richer and more nuanced picture of the field. In addition, the results are presented in a temporally linear fashion. Importantly, this is more for ease of presentation than to suggest an unproblematic linearity of research approaches. As we portray below, these are occasionally internally inconsistent, as well as often overlapping. Indeed, some key works could easily have been placed in more than one, given the analytical approach taken, or assumptions made. Complexity within and across approaches, which we more obviously depict in supplementary tables, should thus be kept in mind throughout.

The paper is structured as follows. We begin by describing the research methodology, and account for its necessary boundaries. We then discuss the results of the review by period, introducing key empirical, theoretical and methodological themes. Based on this, we highlight notable absences, and outline how the practice-based approach can meaningfully contribute, by identifying promising analytical foci and research questions, but also acknowledging limitations.

Methodology

As previously noted, how ‘managerial work’ is operationalized has a direct consequence on what is included. This is particularly relevant, given that this review aims to engage across distinct literatures, over a significant period of time, concerning a category fraught with difficulty. For instance, what do we mean by ‘managerial’? How is it distinct from other categories, such as supervisory or administrative? On what basis can the distinction be made or sustained? Whose definition counts and with what effects? Equally, what is definitionally implied by ‘work’ is also relevant. Is managerial work identical to ‘managerial behavior’ (Hales 1986), or is Stewart’s (1989,

p. 4) distinction between 'managerial work', 'managerial jobs' and 'managerial behavior' more fitting?

We thus faced challenges of balancing comprehensiveness against analytical focus. To accomplish this balance, we set several boundaries, which also stand as our limitations. First, given limited space, we restricted the in-depth review to 1951–2015, commencing with Carlson's (1951) seminal study. In this, we partly followed other reviews, most notably Tengblad and Vie's (2012). As a result, several foundational works, such as Barnard's (1938) and Simon's (1945), are briefly acknowledged or entirely excluded (for more in-depth discussion, see for instance O'Connor 2011). Secondly, we limited our search to studies explicitly concerned with everyday work of individuals formally part of organizational hierarchy as 'managers', and tasked with overseeing staff and/or tasks, i.e. those understood as engaged in 'managerial work'. Consequently, related accounts of everyday organizational life, such as Blau's (1965), were omitted. While we acknowledge the importance and difficulty of defining precisely who managers are and on what basis, this decision also reflected our primary interest in actual work (in its verb form) of those identified in situ of belonging to this category (see also Hales 1986, p. 90). Finally, scholars have begun to explore mundane work of managers as leaders, *de facto* challenging the traditional distinction between the two terms (e.g. Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003), with which we agree. However, because of the vastness of the leadership literature and our focus on managerial work and behaviour as a literature with its own history, we did not include the former in any substantive way.

We originally began this review with a structured keyword search, informed by an initial reading of existing reviews. Like similar engagements (e.g. Crossan and Apaydin 2010), we selected peer reviewed journal articles as the primary data source. Books and book chapters were also included, while unpublished articles, working papers, conference proceedings and dissertations were excluded. To carry out the search, we used three databases: Business Source Premier, ABI/Inform and Thomson ISI Web of Knowledge Social Sciences Division. This search was based on combinations of five search words (identified as traditionally related) with 'managerial': 'work', 'behavior', 'jobs', 'practices', 'roles' and 'activities'.¹ To minimize the number of preliminary articles, generic terms such as 'managing' and

'management' were excluded, as when included the search yielded more than 20,000 articles. When the search terms were initially inputted in May 2011, this generated more than 2100 titles. Based on our own scholarly interest in work, in selecting further we focused on managerial activities. We were also aware of space-related limitations. Thus titles emphasizing values, motivation, cognition, leadership, ethics, strategy, corporate governance or work–life balance were subsequently excluded. On these criteria alone, the number of articles was reduced to 246. In instances when there was doubt regarding relevance, we reviewed introductions and conclusions, and separated articles into three lists. List 'A' included definitely relevant studies; 'B' articles were possibly relevant; and 'C' were clearly not relevant. There were 84 articles in list 'A', 101 in list 'B', and 61 in list 'C'.

Following this separation, we independently reviewed full text versions of the remaining articles from lists 'A' and 'B'. Based on our own scholarly understanding of relative contribution and quality,² we eliminated 72, most of which were published in tier III journals and had low citation patterns. We placed the remaining papers into categories divided by study type (empirical and non-empirical: review, industry, theory) and contextual focus. Where several papers produced similar findings, the article with greatest number of citations was included, bringing the total to 92 articles. To ensure that no relevant articles were accidentally excluded, however, we conducted a backward and forward snowballing search based on reference lists of above articles (Bakker 2010), including major previous reviews (Hales 1986; Martinko and

jobs; managerial activities; managerial practices; work activities; what managers do; nature of managerial work. Individual searches also included the following limitations: #1 or #2 or #3 or #4 or #5 or #6 or #7 or #8 or #9; limit all searches to English. We recognize of course that this choice of keywords, though informed by an extensive reading of the literature, is nevertheless inherently limiting. We have sought to address that by conducting further steps beyond this initial search in order to give a more comprehensive overview (i.e. by not relying solely on the keywords themselves), but also by openly acknowledging the subsequent limitations here and in the Conclusion of the article. The latter includes a particular historical understanding of words and their meanings, which have been undoubtedly relevant in this instance as well.

²In this, we were again inevitably conditioned by our own historical existence in a scholarly domain where research quality is partly expressed in the ranking of the journal in which it is published. We acknowledge the possible limitations of this, and have sought, as above, to address this in part by expanding this initial search including other relevant texts as outlined.

¹The particular search terms were as follows: managerial work; managerial behavior; managerial roles; managerial

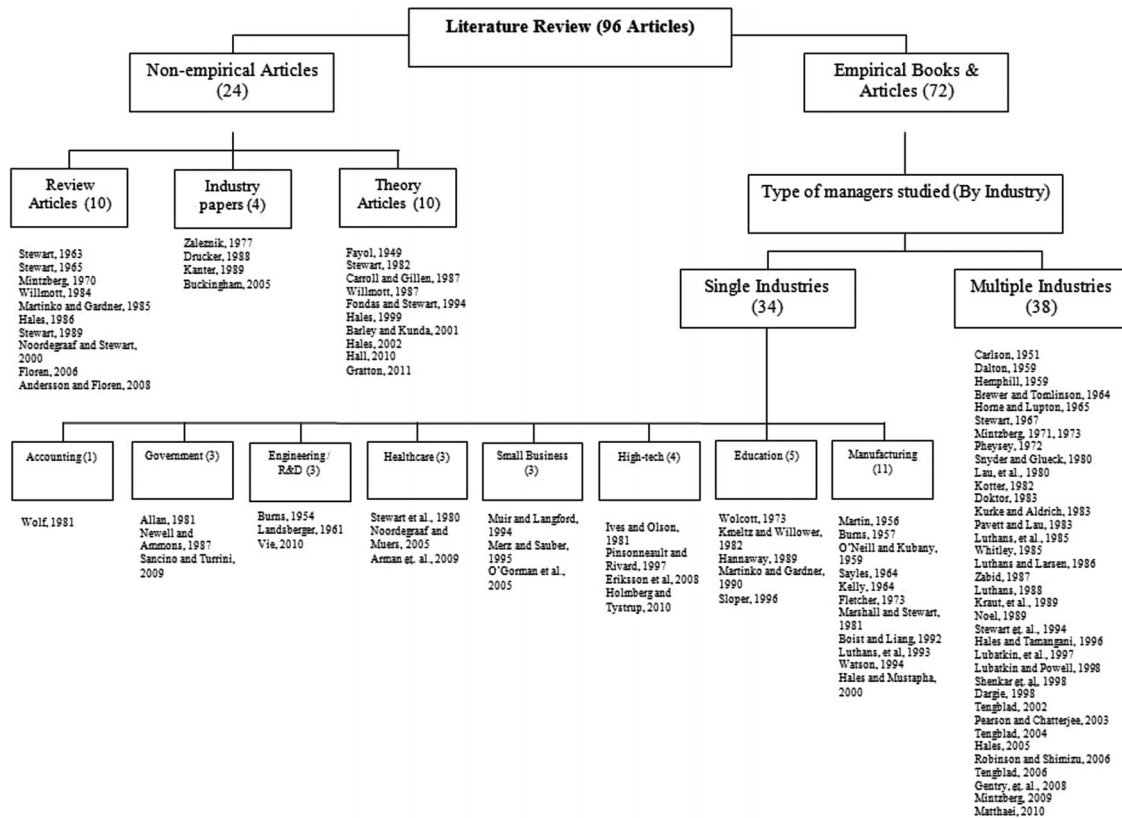


Figure 1. Initial classification of managerial work literature by study type and contextual focus

Gardner 1985; Stewart 1989; Willmott 1984, 1987). Four articles were added to 92 originally identified. In all, this brought the original base sample of papers to 96. These, organized by type, are listed in Figure 1.

Having reached this juncture, however, we were reminded of the evolution of disparate literatures over time, as well as the inherent limitations of a structured keyword-only search, which in this case omitted some widely recognized works, such as Gouldner's (1954) *Wildcat Strike*, but also Mintzberg's (2009) *Managing*. The first step thus had to be supplemented if we were to progress toward our aim of a more nuanced understanding of the field. The second stage of this review was therefore an exploratory search, aimed at filling in notable gaps, and moving beyond the 'usual suspects' of key texts (see Tengblad and Vie 2012, for instance). We conducted a further 'snowball' search, commencing from reference lists of other review-oriented articles and books (e.g. Cunliffe 2009; Noordegraaf and Stewart 2000), to identify accounts whose contributions we saw as crucial to such understanding. Related studies in labour process and critical management studies traditions, largely

under-cited in this mainstream literature on managerial work and behaviour, were subsequently included, as well as ethnographic accounts that engaged 'managerial work' as morality in practice (Jackall (2010 [1989])).³ Finally, the same process was followed to include recent literature that had appeared after our initial search was conducted, and which relied on or spoke to key sources in the field as reference (e.g. Cloutier et al. 2015; Kepes et al. 2014; Royrvik 2013).

'Managerial work': past development of the concept

The following sections succinctly describe the results of this review. Focusing on how the literature developed since 1951, the sections recount how 'managerial work' as an analytical category has been filled with meaning, reflecting also the methodological approaches taken. A summary is provided in Table 1.

³We particularly thank our reviewers for pointing out these omissions in our original search.

Table 1. *Thematic focus and trends (by period)*

Period	Thematic focus	Aim and orientation	Principal methodologies employed	Key references
Pre-1951	Development and categorization of managerial functions	Ideal types; Normative Intent; Descriptive and Anecdotal	(1) Personal experience	Fayol 1916[1949]; Gulick and Urwick 1937; Taylor 1911
1951–1960	Recognition of behavioural patterns and common relationships; Embellishment of the notion that management is often 'messy'	Time audits of executives; communication patterns; organizational politics; Methods innovation to capture management in action	(1) Self-recorded diaries; (2) Participant observation (3) Surveys	Burns 1954, 1957; Carlson 1951; Dalton 1959; Hemphill 1959
1960–1970	Identification of different priorities and work patterns among middle and lower-level managers	Consolidation of research; Differences in managerial work; Quantitative appearance of qualitative studies; Generalizability of results; Organizational politics	(1) Self-recording diaries; (2) Participant observation; (3) Activity sampling	Horne and Lupton 1965; Sayles 1965; Stewart 1967
1970–1980	Development of universal roles and behaviours of managers at the executive level; Development of critical perspectives	Theory development (roles and propositions); Thick description of work behaviours; Exploration of micro-processes of power, class and identity	(1) Structured observation; (2) Diaries; (3) Ethnography; (4) Factory/single site in-depth explorations	Braverman 1974; Mintzberg 1973; Nichols and Beynon 1977; Stewart 1976; Wolcott 1973
1980–1990	Specialization of work studies –Managing in a global world; Managerial effectiveness; IT and changing work in organizations; Critical engagements; Fragmentation	Test Mintzberg's roles and propositions; Impact of culture on behaviour; Improving performance through the study of managerial activities; Managerial work as part of wider capitalist production	(1) Structured observation; (2) Surveys; (3) Interviews	Boyatzis 1982; Hales 1986; Kanter 1989; Knights and Willmott 1986; Kotter 1982; Stewart 1989
1990–2000	International management practices; work practices and performance; comparative research	Establish universality of Mintzberg's work practices in developing countries; Determine what makes managers 'effective'; Determine cultural differences in work practices	(1) Surveys; (2) Structured observation with quantitative analysis; (3) Diaries; (4) Interviews; (5) Ethnography	Boisot and Liang 1992; Lubatkin <i>et al.</i> 1997; Luthans <i>et al.</i> 1993; Stewart <i>et al.</i> 1994; Watson 1994
2000–2015	Post-bureaucratic change in organizations; Entrepreneurship, organizational size and work behaviour; 'Micro' practices, including how they inform or enact 'macro' categories (e.g. 'institutional work')	Establish changes in work practices since 1970s; Determine differences in work activities of managers in small and large organizations; Explore how 'large' phenomena such as capitalism take on meaning in situated doing	(1) Structured observation; (2) Surveys (3) Calendar Analysis (4) Ethnography	Barley and Kunda 2001; Cloutier <i>et al.</i> 2015; Floren 2006; Hales 2002; Royrvik 2013; Tengblad 2006, 2012; Vie 2010

Setting the scene: the naissance of managerial work as theory

While this review is centred on the post-1951 period, an elementary understanding of what came before is critical for situating subsequent work. In particular, most work before 1951 is notable for being less interested in describing managerial work than in theorizing it, with latter often implying an analytical process of truncating managerial work to supposed elemental functions in an effort to achieve optimal outcomes. This was certainly the approach taken by Taylor (1911), who sought, by measuring distinct units of work accomplished by ‘first-class men’ [*sic*], to set the groundwork for scientific management as a solution to worker inefficiencies via ‘proper’ task design, people selection, and control and oversight (Bluedorn 1986; Locke 1982; Nelson 1996). While many of Taylor’s insights now seem severely outdated, like placing ‘an intelligent, college-educated man in charge of progress’ (cf. Merrill 1970, p. 59), the essential assumptions driving Taylor’s theorizing, namely an implied norm of ‘one right way’ as a guide for a manager, and an analytical structural and functionalist orientation toward reducing work and management to their smallest constituent parts in ignorance of contextual and relational aspects, remained relevant for years (see Boje and Winsor 1993; Reed 1984).

Fayol (1916[1949]), in turn, reflecting on personal observations as a mining director, described managing as consisting of five functions: forecasting and planning; coordinating; organizing; commanding; and controlling. Gulick and Urwick (1937) later expanded and popularized these by coining the acronym POSDCORB.⁴ Similarly, Barnard (1938) built on his experiences as an executive to theorize management as an art and a science, suggesting that at its crux are leadership, morality and cooperation. Notably, in contrast to largely mechanistic depictions such as Taylor’s (1911), Barnard also acknowledged the social nature of management, highlighting complex behaviour and the presence of informal organization (Gabor and Mahoney 2013).

The work of early management theorists has been criticized for lacking a scholarly empirical base and ignoring important aspects of actual work (Brunsson 1982; Cyert and March 1959; Stewart 1963). While the verdict is still open to what extent such theoretical accounts accurately reflect empirical realities in

all their instances (see Hales 1986, p. 110; Watson 1994, pp. 35–36), they are notable for setting an important precedent. In particular, they suggested that creation of abstract categories amounted to theorization, and that such generalized conclusions regarding the ‘essence’ of (good) managerial work could be based on personal experience rather than research.

Innovation and discovery in management studies (1951–1960)

In this nascent field, a major shift occurred with Carlson’s (1951) *Executive Behaviour*, the first scholarly empirical account (see also Mintzberg 2009; Tengblad and Vie 2012). Examining ‘managerial work’ as managerial activity, Carlson sought general behavioural patterns and common relationships. He used self-recorded diaries to acquire information on work locations, contacts, communication patterns and decisions made by eight Swedish CEOs. One of the most significant findings was that managers were rarely alone and had little time for sustained thinking. Consequently, the CEOs had to work at home, early or late to accomplish tasks requiring concentration. Importantly, his descriptions of work fragmentation and constant interruptions ran contrary to previous holistic management theories. In addition, Carlson’s study effectively brought an empirical sensibility to the field, in contrast to the normative approach of predecessors.

As Hales (1986) also noted, two main approaches emerged following Carlson’s footsteps: studies using diaries and studies relying on observation. The most prominent examples of each were Burns (1954, 1957) and Dalton (1959). Burns’ work (1954, 1957) was particularly notable for confirming that managers spent much of their time dealing with issues not directly related to output and production. These findings supported the need to study managers to improve efficiency; a key analytical theme in the 1950s (Carlson 1951, p. 114). Burns (1954) was also the first to study communication patterns vertically, but also laterally, thus running against classical depictions. Dalton’s work was equally innovative and ground-breaking. Focusing on the gap between formal and informal roles, Dalton not only described managing as messy, but gave detailed accounts of managers’ informal, self-protective and apparently irrational behaviours. In discussing organizational politics, he highlighted an area of managing rarely considered since. Based on over ten years of covert participant observation, *Men Who Manage* (Dalton 1959) was also unique

⁴I.e. planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting and budgeting.

methodologically as the only piece of ethnographic research conducted in 1950s, and one of a handful since. Looking beyond these, while observational techniques were often employed (e.g. Jasinski 1956; Martin 1956; O'Neill and Kubany 1959), studies in this period were generally conducted in the spirit of time-and-motion studies, recording 'quick facts' and testing hypotheses with inferential statistics, rather than lived realities of everyday work.

Finally, Hemphill (1959) introduced a third approach with his use of questionnaires. Based on a 575-item questionnaire completed by 93 upper, middle and lower-level managers, Hemphill concluded that, while there are certainly differences across levels, all managers participated in similar activities. His study was particularly important to the field for two reasons: it illustrated that there are distinct differences across different 'levels', and that questionnaires were a viable (if inherently limited) means to study work. While few scholars followed Hemphill's example in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Pheysey 1972), questionnaires became popular in the 1980s and 1990s.

Managerial work as normal science? (1960–1970)

Echoing Kuhn's (1962/1970) 'normal science', researchers in the 1960s took stock of existing findings, most notably by Carlson (1951) and Burns (1954, 1957), and sought to advance the field by exploring the applicability of those at managerial middle and lower levels. Research consisted, to a notable degree, of more of the same: diary and observational studies, with a focus on recording activities. Investigations were largely qualitative, though researchers sought to increase generalizability by using large sample sizes (Horne and Lupton 1965; Sayles 1964; Stewart 1967) or testing new approaches such as activity sampling Kelly (1964).⁵

This era also saw earliest efforts to expand managerial work research beyond boardrooms and c-suites, with a number of contributions related to early career and mid-level managers (see Horne and Lupton 1965; Kelly 1964; Landsberger 1961; Sayles 1964; Stewart 1963, 1967). Using earlier studies as benchmarks (i.e. Carlson 1951; Guest 1956), many found that managerial work activities, functions, and communication patterns were fundamentally similar across levels. However, such comparisons were largely

rudimentary, and were later called into question by Stewart (1967), the first to examine 'managerial work' as differences and similarities between managerial jobs. In a diary-based study of 160 middle managers, Stewart (1967) identified five different types (emissaries, writers, discussers, troubleshooters and committee members), and illustrated that there was a great deal of variation in managerial jobs, with a subsequent impact on how managers spend their time (see also Stewart 1976).⁶

Dispelling existing myths: two contrasting approaches (1970–1980)

The 1970s in turn introduced two innovative perspectives, which offered distinct and largely opposing means for engaging 'managerial work': Mintzberg's structured observation, and labour process scholars' identification and exploration of 'managerial work' as politics, class and ideology.

Managerial work as activities and roles. First, aiming to address a gap between theory and practice, Mintzberg (1970, 1971, 1973, 1975/1990) used structured observation to record work activities of five CEOs to examine managerial work as 'what managers really do'. Taking a firm position that previous work, particularly that foundational to the field, such as Gulick and Urwick (1937), was too theoretical and/or disconnected from organizational realities, Mintzberg attempted to unite rich empirical work with management theory. To this end, he formulated ten managerial roles and made 13 theoretical propositions. He also drew a number of broad conclusions about managing: it consisted of large quantities of work conducted at a relentless pace; was characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation; was highly interactive, with managers spending considerable time in meetings; and was conducted with strong emphasis on verbal, rather than written communication.

Interestingly, most of what Mintzberg presented was described in earlier accounts, for instance that managerial work was fast-paced, fragmented and reliant on face-to-face communication (Burns 1954, 1957; Carlson 1951; Sayles 1964; Stewart 1967).

⁵Developed by L.H.C. Tippet, activity sampling breaks behaviour down into categories and collects a large number of momentary observations at randomly selected times.

⁶Rather than classifying managers by rank or function, Stewart (1976, p. 46–47) developed a task-oriented typology that categorized managers into four categories based on position and pattern of activities (i.e. system maintenance, system administration, project and mixed).

Despite this, in our sample, *The Nature of Managerial Work* has been referenced more than all other managerial work publications combined. This is likely for Mintzberg's focus on examining 'managerial work' through managerial characteristics. While prior research made claims about general work patterns (i.e. fragmentation), these were singular or coupled, and not presented as concise and practically relevant focal points (Copeman *et al.* 1963). Mintzberg instead combined theory and rich observation to develop a common set of characteristics that were easily communicated; two aspects also traditionally at opposite ends in the literature (e.g. Guest [1956] vs. Dalton [1959]).

A further notable (if not explicitly field-based) contribution toward re-imagining 'managerial work' as an everyday activity was made by Wolcott (1973), who adopted a richly ethnographic approach to examine the work of a school principal. Most notably, Wolcott's two-year stay meant that he was able to capture culturally governed patterns of behaviour. To Wolcott, the value of such long immersion was expressed in the intimate familiarity it enabled for the reader, allowing him to 'understand how he might act if he were in the role of the principal' (p. xi [*sic*]).

Managerial work as power, ideology and control. Building on Gouldner's (1954) classic account of worker-management struggle and Braverman's (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, a second body of work emerged in this period, challenging 'managerial work' as rational and apolitical. Many of them empirical, such accounts sought to 'tell it like it is' (Nichols and Beynon 1977, p. viii). However, while their methods may have broadly echoed Mintzberg's empirical and anti-rationalist approach (e.g. see Knights and Murray 1994, p. 181), the subsequent analysis differed greatly.⁷ In particular, as opposed to Mintzberg's predominant orientation toward examining everyday work as performed, notable

scholars in this tradition (though not all) were primarily oriented toward situating this against wider structural imperatives, namely class power, capitalist ideology, and conflict as norm. Informed by Marxist philosophy, authors such as Nichols and Beynon (1977, p. xiv), for instance, visited several chemical production plants, to depict 'what work is like at Riverside and of the different ways in which workers, foremen and managers feel about it'. They particularly focused on exploring the interrelations of managers and workers, highlighting class differences and control imperatives constitutive of such relations. This led them to conclude that 'their reason d'être, as managers, is to plan and to organize, thereby to better exploit the labour powers of others' (*ibid.*, p. 72).

Specialization, critique and fragmentation (1980–1990)

Departing from broad questions such as 'what do managers do', researchers in the 1980s in turn became more focused on the role of planning (Snyder and Glueck 1980) and the impact of perceptions (Marshall and Stewart 1981), but also questions of power, class and politics (Knights and Willmott 1986). In particular, four topic lines dominated, each a distinct expression of what study of 'managerial work' practically meant.

Managing in a global context. According to this review, prior to the 1980s, there were almost no studies on managerial work practices outside Europe or the USA. In an attempt to address this, and acknowledging the rise of increasingly international corporations, authors such as Doktor (1983, 1990) and Zabid (1987) conducted studies in Asia, finding distinct differences between 'Eastern' and 'Western' management. For example, American CEOs were found to spend much more time in short-duration management activities relative to their Asian counterparts, illustrating the latter's 'sensitivity to human relations' (Doktor 1990, p. 54). Further studies on other continents soon followed (e.g. Boisot and Liang, 1992; Stewart *et al.* 1994).

Managerial work as performance. Exploring the link between managerial activities and performance (as success and effectiveness), several researchers took existing interest in exploring 'what managers do' and refocused it as 'what makes them effective'. Kotter's (1982) work was particularly notable (see also Boyatzis 1982; Gabarro 1987). He found

⁷Knights and Murray (1994, p. 199) clarified the distinction between the two approaches by noting: 'processual analysis has made a significant contribution to the analysis of the organisational politics of change but [...] it tends to obscure the way in which the reproduction and transformation of micro-organisational power relations are constituted and sustained within both specific identities/subjectivities and broader politico-economic markets and inequalities'. Notably, their analysis moves beyond traditionally Marxist roots and engages the work of Foucault as underpinnings for view of political struggle as underpinning all social relations (p. 17).

that network-building and interpersonal skills were the most important characteristics of effective managers, as developing networks of cooperative relationships aided successful implementation of agendas. These findings were later expanded by Luthans and colleagues (1985, 1993). Differentiating between 'success' and 'effectiveness', Luthans (1988) examined whether there were any behavioural differences between successful managers (those quickly promoted), and effective managers (those leading high-performing teams). He suggested that effectiveness came from managers engaging in human resource management and communication activities, while networking was key to successful managers.

Managerial work as historically distinct. The climate of increasing competition in the 1980s, in turn, led authors such as Drucker (1988) and Kanter (1989) to speculate whether ongoing technological and societal changes would be echoed in the nature of managerial work. Kanter (1989), for instance, famously predicted that organizations would undergo a transformation to become flatter, more flexible, less hierarchical and more knowledge-based, all of which would lead to a 'new managerial work'. However, research on whether or not such changes actually occurred remained dormant until well into the 2000s.

Managerial work as labour process. Finally, industrial sociology scholars working in the labour process tradition examined 'managerial work' as situated relational strife and conflict against a broader capitalist agenda. For instance, Knights and Willmott (1986, p. 2) collated a number of empirical studies that took seriously 'the structured and contested relations of power through which management practices are articulated and reproduced'. As Willmott (1987) argued, the impetus behind such work was a recognition that traditionally behaviour-focused explorations, such as Dalton's (1959) and Mintzberg's (1973), failed to account for the wider institutional and political structures of that work. For authors such as Willmott (1987), Jackall (2010 [1989]) and others, 'managerial work' was thus not a politically neutral category, but a set of behaviours and situated moralities that required empirical engagements explicitly critical of their inherent assumptions and values, driven by social systems of difference. Importantly, while the approach is highly relevant for consideration of institutional context and ethnographic reporting from organizational 'front lines', its reliance on a broadly exclusive set of a priori theoretical underpinnings has meant that

studies of labour process have since evolved as a largely separate domain under the broader Critical Management Studies tradition (e.g. McCann *et al.* 2008; see O'Doherty and Willmott 2009).

While in earlier decades managers were studied to understand their work comprehensively (Burns 1954; Carlson 1951; Stewart 1976), from the 1980s, aspects previously included in empirical conceptualizations of 'managerial work', such as leadership (Porter and Nohria 2010), decision-making (Langley *et al.* 1995), and information use (Hall 2010), similarly became largely separate from managerial work as a body of literature. In particular, despite admonitions regarding risks associated with treating managers as metaphorical onions whose layers can be unproblematically peeled away (see Bryman 2004; Lau *et al.* 1980), on which we reflect later, the number of publications on leadership and other areas continued to grow immensely, while 'managerial work' has remained relatively small. For instance, via a simple search of the ISI Web of Knowledge, we found that that, from 1980 to 2010, there were more than 64,000 articles written on leadership, including some that empirically examined the work of managers (e.g. Holmberg and Tyrstrup 2010; Porter and Nohria 2010). During the same period, only 5000 articles were written on managerial work, broadly defined.⁸

Managing around the world (1990–2000)

In line with emerging awareness of globalization, research in the 1990s continued to focus on understanding culture, particularly regarding efficiency. Boisot and Liang (1992) explored the work of Chinese managers, replicating Mintzberg's (1973) study, and suggesting that communication patterns of Chinese managers were more personalized than their American counterparts. Shenkar and colleagues (1998) similarly explored differences between 'eastern' and 'western' management, finding that though important, 'cultural milieu' was not the sole factor affecting role structure, noting instead the effect of political, economic, social and enterprise-level factors. Recognizing a 'narrow map' of empirical research focused almost exclusively on Anglo-American managers, authors also urged researchers to investigate wider settings.

⁸The results of this search of course also reflect the choice of underpinning search keywords used, as we have already acknowledged elsewhere. Despite this limitation, the size of the discrepancy between the two is nevertheless telling.

This era is also important in that it signified a notable shift in the predominant methods used. In particular, beginning with Luthans in the 1980s, there was a drift away from qualitative to quantitative techniques, particularly by US researchers. Alongside Luthans *et al.*'s (1985, 1993) research based on regression, Lubatkin and colleagues (1997), for instance, used analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test whether managerial work was universally similar in developing and developed countries. Yet, echoing the generally messy and concurrent methodological flows within periods, during this time Watson (1994/2001) followed Wolcott (1973), by adopting an ethnographic approach to examining middle managers' work in a large manufacturing organization for a year. One notable finding was that managers pushed new, fashionable management ideas (not necessarily in the organization's best interest) in an attempt to build reputation and grow their careers. Watson was thus able to gain an understanding of not only what managers do, but also why – a key question that Hales (1999) argued has remained largely under-examined (though his critique excluded work within labour process and Critical Management Studies, which as noted above largely proceeded distinct from the managerial work literature).

The return to the study of real time work? (2000–2015)

After decades focusing on topics such as culture, success and effectiveness, research in 2000s began to re-examine the question that started it all: what do managers do? Such renewed interest was driven by two converging factors. First, Barley and Kunda (2001) effectively illustrated how work-based studies had provided an empirical base for organizational theory, and suggested that the latter's development had been hampered by marginalization of detailed work studies. Second, researchers recognized that it was now possible to examine how work might or might not be different from earlier accounts postulating major changes brought on by globalization and the 'knowledge based economy'.

Hales (2002) was among the first to respond to claims that changes in organizational forms (i.e. 'bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic') had resulted in profound changes in patterns of managerial work, conceptualized as routine activities and tasks. He argued that some claims were not substantiated, in that even where organizations had initiated structural changes, managers were still preoccupied with monitoring work processes, and continued to be held

personally responsible for performance. What was emerging was thus something like 'bureaucracy-lite'. Driven by similar questions, Tengblad (2006) examined the activities of four Swedish CEOs and compared his findings with Mintzberg's (1973). While he acknowledged that the two were remarkably similar, he highlighted some major differences suggesting the emergence of a 'new managerial work': executive work as observed was not fragmented and interrupted, and managers did not show that they preferred brevity and interruptions, thus challenging Mintzberg's (1973) second and third propositions (see also Matthaei 2010). These and other differences led him to conclude that such changes were more than 'cosmetic fads' (Tengblad 2006, pp. 1452–1453), and could be indicative of a shift to institutional leadership as a distinct category (though see Vie [2010] for a contrary view).

However, in contrast to such examinations, and reflecting the field's fragmentation, one of the most notable in-depth explorations of managerial work during this period was Royrvik's (2013) ethnography of managing practices in a Norwegian 'global' corporation, where situated everyday practices were linked to global discourses regarding inequality, morality and nature of capitalism. A summary of continuities and changes in managerial work (1950–2015) is provided in Table 2.

'Managerial work': a contested terrain occupied by four research approaches

Our comprehensive review since 1951 (which also recognized key earlier texts as a historical baseline) highlighted a number of distinct orientations toward what counts as 'managerial work' and how this should be studied. We suggest that these constitute coexisting and contrasting research approaches that have, in competing for attention, come to frame the term (and thus the field's development). In particular, our analysis of the literature indicated that at least four broad research approaches to engaging 'managerial work' can be identified. These approaches, encapsulated in key referential publications, have served as orienting templates structuring later engagements. The four research approaches are: search for the essence of managerial work, search for a general classification of managerial behaviours, analysis of management as power, conflict and control, and study of management as meaningful ordinary activity. Their main

Table 2. Continuities and change in managerial work (1951–2015)

Continuities	Changes
<i>Continuities in managerial work (all levels)</i>	
Communication	Communication/ Decision-making Shift away from command and control style of decision-making to more dialogue-oriented communication (Martinko and Gardner 1990; Mintzberg 1973; Tengblad 2006; Vie 2010)
Meetings	Meetings More participants attend meetings (Arman <i>et al.</i> 2009; Mintzberg 1973; Tengblad 2006; Vie 2010) More time is spent with subordinates and less with 'outsiders' (Arman <i>et al.</i> 2009; Tengblad 2006; Vie 2010) Managers give more information (Mintzberg 1973; Tengblad 2006; Vie 2010)
Information	Information More time is spent on information (reading/review) (Martinko and Gardner 1990; Tengblad 2006; Vie 2010)
Tours	
Preferences	
Responsibilities	<i>Changes in managerial work (executive-level management)</i> Travel There is increased travel (Matthaei 2010; Mintzberg 1973; Tengblad 2006) Fragmentation There are less interruptions and fragmentation at the executive-level (Mintzberg 1973; Tengblad 2006) Hours Executives work longer hours (Matthaei 2010; Mintzberg 1973; Tengblad 2006) Desk work Less desk work at executive level (Mintzberg 1973; Tengblad 2006)
Alone time	
<i>Continuities in managerial work (middle management)</i>	
Desk work	<i>Changes in managerial work (middle management)</i> Meetings Managers engage in more scheduled meetings (Hales and Mustapha 2000; Horne and Lupton 1965; Vie 2010) Travel There is increased travel (Martinko and Gardner 1990; Vie 2010)
Fragmentation	
Hours/Difficulty	
<i>Continuities in managerial work (lower-level management)</i>	
Fragmentation	Responsibilities The supervisory, planning, and monitoring activities of lower-level managers has been enlarged (Hales 2005)

Table 3. Key analytical conceptualizations of (and approaches to) 'managerial work' since pre-1950

	Managerial work as	Analytical foci	Defined/operationalized as	Illustrative account	Corresponding research approach
<1951	A series of abstract functions	Identification of normative ideal types	Descriptive development and categorization of managerial functions	Fayol (1916[1949]); Taylor (1911);	Essence of management
1950s	Informal systems and context politics	Organizational politicking	Informal, often irrational practices	Dalton (1959)	Categorization of behaviours
1960s	Differences and similarities between jobs	Variation within and between jobs	Demands, constraints and choices in managers' work	Stewart (1967)	
1970s	Activities and roles	Realities of everyday management	Activities and roles (tasks) as performed in situ	Mintzberg (1973)	
	Tasks, responsibilities and function	'What do managers do?'	Contextually broader than just 'managers' behaviour'; Distinction between activities and tasks, or behaviour and function, to understand work.	Hales (1986)	
1980s	Power, ideology and control	Maintenance of power in daily practice; interaction and struggle	How local practices serve to act as a 'purposive programme of intensification, fragmentation and deskilling of work' (p. 3); how management practices come to perpetuate class and power divisions between staff and managers; expressions of ideology in situ; against rational, power-neutral definitions.	Knights and Willmott (1986)	Power, conflict and control
1990s	Situated sensemaking and culture	Everyday interactions and talk	Individual and organizational identities made sense of and enacted in context	Watson (1994)	Management as meaningful ordinary activity
2000s	Practiced morality	Daily activities as negotiated moralities	'What matters on a day-to-day basis are the normal rules-in-use fashioned within the personal and structural constraints of one's organization' (p. 5).	Jackall (2010 [1989])	
	Practised craft	Everyday tasks	'Behavioural patterns' and their outcomes as they 'really' happen. Contrast to rational-normative distinct tasks performed step-by-step.	Cloutier <i>et al.</i> 2015; Tengblad (2012)	

characteristics and analytical foci are summarized in Table 3.

The first of these approaches, which we call the 'essence of management', interprets the study of managerial work as a search for essential characteristics. The orientation here is explicitly towards identifying a set of immutable functions that constitute the core of what management is. The approach, represented by Carlson (1951), but also by Fayol (1916[1949]), traditionally thrives outside or at the boundary of the academic community (e.g. Drucker 1974; Joyce *et al.* 1994; Merchant 1982; Sull 2009). It is based largely on anecdotal or personal constructions of ideal types,

which are then offered as guiding metaphors to existing and aspiring managers. Crucially, there is little recognition of broader institutional or political context – it is immediate work, driven by utilitarian concerns, which is the focus of attention.

A second approach, inaugurated by Mintzberg (1973) and Stewart (1976), engages 'managerial work' as categorization of behaviours and definition of roles or jobs. Like the previous, its goal is to construct general categories capable of both 'capturing the nature of' and 'explaining' management, though it operates inductively, building from scholarly observation. With notable exception of Mintzberg's later work

(e.g. Mintzberg 2004), which places him closer to scholars in the third approach given its critical orientation (though is a-theoretical in comparison), it mostly engages with managerial work as separate from wider institutional context, most notably regarding consideration of effects. Like the previous approach, it also pays scant attention to historical context.

This contrasts sharply with the third approach that we identified, namely 'management as power, conflict and control'. This approach, historically echoing the Critical Management Studies movement (Alvesson and Wilmott 1992, 2012), and building on neo-Marxist and post-structuralist theoretical underpinnings, as well as labour process studies, understands management as the effects of a specific ideological project enacted through everyday managerial activities of control, which enables the creation and perpetuation of social inequalities. Some of the subsequent analytical foci are everyday activities by which differences and privilege are enacted, but also discourses, particularly those oriented toward legitimizing management and managers as holders of authority, and its ideological spread, notably to the public sector (see Clarke and Newman 1993; Cunliffe 2009; Grey and Wilmott 2005; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003).

Finally, this review identified a fourth approach, which takes 'managerial work' as largely description, rather than explicit theorization, of social and material activities (e.g. Tengblad 2012, but to an extent also Watson 1994). This minority 'management as meaningful ordinary activity' research approach shares with the third one an appreciation for the historical situatedness of what management is, although it chooses to focus almost exclusively on its situated accomplishment, largely again in ignorance of the institutional and political context in which this is embedded, and of its broader consequences. The fourth approach is thus both empirically compatible and analytically distinct from the third, in that it explores how the 'game' is played, what ordinary activities are conducted by those involved in this game, what the conditions in which the game takes place are, and what are the effects on both the players (though not beyond the particular interaction). It is also different in its lesser reliance on a few dominant theoretical lenses that strongly influence the process of subsequent analysis, characteristic most strongly of the third research approach.

According to this review (see especially Table 3), the four research approaches, which in effect served to 'fill' the category of managerial work in distinct ways over time, appear to have coexisted in dynamic

tension. Scholars positioned themselves in one by adopting a particular analytical and methodological approach, and by referencing (often almost exclusively) key works from scholars taking the same, largely in ignorance of the other three. This has had the effect of creating not just a disjointed subject of study ('managerial work'), but also a largely set-apart field. In addition, such a presence of coexisting, yet unequally active research approaches helps to explain three notable findings in this review: the presence of ebbs and flows in methodological engagements; the particular role of Mintzberg's work; and the notable phenomenon whereby, paradoxically, what has too often been missing from the study of managerial work is work itself, in its comprehensive empirical iterations.

Ebbs and flows in research methodology

As summarized in Tables 1–3, the field has been characterized by an ebb and flow dynamic, whereby periods of 'zooming in' on the details of managerial work were followed by times when a 'zooming out' toward generalization prevailed, only to be repeated (cf. Nicolini 2009). This was not without consequences. Most notably, the ebb in qualitative, and in particular observation-based, research since the 1950s, meant that the foundational question of what managers did in practice was left largely unanswered, or was answered in restricted ways, as quantitative studies relied on managers' perceptions of their work, which earlier studies had shown to be, if not inaccurate, then at least limited (e.g. Burns 1954, p. 96).

Importantly, the methodological pendulum began to swing back towards qualitative methods from 2000. However, as there had been few observational studies conducted in preceding decades (1980–2000), observational studies seemed to pick up where they left off in the 1980s, using Mintzberg's work as a measuring stick to determine extent of subsequent change (Tengblad 2006; Vie 2010; see also McCann *et al.* [2008] in labour process tradition). Such studies also occasionally employed a more quantitative, counting-oriented analysis, resulting in findings such as 'approximately 66%' of time was spent on informational activities, 'excluding any clinical work performance and breaks' (Arman *et al.* 2013, p. 150). Thus, while managerial work has been returning to its qualitative roots, it was not with the same analytical *tabula rasa*, as studies were bound by predefined, highly ingrained categories. The result was deductive rather than inductive research, with little novel theoretical development.

The dominant position of Mintzberg's categories: legacy or curse?

The idea of alternative research approaches coexisting and competing for dominance also helps to explain the paradoxical role of Mintzberg's scholarship. Namely, Mintzberg's (1973) study has been immensely, if not always helpfully popular. This is in part given the centrality of the second research approach Mintzberg encapsulates to the conjoined managerial work and behaviour literature, which has come to stand as 'the' managerial work literature, reflecting the disconnect between the approaches outlined previously. In particular, as also mentioned above, the field's development has to a notable extent been informed by pre-existing categories, with replication and comparison trumping over open-ended inquiry (e.g. Kurke and Aldrich 1983; Snyder and Glueck 1980; Tengblad 2006, 2012; see Stewart 1982, p. 11). Even when more recently authors such as Akella (2006), Matthaei (2010) or Arman and colleagues (2009, 2013) worked to develop new categories (and Mintzberg himself called for more such efforts), Mintzberg's roles continued to act as an overshadowing reference point.

Similarly, Mintzberg's (1973) engagement effectively normalized one week of observation as analytically sufficient (e.g. Hales and Tamangani 1996; Sancino and Turrini 2009; Vie 2010). However, limiting observation periods to a convenient, but largely arbitrary duration also inevitably limits what can be learned. Most notably, if managers are studied for longer periods, as with ethnographic engagements, patterns can begin to take shape. Furthermore, researchers would find themselves less likely to wonder whether or not they observed a 'typical' week. This promise is evidenced by continued influence of Watson's (1994) book (see for instance Hay 2014), and the rich insights of Royrvik's (2013), both based on 'traditional' pieces of fieldwork.

Research approaches and their discontents: the problem of ordinary work

Finally, the notion that 'managerial work' has been addressed by and through four alternative research approaches helps to explain another paradoxical finding. Namely, while scholars investigating 'management and work behavior' (Tengblad and Vie 2012) have focused on all sorts of subjects, from functions to roles and discourses, they have rarely examined ordinary work itself. If they have, they rarely reported

it so that its everyday nuances remain richly visible. We argue that this can be explained in part by the accumulation effect of different research approaches. Our analysis suggests that three out of four effectively reduced the term to a particular pre-existing 'box', rather than exploring open-endedly the what, how and, crucially, why of managerial work. In particular, in spite of other profound differences between them, the qualitatively dominant Mintzbergian approach categorizing behaviours and roles, but also its competing approach focused on searching for the essence of management, and that inspired by Critical Management Studies, all pursue a generalizing aim, that is, concentrate on distilling common factors to which managerial work can be usefully reduced, and by which it can be explained (see also Reed 1984). This can only be accomplished, however, through an abstraction process that glosses over mundane activities, or their reduction into pre-existing categories regarding meaning, aims and consequences. The meaningful exploration of situated accomplishments is thus sacrificed on the altar of general categories, including those with a strong critical content (e.g. Alvesson and Wilmott 2012; Tsoukas 1994). However, the fourth approach that we identified has shortcomings of its own. In particular, while it does provide rich, observation-based accounts, these are rarely conjoined with solid theoretical underpinnings beyond canonical categories such as Mintzberg's, or with serious consideration of broader institutional context (e.g. Tengblad 2012), both necessary for more nuanced theorizing.

'Managerial work' back to the future: infusing theory through 'practice'

As argued above, examination of the four distinct research approaches highlighted a prominent scarcity, though not a complete absence, of ethnography-based studies of managerial work. This reflects the challenges of publishing rich, bottom-up empirical accounts in elite journals, but also the orientation of dominant research approaches toward pursuing abstract generalizations. This tendency to re-specify 'what is managerial work' into 'what is management' also generated an unhelpful reliance on pre-existing categories (Noordegraaf and Stewart 2000). Coupled with the analytical fragmentation emerging in the 1980s, this has meant that, notable exceptions such as Watson (1994) and Knights and Willmott (1986) aside, managers have been rarely studied to

understand in a comprehensive, empirically informed way what, how and why they work, and with what consequences. As Mintzberg (1994, p. 11) put it, 'the integrated job of managing has been lost in the conventional ways of describing it . . . we have become so intent on breaking the job into pieces that we never came to grips with the whole thing'. The scholarly process of engaging with piecing it back together has been slow, however, and left to too few to attempt (e.g. Tengblad 2012). Yet, as the editors of *Journal of Management Studies* argued in a recent reflection piece, there are two key aspects to promising research for future of management studies as a discipline: 'close to the phenomenon' methodologies; and abductive reasoning 'led by observations on the ground' (Birkinshaw *et al.* 2014, p. 53).

Building on this, we suggest that managerial work can strongly benefit from a re-orientation in both subjects of study and approach, informed by notable contributions in theory and method, led by congruent engagements from other fields. In particular, we argue that much could be gained by joining the practice turn in organizational studies as a particularly promising sensitizing lens for understanding and theorizing 'managerial work' (Miettinen *et al.* 2009; Nicolini 2012). Most notably, a practice-based sensitivity can situate and territorialize managerial work in ways that resist the temptation of introducing abstract categories and mysterious forces in explanations. This has historically affected all approaches, including the most critical ones. In Burawoy's (1979, p. 12) words, 'it is necessary, [. . .] to break with the transhistorical generalities and partial perspectives of industrial sociology and organization theory and to dispense with metaphysical assumptions about underlying conflict or harmony. Conflict and consent are neither latent nor underlying but refer to directly observable activities that must be grasped in terms of the organization of the labour process under capitalism'.

The suggestion of the potential fit of a practice-based approach is similarly not new. Like Burawoy (1979), Noordegraaf and Stewart (2000, p. 440) argued that researchers need to explore the 'social embeddedness of managerial behavior' if the field is to develop. Tengblad (2012), in turn, stressed that managerial work needs practice theory, as it is the only existing means to explain the complex, ambiguous nature of management. However, how exactly a practice-informed approach could meaningfully address the identified limitations of existing ones has thus far not been outlined in detail. We introduce this in the next and final section.

Studying managerial work as practice

Practice theory, practice-based studies, practice approach or practice lens denote a family of orientations that take orderly social and materially mediated doing and sayings ('practices'), and their aggregations, as central to understanding organizational phenomena. The approach, which has gained significant purchase in management studies (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011; Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009; Miettinen *et al.* 2009; Nicolini 2012), including recognition for its capacity to contribute meaningfully to organization theory (Lounsbury and Beckman 2015), represents a particular way of responding to Barley and Kunda's (2001) call to 'bring work back in'. We say 'particular' because, since its publication, the study of work has become a central preoccupation for a number of researchers, and ethnographic studies of organizing are becoming increasingly common. Yet the understanding of work underpinning this return is at times worryingly traditional. For example, surveying the responses to Barley and Kunda's (2001) paper, Philips and Lawrence (2012, p. 227) argued that most authors understand work as 'goal-directed effort on the part of an actor (individual or collective) to manipulate some aspect of their social-symbolic context'.

Practice-based approaches, of which there are many (see Nicolini 2012 for a discussion), notably break with this tradition, by taking molar activities and socially legitimized regimes of sayings and doings, i.e. 'practices' (or, more precisely, modes of practicing) as their unit of analysis. As Cohen (1996) argued, 'while theories of action start from individuals and from their intentionality in pursuing courses of action, theories of practice view actions as 'taking place' or 'happening', as being performed through a network of connections-in-action' (cf. Gherardi 2009, p. 116). Practices are thus more than 'just doing', as the common-sensical definition might suggest, and in contrast to the fourth approach's empirical focus on context-bound activity. Instead, they can be seen as meaning-making, identity-forming and order-producing activities situated in specific historical conditions that imply a number of mediational tools, a specific set of linguistic practices, and a community of peers (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011; Nicolini 2012). Concretely speaking, taking a practice-based view thus entails an orientation towards understanding how social life is continually enacted in relations of people, objects and doings, in multiple situated realities. It requires providing convincing accounts of both the

activity and its conditions of possibility, expressed in terms of further practices, that is materials and discursive activities. This is a challenging task, yet well within scholarly reach, as demonstrated, for example, in recent work by Ho (2009), Royrvik (2013), Jarzabkowski and colleagues (2015) and Cloutier and colleagues (2015).

Consequently, taking this ‘turn’ to practice in the study of managerial work necessitates departing from certain kinds of research upon which the field was built, specifically quantification of activities based on pre-existing categories with the aim of capturing its definitional essence (see Stewart 1989). First, it requires that we focus ‘on how practitioners are ordinarily involved in the *relational whole* within which they carry out their tasks’ (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011, p. 345, emphasis in original). This is because studying daily doings without addressing their telos (‘aim’), tools, rules and the wider institutional context means only scratching the explanatory surface (Schatzki 2012). Therefore, to attend to managerial work meaningfully, we should move toward ‘strong’ engagements: rich qualitative studies capable of explaining organizational actions, ‘instead of simply registering them’ (Nicolini 2012, p. 13). Such a move notably also implies an analytical focus on relational practices, not individuals or jobs; contrary to a great deal of the literature (see Stewart 1989). Secondly, we must examine the particular historical and material context. If we take seriously empirical evidence suggesting the vast diversity and flexibility of managerial jobs (Stewart 1976), this suggests that, rather than seeking to build generalizable accounts, valuable development here is that which attends to specificities of work. Put differently, a practice approach to managerial work suggests that the search for general definitions is misplaced, as several profoundly different forms of managerial work exist, which follows from their being situated within different historical and material conditions, different cultural and discursive matrices and, different positions within the labour process (Teulings 1986; see for instance Royrvik 2013). Yet such social and material conditions cannot be simply mentioned or invoked as ‘explanatory’ forces. On the contrary, they need to be made analytically present – we need to understand how they count in the unfolding of practice. Interesting existing examples of this come from the Cultural Historical Activity Theory research tradition, one of the ‘tributaries’ of practice-based studies, which focuses on how history is mediated in the accomplishment of practices and how this creates generative contradictions (Blackler 1993;

Table 4. *Managerial work as practice: a blueprint for a theory-methods sensitizing lens*

Management as practice	
Methodological focus	Everyday work in situ observed as it happens, and the evolving relationship(s) with its material and historic ‘hinterland’ (Law 2004)
Analytical foci	Occupations (doings, sayings, discursive practices, objectives of work)
	Preoccupations (changing practical concerns, interests)
	Expectations (from others; from the prevailing and personally held conceptions of what a good manager should do; from the current hegemonic discursive formations about ‘what good managing is’, and how these are variously brought to bear)
	Material and discursive mediation processes (the artefacts, tools and discursive resources which enable the accomplishment of managing, and how these vehiculate onto the scene of action; historic and present material conditions)
	Social relationships, ‘local’ conflicts and technologies of empowerment
	Regulations, norms, rules and conventions
	Lived contradictions between all the above and how these are practically negotiated and temporarily resolved at individual and collective levels, i.e. within distinct ‘sites’ of practice

Engeström 1974 [2014]; Kemmis *et al.* 2013), as well as from certain branches of Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 2005; Hardy and Thomas 2015; Mueller *et al.* 2013).

In short, to understand ‘managerial work’, one cannot but start with exploring situated understandings of managerial practices, how they are accomplished in a particular places and times, and how they are brought together and/or made distinct from other activities, before considering and theorizing their possible effects. The ‘zooming in’ on ‘local’ expressions must be followed by a ‘zooming out’ movement (Nicolini 2009), linking the here-and-now of work with wider issues, such as identity reproduction, difference and power. Some of the analytical foci stemming from this proposed approach to the study of managerial work are provided in Table 4.

Most of these foci represent ways in which the historical and material hinterland is manifest practically in the work of managing. Like Law (2004), we use the

Table 5. *Managerial work as practice: sensitizing themes and associated research questions*

Sensitising themes	Associated objects of inquiry/research questions
Managerial work as bodily and discursive mundane accomplishment	What are the ordinary activities of managers? What does managing look like in situ? What are the scenes of action where managing takes place? How is management accomplished through bodily conduct? What do those who manage consider as work? What visible and/or invisible work do they carry out? What are the rhythms and tempo of managerial activity? What affective dimensions are implicated in the work of managing? How do managers talk about and thus enact their work? Who do managers speak to and why? What can this tell us about how they see their work? How are their discursive practices different in relation to distinct tasks and settings? What drives these forms of discursivity? Where do they derive the discursive resources from? To what extent do discursive practices match material expressions of their work (e.g. job descriptions)?
Managerial work as mediated activity	What are the mundane objects, including space, artefacts and technologies, by and with which work is accomplished? What are the local conventions, rules and cultural expectations that ostensibly frame managerial activity? How are these brought to bear on the scene of action in relation to 'managing'? What sort of historical legacy do they convey in the scene of action? How are these made to matter? What do distinct presences or absences of certain objects tell us of the nature of work being envisioned?
Managerial work as relational accomplishment	What is the nature of interactions managers engage in every day? What sort of 'technologies of relationality' (e.g. meetings) are employed to accomplish it in situ? How are such technologies of rationality used to establish and perpetuate certain (including unequal) social/relative positions? What 'work' is being accomplished in such interactions? How is meaning attributed to these? How are these relationships conditioned? What (relative) identities are implied? What can such relationships tell us of managers' own conceptions of what it means to be a 'good' manager?
Managerial work as situated accomplishment	How is managerial activity related to other activities in this setting? What are the proximal and distal resources it is relying upon? What connections do these activities establish? What form of managerial agency is made possible by such configurations? What other effects are produced by these arrangements (e.g. gender)? What are the historical conditions, both local and societal, within which work is situated? How do they manifest in ordinary activity? How have work practices evolved in time? How are they reproduced? By whom? Where? How are they transmitted? With what (multiple) effects?

word 'hinterland' to refer to the ramifying bundle of pre-existing social and material realities and relations that preside over the emergence of any social phenomena. Law (2004, p. 34) borrows the image from geography, where hinterland describes the territory and activities that make any 'city center' possible. The idea of hinterland is a good substitute for 'context', which is often reduced to an inert container or background where social action takes place. Each of these foci therefore points at other practices that can become objects of inquiry in their own right. We can thus ask, for instance, where the image of what counts as a good manager is manufactured. This would lead us to different yet connected places, such as consultancies, business schools, training sites and selection panels, as sites where the normative figuring of 'what is expected from a good manager' is concretely negotiated through other discursive and material practices.

Finally, the foci can be operationalized in terms of sensitizing themes around which investigations could be meaningfully ordered, with research questions occasioned by each. Table 5 offers some of these in an orientating and illustrative spirit, rather than an exhaustive one.

In summary, by re-conceiving the category of 'managerial work' as practice, therefore, the perspective offers a conceptually coherent means around which future empirical engagements could be meaningfully organized. This is done without limiting at the onset, via a pre-existing set of assumptions regarding 'managerial work's' nature, in terms of its aims or consequences. Though we are aware that in outlining the above questions we open ourselves to criticism of this being but another way of 'cutting up' managerial work, we believe if put to use as a situation-adaptive, theory-methods toolkit, oriented toward rounded accounts, as suggested, the dangers of such reductionism are considerably less. Moreover, the approach promises to tackle varied intractable issues in the study of managerial work, from 'what is it' and 'how does it differ from leadership', to 'what is a good manager supposed to do'? It does so by praxeologizing these questions, and asking which configurations of practices preside over the creation and perpetuation of such distinctions; where are these normative issues discussed, by whom and how; what are the ordinary issues, practical concerns and material interests that drive these processes; and how do they

participate in and contribute to broader and more extensive nexuses of practices. While each study may not be able to attend equally to all these aspects, being attuned to and considering several in exploring situated managerial work, as suggested here, enables more comprehensive accounts.

However, we would be remiss if we did not openly address the limitations of this approach, particularly what it does not allow us to see. One notable consequence is potential trade-off of breadth in favour of depth. In particular, the approach suggests a comprehensive examination in distinct hinterland (Law 2004), or setting as suggested. The time-consuming methods this demands also mean that, for practical reasons, such engagements may require great investment to facilitate further comprehensiveness as outlined, with practical consequences. Analytically, this also precludes normative deductions beyond immediate empirical confines. In other words, the approach does not sit naturally with efforts oriented toward universal rules, including regarding a-contextual notions of 'good' or 'excellent' (unlike, say, Kotter 1982, p. 75). Instead, a practice sensibility mostly takes what 'makes sense' in situ as the only 'good' that matters, or can be postulated. Finally, and relatedly, it necessarily implies a rejection of a priori presence of any particular concept or its to-be-expected effects, for instance power, gender or institutions. As Nicolini (2012, p. 218) noted, the approach 'set[s] a stage and establish[es] a set of specific characters without then prescribing ex ante how the story should, or would, unfold'. In a political sense therefore, the approach consequently finds its politics solely expressed in situated practices under its gaze.

Concluding remarks

Reviewing in-depth how 'managerial work' has been engaged since 1951, this paper has addressed the dearth of comprehensive reflections in recent years, and made a number of analytical suggestions aimed at moving the field forward in a meaningful way. Specifically, we identified notable trends that emerged from over 100 books and articles reviewed.

First, we identified four broad research approaches to understanding managerial work: 'essence of management'; 'categorisation of behaviours'; 'power; conflict and control'; and 'meaningful ordinary activity'. These differ substantially in both analytical subjects and methodological orientation, and are loose enough to encompass variations. As templates

ordering later engagements, which allow us to understand the phenomenon in distinct ways, these served as means of limiting subsequent insights, and of delineating the field into largely non-communicative parts. Secondly, we noted a series of methodological ebbs and flows since 1951, with periodic returns of similar engagements and concerns (including ours). Thirdly, we noted that despite Mintzberg's continued calls for inductive studies, the field continues to suffer from analytical overreliance on his categories. Finally, and related, as too-few inductive empirical investigations occurred recently, we are left with a field in not only a superficially empirically known, but also a largely 'atheoretical' state. This partly reflects its analytical fragmentation from the 1980s onward, whereby components of managerial work (e.g. strategy, leadership, culture) have come to speak increasingly on its behalf. The risk, as also suggested by Hales (1986, p. 102), is that studies 'which seek to dissect managerial work, may, in the process, lose the "living whole"' (see also Mintzberg 1994).

We of course acknowledge that our approach, resulting in the above analysis, carries risks of its own. In particular, these are associated with the methodology underpinning this review (i.e. focus on elite journals and distinct keywords), as well as related dangers of presenteeism. Namely, with regard to the latter, it is important to stress that understandings of 'managerial' and 'managerial work' have changed over time (e.g. vis-à-vis 'administrative') and that, in approaching this review with a specific contemporary view, we probably limited it in some ways. The presentation of our four research approaches as an evolution over time may have similarly provided presentational clarity, but also signalled linear sequential progress of ideas, which we did not wish to suggest. We are aware that such risks put together imply this is a particular 'reading' of history, one which may have been otherwise. That being said, given the crucial role of managerial work research for both teaching and theorizing management (Barley and Kunda 2001; Carroll and Gillen 1987), the chief gap highlighted in this paper, namely the too-often-witnessed disconnect between scholarly conceptualizations and mundane realities, is nevertheless vital (Bechky 2011; Birkinshaw *et al.* 2014). This is least of all due to the continued everyday relevance of 'managerial work'; after all, many of us are managed or manage, and know many others who do both.

To this end, we offered a number of suggestions. Our first is that managerial work studies join the 'practice turn' (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011; Schatzki

et al. 2001), which has already notably enriched other fields, such as management learning (Nicolini *et al.* 2003) and strategy (Whittington 2006), as well as organization theory more broadly (Lounsbury and Beckman 2015). Despite acknowledged limitations, we believe there remains great promise in researchers moving from existing theoretical and analytical templates to practice-informed investigations of everyday managerial work (Miettinen *et al.* 2009; Nicolini *et al.* 2003). In particular, we advocate a 'strong' approach to practice via use of in-depth, open-ended qualitative methods such as ethnography, capable of contributing both analytical and empirical granularity to grounded theorizing (Nicolini 2012). Such examinations over lengthy periods of time have already resulted, in the few cases in which they have been done, in rich insights, including regarding why managers behave the way they do (Hales 1999 2001; Watson 2011).

Our second recommendation is closely related, and is intended to ensure the vitality of managerial work as a distinct, practically informed and relevant field. To this end, we suggest that researchers rebalance their analytical foci, suggesting a number of promising modes of engagement and related research questions (see Tables 4 and 5). Recognizing the vast divergence masked under apparently similar managerial titles (see Kotter 1982; Stewart 1976), and in line with the practice-based approaches' attunement to situatedness (see Nicolini 2012), these ought to be investigated in relation to particular hinterlands (Law 2004). Specifically, we suggest detailed attention be paid to how managerial work is accomplished relationally, how mundane objects aid in achieving certain managerial activities, how talk enacts and defines particular managerial work, how institutional contexts and historical understandings come to matter, and how temporal elements, expressed in evolutions of joint practices over time, shape practices, or their distinct 'bundles', as 'this-not-that' (Sacks 1992).

Such an approach is by no means the only one or without its own restrictions, as acknowledged. However, its great value lies in enabling a theoretically open return to holistic empirical investigations, which have already brought acknowledged value to the field's development. Practice as a sensitizing lens may at the same time allow for better theorizing, one that by being informed by richer understandings of mundane challenges of managerial work can have something more nuanced to say regarding how it might be done differently. In doing so, it can also enable relevant scholarship. As discussed earlier, Birkinshaw

and colleagues (2014) listed both criteria as key to the future of management studies as a broader discipline. Looking to the history of 'managerial work' to be informed on our path is thus one side of this coin. Engaging in ways that allow us to remain empirically 'close' and theoretically a priori unrestricted is the necessary other. In other words, we suggest that it is in longitudinal, in-depth engagements with situated practices, as part of a practice-informed approach as outlined, that the future of managerial work scholarship can find a direction for further valuable contribution. We trust that the paper has provided sufficient impetus and guidance for promising travel down this road.

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