

Exploring middle manager's identity as strategists within a public sector organisation: a multi-level perspective

Mishumo Emmanuel Mamburu, Nadine de Metz and Annemarie Davis
*Department of Business Management, University of South Africa,
Pretoria, South Africa*

Abstract

Purpose – Amidst calls for more research that combines the concepts of identity and strategy, particularly in a public sector context, this study explored the identity dynamics between two groups of managers within a multi-level perspective in a government department. The aim of this study is to provide a dynamic and holistic view of how middle manager identity is experienced and how best to utilise middle managers and their abilities.

Design/methodology/approach – Through a practice-based perspective, the study used a case study design, and 26 in-depth interviews were conducted with 2 groups, namely directors and middle managers.

Findings – Findings revealed that, whilst participating middle managers were viewed as critical strategists, there was a misalignment of expectations between directors and middle managers, and this reflected an ambiguous and complex environment where middle managers were situated. The findings also reflected tensions and power dynamics evident between middle managers and their direct supervisors, and these shaped the way in which middle managers responded to or were influenced by such tensions. Our research confirms the dynamic nature of identity at a multi-level perspective.

Practical implications – The findings of the current study may be useful in providing insight into how middle managers can be utilised to the best of their ability within a public sector department.

Originality/value – The study contributes to strategy-identity studies using a practice-oriented lens in an under-explored government context. We present a better understanding of the reciprocal tensions and inter-relationships between identity and strategy from the perspective of two levels and explore how this affects strategy practices and processes.

Keywords Identity, Middle managers, Strategists, Strategy–identity nexus, Government context

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that middle managers occupy a crucial position within both public and private organisational hierarchies (Tyskbo and Styhre, 2023). However, given their

© Mishumo Emmanuel Mamburu, Nadine de Metz and Annemarie Davis. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Author contributions: Conceptualisation: NDM and AD; methodology: MEM, NDM and AD; validation: MEM; formal analysis: U.H., J.H. and Z.S.; investigation: MEM; resources: MEM; writing – original draft preparation: NDM and AD; writing – review and editing: NDM and AD.

Funding: This study received no funding.

Informed consent statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data availability statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to restrictions.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.



unique position within the organisation, they are often perceived as being “sandwiched” in the middle (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020, p. 124) or, as described by Newell and Dopson (1996), they inhabit the “muddle in the middle”. This has a bearing on their identity as strategists, as it influences how they deal with strategic activities within this middle-role position. Despite growing interest in exploring the connection between identity and strategy, not enough attention has been given to the strategy–identity nexus in a public sector context. Strategy is a situated activity, meaning where it takes place could influence how it takes place (Jarzabkowski and Whittington, 2008). Public sector strategising may be dominated by politics and the ideologies advanced by the political party as discourse. Additionally, public sector strategising is influenced by a wider spectrum of stakeholders, directly or indirectly involved in the strategising work. For example, Ferguson (2019) confirms that trade unions are the majority stakeholder in government, and their strategising is subject to negotiation processes (Bryson and George, 2020).

Further, combining strategy and identity at the individual level presents an opportunity to study the struggle between individuals’ identities as strategic agents and their day-to-day practice of strategising (Ravasi *et al.*, 2020). The study focussed on micro-level practices within a contemporary public sector setting. Accordingly, we set out to answer the following research question: *How do the internal identity dynamics of middle managers and their immediate supervisors shape the strategising work within a government department?* Subsequently, we explored the multi-level dynamics between middle managers and their immediate supervisors.

Placing strategy and identity within the same field of experienced reality provides for new theorisation that enables the development of a more dynamic and nuanced view of strategy when compared to traditional strategy perspectives (Sillince and Simpson, 2010). We adopted the strategy-as-practice perspective, viewing strategy as a situated activity (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007, p. 7). True practice-oriented research recognises the need to look at the underlying practices that produce the simultaneous materialisation of both strategy and individual identity, as the *doing* of strategy is closely related to the being (identity) (Ravasi *et al.*, 2020). Our approach emphasises detailed micro-level processes in organisational life, with a focus on middle managers’ identity work and its influence on strategy. Unlike traditional views, we align with Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008), who define strategists in a much wider sense to include both those directly involved in making strategy and those with indirect influence. By studying the multi-level dynamics between middle managers and their immediate supervisors, our research responded to calls for more studies that focus on identity at the cross-level (Ravasi *et al.*, 2020). In line with Joshi and Jha (2016) and Almansour and Obembe (2021), we recognise that middle managers are powerful role players in the strategising practices within an organisation. However, *how* middle managers see themselves is a useful perspective to explore, as it sheds light on how middle managers make sense of and navigate the organisational realities that they face. At the same time, exploring how top managers perceive middle managers as strategists may also add to the body of knowledge on middle managers by revealing a multi-level perspective and uncovering the relational aspects often overlooked in most studies (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020).

Research on the identity of middle managers tends to favour private sector organisational contexts, which implies that public sector entities, particularly in developing countries such as South Africa, are under-explored (Ainsworth *et al.*, 2009). Some key strategic issues facing strategic management in Africa include, but are not limited to, issues such as political instability, high levels of poverty, an inefficient public sector and a lack of key skills. Investigating the identities of middle managers in modern public sector organisations becomes increasingly significant, especially when considering the extensive reforms and transformations that the South African public sector (particularly basic education) has undergone. Consequently, a contemporary government institution in an emerging economy

provides an ideal context to explore the strategy–identity nexus. It focusses on the South African public sector context, addressing the reciprocal tensions and inter-relationships between identity and strategy from the perspective of two levels. Such studies can assist in understanding how these tensions and relational aspects are managed or navigated and how this affects strategy practices and processes (Ravasi *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, studying the relationship between middle managers and top managers in the context of public sector may contribute to the knowledge of how leadership unfolds in practice (Tyskbo and Styhre, 2023). Such research may also provide insight into how middle managers and their superiors cope with identity-strategy-related aspects. Significantly less research has focussed on copying tactics, particularly when it relates to identity-strategy-related activities and perspectives across different hierarchies (Wenzel *et al.*, 2020; Gioia *et al.*, 2013).

We begin with a theoretical background on strategy and identity from a strategy-as-practice perspective. We then explore public sector strategising and present the research context, design and findings. The paper concludes with a discussion section and concluding remarks, highlighting the limitations of the study and areas in need of further research.

Literature review

The link between strategy and identity from a strategy-as-practice perspective

From a practice perspective, there is a connection between identity, the actions of individuals and outcomes (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007). This assertion is important as it directs attention to the identity of the actor embedded in the question of “who am I”. The identities that strategists bring to their work may constitute fundamentally different experiences in the way those actors shape strategy. Consequently, identity-related practices often have immediate strategy implications (Bürgi and Oliver, 2005). Identity is inherently linked to praxis and can therefore provide a route to understanding praxis. Identity can also bridge the gap between the micro and macro levels and can therefore be a powerful interpreting approach when understanding organisational settings and phenomena (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Gioia, 1998). This is because an individual’s identity plays a vital role in shaping their thoughts, emotions and values and how they behave in social settings (Albert *et al.*, 2000). Consequently, identity construction is a key characteristic of sense-making, which makes it an important element of strategising (Weick, 1995).

We viewed identity from a micro perspective, often referred to as “identity work” (Brown, 2015). Identity work is defined as the “range of activities that individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept” (Kreiner *et al.*, 2006, p. 1032). Brown and Toyoki (2013) note that individuals’ social identities take the form of self-narratives, which are authored through internal orations as well as interactions with others. It can be said that identities are constructed through and within discursive systems, enabling individuals to craft their desired selves by providing materials and opportunities for self-reflection (Brown and Toyoki, 2013).

In this study, our interest was in the individual identity of middle managers as strategists, from the perspective of both the middle managers and their immediate supervisors. We shifted away from conceptually narrating the identity of middle managers to empirically soliciting the practical views of middle managers and their immediate supervisors about who they think they are concerning what they do and how they act. By focussing on how middle managers view themselves as strategists, our research inevitably also focussed on how they construct their own identity and how identity work is a central component as defined by Brown (2015). We, therefore, respond to calls to view both strategy and identity as practices – as activities that people do (Oliver, 2015). Our goal is to understand how strategists shape strategising activities through who they are – an area that is still underdeveloped

(Ravasi *et al.*, 2020). Through a practice approach, we address a gap in understanding the nuanced and often hidden dynamics present within a unique context, from two different levels.

The middle manager perspective

Our recognition of middle managers as powerful actors is motivated by their intermediate positions within organisations where they serve as important interfaces between otherwise disconnected actors and domains such as top-level and operating-level. Harding *et al.* (2014) define middle managers as those who occupy a particular position in the hierarchy, in which they face upwards to senior management or downwards to junior staff. As described by Mintzberg (1989, p. 98), middle managers occupy a position “between the operating core and the apex”, and they therefore act as “critical mediators” (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011).

Previous studies have extensively demonstrated the critical role that middle managers play in making strategy work (Wooldridge *et al.*, 2008; Jansen van Rensburg *et al.*, 2014; Surju *et al.*, 2020; Schuler *et al.*, 2023). Within the context of public sector, Chen *et al.* (2017) considered the upward roles of middle managers in championing alternatives and synthesising information. Additionally, Chen *et al.* (2017) confirmed that middle management work involves much more than upward activities and includes policy implementation, facilitating change and boundary spanning. However, middle managers often find it challenging to establish themselves as strategists (Laine and Vaara, 2007), as strategic roles are typically assigned to top-level managers rather than middle managers (Splitter *et al.*, 2021). Navigating this “middle-management world” between upwards and downwards positioning means middle managers are exposed to relational aspects from two directions on a day-to-day basis (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020, p. 129). They are therefore largely influenced by day-to-day informal conversations and social practices. However, limited research focusses on these relational aspects and the social dynamics underlying middle managers’ organisational realities (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020; Schuler *et al.*, 2023).

Strategising in the public sector

Axelsson (2016) notes that strategies in public institutions emanate from government or top-level management of public authorities. It is possible to define a strategy as an outcome of policies and ideologies advanced by the political party as political discourse (Axelsson, 2016). More than just maximising organisational performance, two of the compelling reasons why public sector organisations conduct strategic planning are accountability and compliance with the law (Bryson *et al.*, 2018). Growing financial and social pressures are some of the forces compelling public institutions to have structured planning based on pre-defined objectives and priorities (Favoreu *et al.*, 2016). Public entities are held accountable for the resources allocated in pursuit of their constitutional mandates. In meeting constitutional obligations, public entities embark on a planning process, which eventually leads to the development of plans and strategies towards meeting service delivery targets (NPC, 2015). Strategic management is therefore prominent in many public sector organisations (Bryson and George, 2020).

Given its political orientation and, as stated earlier, the fact that the public sector is often characterised by multiple internal and external stakeholders with different interests, these institutions must strive to meet diverse interests simultaneously. Therefore, public strategising tensions are seemingly inherent in the public sector and lead to the development of various bureaucratic organising practices and processes to deal with those tensions (Höglund *et al.*, 2018). Evidently, the public sector context provides for a unique and dynamic context within which to study aspects such as strategising and the concept of

identity. In addition, middle managers are immersed in these tensions and need to conduct their day-to-day strategising activities within this dynamic organisational setting.

Introducing the selected government department

By adopting a case study design, we were able to delve deep into the lived experiences of middle managers and their immediate supervisors. We purposely selected a single South African government department responsible for education provision. Our research team is familiar with the selected department through previous research endeavours. Strategic management in the context of the South African Government is broad and encapsulates the development and implementation of strategic plans by various government departments at different levels. The planning process is guided by the Framework for Strategic Plans and Annual Performance Plans (FSAPP) introduced in 2010 (NPC, 2015). In addition, the planning process is influenced by the country's National Development Plan (NDP), which is translated into the five-year Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF). The MTSF identifies institutional key priorities for the period of five years (NPC, 2015).

A typical hierarchical structure comprises of the director-general (who is the accounting officer of the department), the deputy director-general, the chief director, the director, the deputy director, the assistant director, the senior administrative officer and, in some sections, administrative officers and/or clerks. All these positions influence strategising within the organisation, although the degree of influence will vary according to the authority and responsibility that come with each position. The deputy directors are appointed in terms of the Middle Management Services (MMS) handbook, and thus, we took advantage of this in determining middle managers who should be part of the study. Directors are appointed in terms of the Senior Management Services (SMS) handbook. Deputy directors report directly to the directors. Therefore, inevitably, the work of a deputy director, who represent the middle managers in the context of this study, is affected by the upward multiple layers, namely director, chief director, deputy director-general and ultimately the director-general. Our research focus was on the identities of the deputy directors, who are the middle managers in the case organisation. We were interested in how middle managers shape strategy through "who they are" and by way of their positions in the hierarchy or organisational structure, from both the perspective of middle managers and their immediate supervisors (directors).

Methodology

We adopted a qualitative approach to gain insight into how individuals interpret and attribute meanings to their own identity and how their immediate supervisors perceive them. Our exposure to the selected department through an earlier research endeavour, as well as the insider perspective of one of the research team members employed within the department, made the selection of the specific department ideal for extrapolating results. Our approach was situated in the interpretive-constructivist research paradigm to study the lived experiences of middle managers in relation to their work. This paradigm is credited for its usefulness towards understanding reality as an expression of deeper-lying processes (Duffy *et al.*, 2021) and enabled us to collect deep data through in-depth interviews supplemented with the reviewing of documentation such as official strategy reports, annual reports, planning frameworks and government-related policies. In essence, what people see and experience is socially constructed.

Participants

Given our multi-level focus, we selected participants from two levels: deputy directors (middle managers) and directors (the immediate supervisors). We developed two separate interview

guides: one for the deputy directors and one for the directors. We used in-depth interviews to reveal detailed information from both groups relating to three main themes: (1) how middle managers are viewed as strategy practitioners; (2) the “identity work” of both groups, involving the day-to-day activities and dynamics present within their specific context, and (3) aspects relating to individual identity within the organisational context. We interviewed 13 deputy directors and 13 directors. Data saturation, as defined by [Saunders et al. \(2018\)](#), repeated what was expressed in previous data. We continued with the interviews until we reached at least 13 interviews in both groups, in line with [Hennink and Kaiser \(2022\)](#), who suggest that the sample size for saturation ranges from 5 to 24 interviews. There was no need for a second round of interviews, as similar and consistent themes emerged throughout the interviews. The middle managers and their immediate supervisors were selected from different functional areas in the case organisation to ensure representation and unbiased sampling ([Gibbs et al., 2007](#)) based on inclusion criteria that included at least 2 years’ experience and permanent employment within the case organisation.

In terms of the directors, the study approached directors from different directorates to ensure a diverse sample across the directorates. Middle managers work with assistant directors and lower-level staff in their day-to-day activities. Part of the responsibilities of middle managers is to provide support to the director or the section on all issues related to the work of the directorate. These middle managers are allocated a sub-directorate, which they manage on their own. However, they get strategic direction from their immediate supervisor, i.e. the director.

Middle managers who participated in this study fell within the three categories of the MMS handbook referred to as deputy director, chief education specialist and branch coordinator. Participating middle managers had between 7 and 33 years of service in the public sector. The directors who participated in this study had between 10 and 38 years of service in the public sector and were appointed in terms of the SMS handbook. All participants were selected from various sections in the case department to get divergent views about the research questions.

Data analysis

We followed a dynamic analysis process, which included both inductive and deductive reasoning ([Nowell et al. \(2017\)](#)). This process required a recursive process, going back and forth between the data and transcripts. Data analysis focussed mainly on generating in vivo codes that would form part of the categories or themes using the direct language of participants ([Saldaña, 2021](#)). In addition, we opted for a thematic data analysis method to assist us in searching, identifying and reporting common themes. The actual process of analysis only commenced after the transcription of interviews had been completed. The first level of coding was done manually. Subsequently, we utilised Atlas.ti to segment the data and allocate codes. All middle manager files had the MM description as an identifier to assist us in distinguishing between the views of the middle managers and the views of the directors. The main researcher who conducted the interviews also conducted the data analysis. Through consensus meetings between the researchers, which included an independent co-coder, the final themes were developed over three levels of coding consensus.

Our data analysis process comprised the first and second cycles of coding. In the first cycle, we adopted open coding to break down the data. We then transitioned to descriptive coding, where we assigned labels to summarise the meaning. After reaching consensus with the co-coder, we moved on to the second cycle of coding. During the second cycle, we collapsed the first cycle codes into a smaller number of codes. From there, we found that large segments of text are better suited to just one key code rather than several small ones. This part of the process was considered pattern coding, as described by [Saldaña \(2021\)](#). From

there, we were able to categorise different codes with similar characteristics. It is from these categories that we eventually identified the themes reported below.

Findings

We first describe the organisational context to offer rich insight into the social setting and prevailing organisational culture within which the middle managers and their immediate supervisors live their identity and conduct their day-to-day work. An understanding of the organisational context aided in revealing the nuances and dynamics present within the case department. We then proceed with rich descriptions from participants regarding their identity their work and identity dynamics that became apparent. We also highlight the complexities that influence how work is done and how identity is influenced by it.

A complex organisational context

At the time of this study, the department had a set of established practices within the organisational environment that influenced how things were being done. We observed a complex environment, and three main themes described the organisational context, namely, the typical bureaucratic organisational structure and its implications, the political influence evident within the department and the organisational culture, which alluded to a rather hostile setting. **Table 1** presents the coding structure associated with the main themes that describe the organisational context.

Typically, the department followed a top-down approach. As expected, some of the practices were inherently bureaucratic and politically inclined. Political influence was evident, as labour unions were considered key stakeholders, creating a political environment involving power dynamics in the strategising work of the department. In terms of the organisational culture, participants described a challenging working environment, including references to working in silos, the forced implementation of decisions, sidelining of middle

Main theme	Categories	Codes
Organisational context	Organisational structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bureaucracy • Top-down approach • Ageism • Red tape • Work scope dynamics • System deficiencies
	Political influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly unionised context • Abuse of political affiliation • Political interference • Changes in political environment
	Organisational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Middle managers felt suppressed • Middle managers - working under fear • Side-lined • Forced implementation of decisions • Middle managers are over-worked • Individuals working in silos • Communication gap between management levels • Power struggles between directors and middle managers • Lack of accountability (middle managers) • Minimal authority (middle managers)

Table 1.
Coding structure of organisational context **Source(s):** Authors' own work

managers and communication gaps between management levels. Middle managers and directors both discussed power struggles between the two management levels, exposing an uncertain environment marked by tensions and frustrations. Middle managers experienced frustration with the lack of responsibility and authority given to them, as expressed below:

[Y]ou're almost waiting for somebody up there to provide that direction because that's also where the accountability lies, because most of the accountability lies at the senior management levels as opposed to the middle management levels or the junior levels (middle manager).

[E]ven though you may play a role in addressing a question or finding a solution to a challenge or responding to a question, the ownership does not lie with you; it lies with someone who's at the senior management level. And that's a bit of a challenge for me, I think, because I think that may impact on your attitude and your approach to work (middle manager)

Notably, directors openly expressed the same frustrations, in terms of what the middle management positions allow them to do/or not to do:

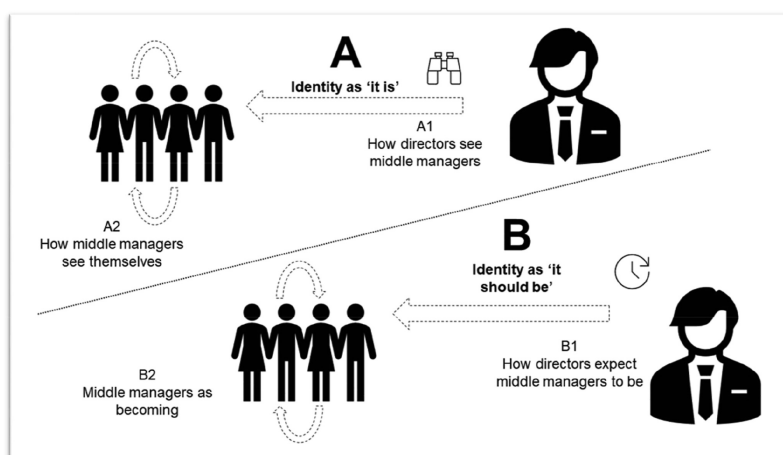
... you also have a challenge of authority around themselves [middle managers] that, when you are not in office, unless it is clearly a delegated and written text, they get frustrated because they don't have the delegated powers of the director (director).

But I know that sometimes directors know they've got also their own shortcomings in the sense that a director sees himself or herself most of the time as the person who's the alpha and the omega, the person to say that I'm Bongani, I'm the director, and my word is final (director).

This provided us with an early glimpse into the “paradoxical, complex and ambiguous world” (Tengblad and Vie, 2012, p. 35) that both middle managers and their supervisors face and navigate.

A multi-level perspective of identity work

The multi-level identity dynamics between directors and middle managers presented a unique vantage point from which to explore how these identity dynamics influenced the actions of middle managers within the department at the time. We offer our findings from two positions, as depicted in Figure 1. Position A depicts the present time and describes the



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 1.
Identity of middle
managers as
strategists: identity as
“it is” versus as “it
should be”

middle manager's identity as it is currently perceived by both the directors (A1) and middle managers (A2), thus categorising as "Identity - as it is". Position B describes the expectations placed on middle managers and how they were expected to behave or the roles they were expected to fulfil, as perceived from both perspectives: directors (B1) and middle managers (B2). This was categorised as "Identity - as it should be".

Position A (identity - as "it is")

In this section, we compare the views of middle managers and their immediate supervisors (directors) in terms of how they were perceived as strategy practitioners. We present the views of the directors (A1) first, followed by the views of middle managers (A2).

Immediate supervisors - directors (A1)

Notably, middle managers were depicted as a critical group by their supervisors and were influential in meeting the strategic obligations of the department. Directors used rich descriptions referring to middle managers as "work horses" and equated the middle manager position to that of an "engine room" when describing the day-to-day work that middle managers do within the department.

One of the directors stated that "the work of the department is literally driven by its middle managers". Other directors expressed similar sentiments:

My view is that, as for me, life will be very much difficult operating without middle managers.

[M]iddle managers are actually the engine of government; they are the engine of the bureaucracy. It is on their shoulders that we all stand or fall (director).

Directors further acknowledged the middle manager's role as an influencer and described their position as:

both strategic and operational but, most importantly, an influential position.

key . . . but also strategically positioned to influence decisions.

Directors, however, also expressed certain frustrations and mentioned the need for middle managers to take initiative and ownership, as expressed below:

They are almost scared sometimes to take that next step and that is therefore important as a director because I don't want people to be scared to make mistakes (director).

Because the element, the syndrome that we have created of dependence, that they depend on the directors and the chief directors, make them not to respond to some of these things, make them not to be effective in meetings . . . (director).

Some directors referred to the lack of experience as a factor contributing to the lack of ownership, whilst others referred to the nature of how things were done in the department as a factor that made middle managers step back and not take ownership.

Middle managers (A2)

When probing middle managers on how they view themselves as strategists, they describe themselves as follows:

. . . fundamental in the sense that . . . you must realise that when you are a [middle manager] at a national office, there is no other [middle manager] in the whole country who is tasked with doing what you are doing for the country . . . (middle manager).

I see myself as a contributor to the other side, the people who do work, who can think, who innovate, who influence good policy, who can present well, who speak well, who write well. So, for me, being in the DBE means representing government well, the way I hope everyone aspires to do (middle manager).

I'm a professional technocrat, I'm a researcher, I'm an evaluator, I'm a public servant (middle manager).

The above sentiments were expressed in a somewhat hesitant manner, and we observed some tensions when middle managers referred to the context, they were situated in. One middle manager expressed the view that middle managers are not managers but rather project coordinators:

I'm coordinating particular projects, but I don't see myself as being, in a true sense of the word, a manager.

Whilst another middle manager expressed in a defensive manner:

We [middle managers] are thinkers. We can think, we can apply our mind, if the DBE can respect that (middle manager).

Another middle manager described their role as mere implementers:

Organisationally we're called middle managers but, from where I'm at, I just think we're just implementing agencies but not really on a strategic level.

Middle managers experienced constraints and frustrations within their roles, which could account for the observed lack of initiative and ownership. This concern was echoed by the directors, exposing some of the shared misalignment perceptions between the two groups. Table 2 presents the coding structure for the theme "Identity as it is."

Position B (identity as it should be)

Middle managers and their immediate supervisors often referred to the expectations set for middle managers and the roles they were expected to play. This theme was categorised "identity as it should be". We first present the view of the immediate supervisors (B1) followed by the views of the middle managers (B2)

Main theme	Categories	Codes
Identity as it is	Directors' perceptions of middle managers (A1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Middle managers are critical - They occupy strategic position - Influencers - They are specialists - Lack of experience - Must take initiative and ownership
	Middle managers perception of themselves (A2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Professional technicians - We are specialists - Influencers - We are knowledgeable thinkers - We adopt a supervisory role - We are project coordinators - Limited authority

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 2.
Coding structure of
theme: "Identity as
it is"

Views on middle managers by their immediate supervisors (B1)

Whilst both middle managers and directors referred to the specialist role of middle managers, some directors expressed that at the time of this study, middle managers did not always represent the specialist role as expected and did not make independent decisions as required:

... We need to go back to that situation where your deputy director [middle manager] is really the specialist, kind of a person who can make an independent decision.

Notably, another director suggested that middle managers should be allowed to be part of strategic decisions:

Let's allow the [middle managers] to be part of the strategic decisions.

Several directors mentioned that they wanted to see middle managers taking initiative, aligned with the vision and the strategic intent of the department. For example:

I would like to see a situation where middle managers are not scared to take initiative, but it is initiative that has a solid foundation on the [the vision and the strategic intent of the department].

Directors also suggested that, at crucial times when directors are not available, middle managers should be elevated to perform at the level of the director. Directors expressed the need for middle managers to feel empowered to assume the responsibilities of the director:

I do feel that they can possibly be at a level of a director

We need to rely on them in the absence of the directors.

Directors supported the view that middle managers should assume the full responsibilities of a director and ensure continuity of operational functions of the directorate:

They should do that and, if the director is not in the office, it is incumbent on them as the middle managers to function at the level that should be seen here so that they are able to steady the ship and work must proceed as if the director is in the office.

should run their projects like they are their own directors in that area and forget about anybody above them.

When referring to expectations within the department, certain identity dynamics were revealed, particularly in relation to the middle manager's roles and the functions they perform in the department. There was a perceived misalignment between what middle managers were doing at the time of the study and what they were expected to do, and this revealed certain ambiguities and tensions within the department. In line with [Johnson et al. \(2003\)](#), the findings show that what middle managers *should* do and what they *can* do or are expected to do are two different things.

Views from middle managers themselves (B2)

When middle managers spoke about their position within the organisation and their experience within this role, they often referred to their career journey and aspirations. They mentioned the need for growth and personal development.

Many middle managers have career aspirations to progress to a director level, as expressed below:

Yes, I think I do want influence – maybe for my own personal reasons. I could move up and become a director.

But there's that ambition. Maybe it's taking more responsibility by stepping up to the next level.

Middle managers referred to the valuable experience they had gained through the years, referring to the tacit knowledge in the form of experience they gained within this position.

One middle manager stated, “I think now having been in this role for the past five years, I’ve gained a lot of experience. I understand the ins and outs of being a middle manager, the demands of this work.”

We also observed how middle managers were expected to be in a process of improving themselves through personal development. In terms of their career aspirations, many middle managers referred to their role as “management in training”, suggesting an “in-between” or transitioning phase in their journey as middle managers. Whilst middle managers viewed themselves as strategy practitioners, there was a gap between what middle managers are perceived to be and what they should be, revealing the dynamic and ambiguous nature of identity. Participants spoke about their self-enhancement and the processes middle managers undergo in becoming what they are or what they want to be. The process of self-enhancement constitutes identity work (Brown, 2020). We found that people continuously work towards their preferred identities (identity as it should be) through processes such as talks, serving self-meaning and impression management purposes. In the same way, strategising work is a continuous recursive process that is understood forward and is future-oriented. Table 3 presents the coding structure for the theme “Identity as it should be”.

Discussion

The previous section shared our findings on how middle managers view themselves and how their immediate supervisors view them. Our findings not only considered the current perceptions of middle manager identity but also how identity is perceived to be. We present our central theme, in line with Brown’s (2015) perspective, emphasising that identity is constructed over time and incorporates a future-orientated outlook. We first discuss our findings linked to the role of identity and role conflict. We conclude by discussing the notion of identity as “becoming”.

Identity ambiguities

Although both groups acknowledged middle managers as strategy practitioners, there were varied views about which middle managers are in relation to strategic work. Some directors perceived middle managers as lacking experience and initiative, often failing to take

Main theme	Categories	Codes
Identity (as strategists) as “it should be”	Directors’ perceptions of middle managers (B1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They must be innovative - They should be specialists and strategists - Wanted middle managers to be more independent - Middle managers should act as directors when needed - They should be empowered to take decisions
	Middle managers perception of themselves (B2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Should play the role of analysts - Career aspirations - Career learning - Growth and maturity - Personal development - Management-in-training

Source(s): Authors’ own work

Table 3.
Coding structure of
theme: “identity as it
should be”

ownership of programmes. This perception adds to the dynamic nature of identity as self-defined. Such views may stem from the individual experiences of middle managers and how they define themselves. After all, identity at an individual level focusses on the self in relation to others (Oliver, 2015). We offer insight into how middle managers experience and navigate certain contradictions and pressures of working within a contemporary public sector department. Like Currie and Procter (2005), we also found that role ambiguity and role conflict are the consequences of contradictory expectations about middle managers' roles. In line with Tyskbo and Styhre (2023), we found that middle managers struggle in their positions, caught, as they are, between the roles of a leader and follower. Whilst middle managers are viewed as influencers who are "strategically positioned to influence decisions", they also have limited authority, are constrained by their intermediate position and often wait for direction from their supervisors (directors). Further, the misalignment between what directors expected of middle managers regarding their strategising work versus what middle managers were accomplishing in their daily work revealed the organisational realities of middle managers in their day-to-day activities. For example, participating directors expected middle managers to be independent and, at times to, act as directors; however, middle managers reported feeling rather disempowered in their position and that they lacked authority. Although we did not explicitly aim to focus on misalignment, it emerged as a key outcome of our study, and we are able to shed light on how organisational actors cope and respond in situations, amidst perceived misalignments. We extend the research of Wenzel *et al.* (2020) by demonstrating how two distinct hierarchical levels articulate instances of shared identity-strategy misalignment. Key elements that contributed to this misalignment included poor communication channels, power struggles and systemic issues concerning aspects of accountability and responsibility. Notably, both groups shared similar views on accountability and responsibility. Whilst both groups expressed a desire for greater accountability and responsibility within the middle management role, directors indicated it primarily falls within their scope. Both groups felt restricted by this dynamic, and this showed how ambiguity "permeates hierarchical charts and other formal structure" (Dille, 2023, p. 19).

The relational dynamics between middle managers and their supervisors revealed a contradictory and ambiguous position that middle managers occupy, which influenced how they did (or did not) "do" things within the department. In line with Oliver (2015), we show that organisations with multiple layers of management are prone to identity ambiguities, which can influence the strategising work of the strategy practitioners.

Lastly, by also eliciting views from the immediate supervisors of the middle managers, we adopt the perspective of middle managers as subordinates, which is rarely studied (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). Hence, we explore narratives related to both the "seniors to junior" (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020, p. 125) and "junior to senior" viewpoint. By doing so, we were able to uncover some of the relational aspects that influenced the strategising activities of middle managers and their immediate supervisors.

Identity as "becoming"

Based on the above, we conclude that middle managers' identities as strategic practitioners were not static but undergo a process of "becoming", as they are in a continuous process of self-enhancement, which is linked to the notion of identity work. Our observation aligns with Mantere and Whittington (2021), who state that middle managers must make sense of themselves as legitimate participants in strategy through defining or redefining their identities. Yet, the identity of the strategist is multi-faceted, and a more dynamic view of identity is required by focussing on how managers become strategists. Brown (2022) states that, central to the process of identity work and in part, is the process of self-enhancement,

which involves processes of identity construction (Brown, 2020, 2022). Therefore, the middle managers' identities, as strategy practitioners, were constructed over time through their career journey and the experiences they had gained in their position as middle managers. Having spent many years in this position, many middle managers shared that they were aspiring to become directors eventually. Like Dille (2023), our findings reflect the situatedness of middle managers "middle-ness", and we were able to show how their ongoing identity work of "becoming" was part of their work practice, which sheds light on the organising elements of practice.

By focussing on the identity of middle managers and how they navigate their organisational realities, we confirm the view that identity formation is an important social phenomenon that affects individuals, organisations and societies (Baba *et al.*, 2021). Our practice-oriented approach offers multi-level insights by examining identity dynamics in a unique organisational context (Ravasi *et al.*, 2020) and shedding light on some of the relational aspects between two levels of management.

Recommendations for practice

Given our role as practice-oriented scholars, we also offer recommendations for possible adoption *in practice*. The findings confirmed a need for middle managers to be afforded more authority in their positions. Such authority can be assigned by involving middle managers in decision-making processes within the department. Whilst the government department under study followed a predominantly top-down approach due to its bureaucratic nature, incorporating consultative and engagement sessions between directors and middle managers during the formulation of plans may be a useful method to engage and enable middle managers in their strategising work. We recommend establishing a forum for middle managers where operational issues can be discussed. This forum can also serve as a platform for top management to share the vision and key decisions of the department in terms of its strategic intent. In this way, middle managers will have first-hand information about the strategic intent of the department under study, which could strengthen their sense of belonging. This may translate into a better sense of ownership of the key activities for which middle managers are held responsible and potentially improve their strategising work, ultimately contributing towards the strategic effectiveness of the department.

Concluding remarks, limitations and future research

Middle managers' identities are shaped by many factors, including the context in which they operate and their interactions with their immediate supervisors. We found that middle managers are also perceived as skilful strategy practitioners who fulfil a variety of strategising roles within the department. We extend research on middle managers by revealing how their work practice was ongoing and how their identity can be viewed as "becoming". We reveal how the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners is perceived from both traditional and contemporary perspectives. The traditional view projects middle managers as mere strategy implementers (Wooldridge *et al.*, 2008), whilst the contemporary view adopts a more comprehensive stance, positioning middle managers at the centre of strategy making from formulation to implementation (Chen *et al.*, 2017; Surju *et al.*, 2020).

We recognise that our research was limited to a single government department in South Africa. Our efforts were limited to middle managers holding the title of deputy director and their immediate supervisors (directors). We excluded participants from other levels that fall under the middle management definition. Also, we gathered data predominantly through

interviews supplemented by reviewing relevant documentation. Further studies could incorporate observations or focus groups to explore the more nuanced dynamics between these two groups and how they interact on a day-to-day basis. Whilst we recognise that our findings cannot be generalised, we hope that they can be transferrable to other government departments sharing similar organisational contexts.

The current study focussed only on the identity of individuals within a middle management position, from the perspective of the middle manager and their supervisor. A deeper investigation into the dilemma between what middle managers should do and what they actually do could offer insight into practices that contribute to enhanced success and potential promotion for middle managers who understand these dynamics. Future studies could include perspectives from the middle manager's subordinates to add further insight into relational aspects from a bottom-up perspective. Another area for future research could be exploring the role of the middle manager in strategic alignment between the lower-level staff and the senior management level.

Future research could explore how the professional identities of top leaders, as strategists of the organisation, affect the strategising work of other strategy actors within the organisation. Such a study would add to the body of knowledge on how the personal traits of an individual influence his or her strategising work and how one person's strategising affects other actors.

Future research could be conducted on the identity work of strategy actors in public and private sectors, focussing on tacit knowledge such as learnt experience and how it influences strategising. This has the potential to add to the body of knowledge in terms of understanding those practices that are learnt over time and that are necessary for strategising. It may also be interesting to explore issues such as communication problems or conflict resolution practices, which could add to knowledge on interactions between directors and middle managers, based on identity perceptions.

This paper provided a unique contribution by presenting a multi-level perspective on the link between identity and strategy. The study highlighted the complex nature of the identity work of middle managers within the case department, shedding light on how middle managers view themselves and how they are viewed by their supervisors. This gap between how middle managers are perceived and how they should be reveals the ambiguous nature of their identity. Some of the tensions and power dynamics between middle managers and their direct supervisors shaped the way in which middle managers responded to their day-to-day activities. By bringing to the fore the voices of middle managers and their immediate supervisors, the study provided multi-level insights and attempted to provide a holistic view of the realities within a unique context.

References

- Ainsworth, S., Grant, D. and Iedema, R. (2009), "Keeping things moving: space and the constructions of middle management identity in a post-NPM organization", *Discourse and Communication*, Vol. 3 No. 1, pp. 5-25, doi: [10.1177/1750481308098762](https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481308098762).
- Albert, S., Ashforth, B.E. and Dutton, J.E. (2000), "Organizational identity and identification: charting new waters and building new bridges", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 25 No. 1, pp. 13-17, doi: [10.5465/amr.2000.2791600](https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2000.2791600).
- Almansour, J. and Obembe, D. (2021), "Strategy consensus and social practice: a perspective from public sector managers", *Journal of Strategy and Management*, Vol. 14 No. 4, pp. 461-476, doi: [10.1108/JSMA-11-2020-0327](https://doi.org/10.1108/JSMA-11-2020-0327).
- Alvesson, M. and Willmott, H. (2002), "Identity regulation as organisational control: producing the appropriate individual", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 39 No. 5, pp. 619-644, doi: [10.1111/1467-6486.00305](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00305).

- Axelsson, K. (2016), *Strategising in the Public Sector*, Finding from Implementation of a Strategy Entrepreneurship in Education, Mälardalen University, School of Innovation, Place, Design and Engineering.
- Baba, S., Hemissi, O. and Hafsi, T. (2021), "National identity and organizational identity in Algeria: interactions and influences", *M@n@gement*, Vol. 24 No. 2, pp. 66-125, doi: [10.37725/mgmt.v24.7809](https://doi.org/10.37725/mgmt.v24.7809), available at: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-2021-2-page-66.htm>
- Brown, A.D. (2015), "Identities and identity work in organizations", *International Journal of Management Reviews*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 20-40, doi: [10.1111/ijmr.12035](https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12035).
- Brown, A. D. (Ed.). (2020), *The Oxford Handbook of Identities in Organizations*, Oxford University Press, doi: [10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198827115.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198827115.001.0001).
- Brown, A.D. (2022), "Identities in and around organizations: towards an identity work perspective", *Human Relations*, Vol. 75 No. 7, pp. 1205-1237, doi: [10.1177/0018726721993910](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726721993910).
- Brown, A.D. and Toyoki, S. (2013), "Identity work and legitimacy", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 34 No. 7, pp. 875-896, doi: [10.1177/0170840612467158](https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840612467158).
- Bryson, J. and George, B. (2020), "Strategic management in public administration", in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, doi: [10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1396](https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1396).
- Bryson, J.M., Edwards, L.H. and Van Slyke, D.M. (2018), "Getting strategic about strategic planning research", *Public Management Review*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 317-339, doi: [10.1080/14719037.2017.1285111](https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2017.1285111).
- Bürgi, P. and Oliver, D. (2005), "Organisational identity as a strategy practice", *4th International Critical Management Studies Conference*, 4-6 July 2005, Cambridge, UK.
- Chen, C.A., Berman, E.M. and Wang, C.Y. (2017), "Middle managers' upward roles in the public sector", *Administration and Society*, Vol. 49 No. 5, pp. 700-729, doi: [10.1177/0095399714546326](https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399714546326).
- Currie, G. and Procter, S.J. (2005), "The antecedents of middle managers' strategic contribution: the case of a professional bureaucracy", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 42 No. 7, pp. 1325-1356, doi: [10.1111/j.1467-6486.2005.00546.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2005.00546.x).
- Dille, M.H. (2023), "Unpacking the ambiguous work of middle managers: on the ongoing becoming in liminality", *Culture and Organization*, Vol. 29 No. 1, pp. 19-33, doi: [10.1080/14759551.2022.2125515](https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2022.2125515).
- Duffy, L.N., Fernandez, M. and Sène-Harper, A. (2021), "Digging deeper: engaging in reflexivity in interpretivist-constructivist and critical leisure research", *Leisure Sciences*, Vol. 43 Nos 3-4, pp. 448-466, doi: [10.1080/01490400.2020.1830903](https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2020.1830903).
- Favoreu, C., Carassus, D. and Maurel, C. (2016), "Strategic management in the public sector: a rational, political or collaborative approach?", *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, Vol. 82 No. 3, pp. 435-453, doi: [10.1177/0020852315578410](https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852315578410).
- Ferguson, C. (2019), "Utilising trade unions in business continuity management to create resilience: a South African perspective", *Continuity and Resilience Review*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 36-46, doi: [10.1108/CRR-01-2019-0007](https://doi.org/10.1108/CRR-01-2019-0007).
- Gibbs, L., Kealy, M., Willis, K., Green, J., Welch, N. and Daly, J. (2007), "What have sampling and data collection got to do with good qualitative research?", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 31 No. 6, pp. 540-544, doi: [10.1111/j.1753-6405.2007.00140.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-6405.2007.00140.x).
- Gioia, D.A. (1998), "From individual to organisational identity", in Whetten, D. and Godfrey, P. (Eds), *Identity in Organizations: Building Theory through Conversations*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 17-31.
- Gioia, D.A., Patvardhan, S.D., Hamilton, A.L. and Corley, K.G. (2013), "Organisational identity formation and change", *Academy of Management Annals*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 123-193, doi: [10.1080/19416520.2013.762225](https://doi.org/10.1080/19416520.2013.762225).
- Gjerde, S. and Alvesson, M. (2020), "Sandwiched: exploring role and identity of middle managers in the genuine middle", *Human Relations*, Vol. 73 No. 1, pp. 124-151, doi: [10.1177/0018726718823243](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726718823243).

- Harding, N., Lee, H. and Ford, J. (2014), "Who is 'the middle manager'", *Human Relations*, Vol. 67 No. 10, pp. 1213-1237, doi: [10.1177/0018726713516654](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726713516654).
- Hennink, M. and Kaiser, B.N. (2022), "Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research: a systematic review of empirical tests", *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 292, 114523, doi: [10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523).
- Höglund, L., Caicedo, M.H., Mårtensson, M. and Svärdesten, F. (2018), "Strategic management in the public sector: how tools enable and constrain strategy making", *International Public Management Journal*, Vol. 21 No. 5, pp. 822-849, doi: [10.1080/10967494.2018.1427161](https://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2018.1427161).
- Jansen Van Rensburg, M., Davis, A. and Venter, P. (2014), "Making strategy work: the role of the middle manager", *Journal of Management and Organization*, Vol. 20 No. 2, pp. 165-186, doi: [10.1017/jmo.2014.33](https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2014.33).
- Jarzabkowski, P. and Whittington, R. (2008), "A strategy-as-practice approach to strategy research and education", *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Vol. 17 No. 4, pp. 282-286, doi: [10.1177/1056492608318150](https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492608318150).
- Jarzabkowski, P., Balogun, J. and Seidl, D. (2007), "Strategizing: the challenges of a practice perspective", *Human Relations*, Vol. 60 No. 1, pp. 5-27, doi: [10.1177/0018726707075703](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726707075703).
- Johnson, G., Melin, L. and Whittington, R. (2003), "Micro strategy and strategizing: towards an activity-based view", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 40 No. 1, pp. 3-22, doi: [10.1111/1467-6486.t01-2-00002](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.t01-2-00002).
- Joshi, M. and Jha, S. (2016), "Choice of an authoritative style when implementing a survival urgency-based strategic change: a middle manager's perspective", *Journal of Strategy and Management*, Vol. 10 No. 2, pp. 168-186, doi: [10.1108/JSMA-06-2014-0041](https://doi.org/10.1108/JSMA-06-2014-0041).
- Kreiner, G.E., Hollensbe, E.C. and Sheep, M.L. (2006), "On the edge of identity: boundary dynamics at the interface of individual and organizational identities", *Human Relations*, Vol. 59 No. 10, pp. 1315-1341, doi: [10.1177/0018726706071525](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726706071525).
- Laine, P.-M. and Vaara, E. (2007), "Struggling over subjectivity: a discursive analysis of strategic development in an engineering group", *Human Relations*, Vol. 60 No. 1, pp. 29-58, doi: [10.1177/0018726707075279](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726707075279).
- Mantere, S. and Whittington, R. (2021), "Becoming a strategist: the roles of strategy discourse and ontological security in managerial identity work", *Strategic Organization*, Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 553-578, doi: [10.1177/1476127020908781](https://doi.org/10.1177/1476127020908781).
- Mintzberg, H. (1989), *Mintzberg on Management*, Free Press, New York.
- Newell, H. and Dopson, S. (1996), "Muddle in the middle: organizational restructuring and middle management careers", *Personnel Review*, Vol. 25 No. 4, pp. 4-20, doi: [10.1108/00483489610123191](https://doi.org/10.1108/00483489610123191).
- Nowell, L.S., Norris, J.M., White, D.E. and Moules, N.J. (2017), "Thematic analysis: striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, Vol. 16 No. 1, doi: [10.1177/1609406917733847](https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847).
- NPC (National Planning Commission) (2015), "Planning discussion document", Pretoria, doi: [10.1177/1609406917733847](https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847).
- Oliver, D. (2015), "Identity work as a strategic practice" in, *Cambridge Handbook of Strategy-As-Practice*, pp. 331-344, doi: [10.1017/CBO9781139681032.020](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139681032.020).
- Ravasi, D., Tripsas, M. and Langley, A. (2020), "Exploring the strategy-identity nexus", *Strategic Organization*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 5-19, doi: [10.1177/1476127019900022](https://doi.org/10.1177/1476127019900022).
- Rouleau, L. and Balogun, J. (2011), "Middle managers, strategic sensemaking, and discursive competence", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 48 No. 5, pp. 953-983, doi: [10.1111/j.1467-6486.2010.00941.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2010.00941.x).
- Saldaña, J. (2021), "The coding manual for qualitative researchers", in *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 4th ed, Sage, Thousand Oaks, pp. 1-440.

- Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B. and Jinks, C. (2018), "Saturation in qualitative research: exploring its conceptualization and operationalization", *Quality and Quantity*, Vol. 52 No. 4, pp. 1893-1907, doi: [10.1007/s11135-017-0574-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0574-8).
- Schuler, B.A., Orr, K. and Hughes, J. (2023), "My colleagues (do not) think the same: middle managers' shared and separate realities in strategy implementation", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 160, 113782, doi: [10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.113782](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.113782).
- Sillince, J.A.A. and Simpson, B. (2010), "The strategy and identity relationship: towards a processual understanding", in Joel, A.C.B. and Lampel, J. (Eds), *The Globalization of Strategy Research (Advances in Strategic Management)*, Emerald Group Publishing, Bingley, Vol. 27, pp. 111-143, doi: [10.1108/S0742-3322\(2010\)0000027008](https://doi.org/10.1108/S0742-3322(2010)0000027008).
- Splitter, V., Jarzabkowski, P. and Seidl, D. (2021), "Middle managers' struggle over their subject position in Open Strategy Processes", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 60 No. 7, pp. 1884-1923, doi: [10.1111/joms.12776](https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12776).
- Surju, J., de Metz, N. and Davis, A. (2020), "The strategising roles of public sector middle managers", *Acta Commercii*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 1-11, doi: [10.4102/ac.v20i1.804](https://doi.org/10.4102/ac.v20i1.804).
- Tengblad, S. and Vie, O.E. (2012), "Management in practice: overview of classic studies on managerial work", in Tengblad, S. (Ed.), *The Work of Managers*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 18-47.
- Tyskbo, D. and Styhre, A. (2023), "Karma chameleon: exploring the leadership complexities of middle managers in the public sector", *International Public Management Journal*, Vol. 26 No. 4, pp. 548-569, doi: [10.1080/10967494.2022.2106330](https://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2022.2106330).
- Weick, K.E. (1995), *Sensemaking in Organisations*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Wenzel, M., Cornelissen, J.P., Hartmann, M. and Rauch, M. (2020), "(Un) Mind the gap: how organizational actors cope with an identity-strategy misalignment", *Strategic Organization*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 212-244, doi: [10.1177/1476127019856524](https://doi.org/10.1177/1476127019856524).
- Wooldridge, B., Schmid, T. and Floyd, S.W. (2008), "The middle management perspective on strategy process: Contributions, synthesis, and future research", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 34 No. 6, pp. 1190-1221, doi: [10.1177/0149206308324326](https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206308324326).

Further reading

- Department of Public Service and Administration (2003), *Senior Management Service – Public Service Handbook*, Pretoria.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A. and Johnson, L. (2006), "How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability", *Field Methods*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 59-82, doi: [10.1177/1525822X05279903](https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903).
- Mookherjee, D. and West, T. (2013), "So what do strategy practitioners actually do?", *The Ashridge Journal*, pp. 26-33.
- National Planning Commission (2020), "A review of the National Development Plan 2030 – advancing implementation towards a more capable nation", available at: <https://www.nationalplanningcommission.org.za/assets/Documents/NDP%20REVIEW.pdf>

About the authors

Mishumo Emmanuel Mamburu completed the Master of Commerce degree in Business Management with distinction at the University of South Africa in 2022. In his research, he set out to explore the identity of middle managers as strategy practitioners within a South African government department. Mishumo passed away in February 2023.

Nadine de Metz is Senior Lecturer in strategic management within the Department of Business Management at the University of South Africa. She earned a Ph.D. in Management Studies, and her interests include strategic management, strategic change, practice and process research, with a focus on individuals' behaviour and actions within an organisational context.

JSMA
17,4

Annemarie Davis is Associate Professor in strategic management and conducted her doctoral research on middle managers using the strategy-as-practice perspective. She is a qualitative researcher with a focus on micro-strategising practices and favours studies on organisational change and the middle manager context. Annemarie Davis is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: davisa@unisa.ac.za

762

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:
www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com