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TURNING ROUND AND ROUND:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF MANAGERS' LIVED EXPERIENCE WITH EMPLOYEES' REQUESTS FOR SPECIAL TREATMENT

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Dedication

To my family and friends, whom I love similarly and differently.

And to all the managers out there—keep turning!

Acknowledgements

As with everything in my life, I owe my biggest thanks to my wife, Karen, and my two sons, Austin and Blake. Karen, you are my biggest supporter in everything. I promise this is my last degree (I think!). Austin, I know, deep in my bones, that one day you'll take the time to read this dissertation (a man can dream, right?). Blake, I really appreciate you asking me several times, "So…why are you doing a PhD?"

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Abstract

Managers face a paradox: treating employees similarly can be seen as fair, but not flexible; treating employees differently can be seen as flexible, but also as favoritism. Yet researchers argue that managers should treat employees both similarly and differently: similarly by creating high-quality, trusting leader-member exchange (LMX) relationships with all their employees; and differently by utilizing idiosyncratic deals (i-deals), or specialized work arrangements, when appropriate. And researchers agree that LMX affects i-deals and i-deals affect LMX. Since most of this research is quantitative in nature, I shine a phenomenological lens on the matter. I asked sixteen managers to share how employees' requests for special treatment take shape within these differentiated manager-employee relationships. It seems managers first attempt to analyze the request using objective criteria. For some requests, this suffices. But for other requests, managers turn away from this natural attitude toward a more reflective, phenomenological attitude. They turn toward the space between the request and their response. In doing so, they are faced with various challenges. When managers turn to the request, they're unsure whether it's normal or abnormal. When they turn to the rules, they're confused whether they should be approached strictly or flexibly. When they turn to the rulers, they're left wondering if the rulers are reliable enough to be trusted. When they turn to reason, they can't be sure which community they should follow. When they turn to relationship, they face the exalted melancholy of every relationship's ethereal nature. When they turn to resonance, they face the challenge of figuring out how much trust they are afforded by the community. Managers find themselves turning round and round, uncertain whether they're subject to another object or object of another subject.

Key Words: Idiosyncratic deals (i-deals); Leader-Member Exchange (LMX); Exception Management; Buber; Relational Philosophy; Wittgenstein; Private Language Argument; Rule

Following Paradox; Kripke; Carroll; Alice in Wonderland; Through the Looking-Glass; Phenomenology; Hermeneutics; Existentialism; Existential Crisis

Introduction

Background and Significance

Background: No Way to Okay

What Happened? In the 1970s, JL Collins, author of the book *The Simple Path to Wealth*, had saved the equivalent of $30,000 in today's currency. He faced a dilemma: he wanted to backpack in Europe for four months, but he didn't want to quit his job, which he liked. After struggling with the decision, he ultimately asked his boss if he could take four months off and retain his job. His boss quickly responded, "No way." Not realizing he could negotiate, JL accepted his boss's response and now faced a difficult decision: go on the trip and resign or don't go on the trip and keep his job. After wrestling with the decision for several weeks, he decided to resign and go to Europe. He went again to his boss and informed him of his resignation. To his surprise, this time his boss told him to hold on so he could check with *his* boss. After a few days, JL's boss informed JL that his four-month leave was approved—it was "okay". What was previously "no way" was now suddenly "okay". Something had changed.

What Was Different? According to JL, nothing was different. From his perspective, the first and second meetings were part of the same conversation. The first was to clarify the parameters of the decision; the second was to inform his boss of his decision based on these same parameters. It seems something was different for JL's boss, however. From his perspective, it was likely that the two meetings were two different conversations. The first meeting was a request for extended leave; the second was a notification of resignation. His different responses were likely due to his perspective of the difference between the meetings.

Why Was It Different? For JL, this story is about money; his boss changed his mind because he realized JL didn't need his job and thus didn't need money. JL tells this story to

describe the power of having the financial resources to empower decisions decoupled from the necessity of earning money through employment. For JL's boss, we can speculate that this story is also about power. In a typical arrangement, an employee needs their job for survival, which puts the employer in the power position when negotiating these special requests. What changed between the two meetings? It's highly unlikely that in the weeks between the two meetings, the company policy changed regarding extended leave. From an outside perspective, the major difference is that in the first meeting, JL was asking; in the second meeting, JL was notifying. In the first meeting, the manager held the power; in the second meeting, JL held the power.

How Was It Different? We know why it happened according to JL because he said so—he's the one telling the story. We don't know why it happened according to JL's boss because he wasn't the one telling the story. But I'm not interested in the *why*; I'm interested in the *how*. How did JL's manager experience this change in power (if that in fact is how he experienced these conversations—perhaps it was something else)? What convinced JL's manager that he didn't need to speak to his boss in the first instance, yet compelled him to do so in the second instance? And what if it was someone other than JL who made the request? How would JL's boss have addressed the same request made by a different employee? This is what I wished to explore. I could've asked JL and his boss how they experienced this situation, but I don't know either of them directly. And since this story took place in the 1970s, I'm not sure how much of it JL's boss would remember anyway. More importantly, I'm less concerned about their specific subjective experiences than I am with the type of experience itself. I'm interested in how managers experience requests for special treatment from their employees generally. Specifically, I wanted to examine the lived experience of managers dealing with requests for differentiated treatment in the context of the differential relationships they form with their employees. I wanted

to hear from managers themselves how they experience treating different people similarly and differently at the same time.

Different Versus Differentiated: Differences That Make a Difference to Different People

JL's request to take four months off work was unusual, or different. This is probably why he was hesitant to ask for it in the first place and why his boss initially said no. Any request for something that falls outside the rules or norms is considered unusual. In essence, someone is requesting to be treated differently than others; if the request is approved, then the employee is in fact being treated differently. The key question is whether the employee is being treated differently or differentially.

What's the difference between different and differentiated? In short, some differences matter, and some don't. When it comes to differences, what matters is how the person making the decision perceives the difference. To differ means *to be* different; to differentiate means *to make* (someone or something) different (Brittanica, 2024). In other words, differences are inherent (i.e., everyone and everything is unique in some way, after all) whereas differentiation is a decision (i.e., someone decides how someone or something else is different—according to the person deciding). Since this study examines workplace treatment and workplace relationships, we'll utilize differentiation terminology common to the workplace.

In business terminology, differentiation is often associated with differentiation strategy, popularized by Michael Porter (1985). Organizations pursuing a differentiation strategy aim to distinguish their products or services—the goal is to be unique *in the eyes of the consumer.* If consumers value convenience, then convenience will be emphasized; if consumers value technological advancement, then that will be emphasized. What the organization values is secondary to what the consumer values. This is often referred to as the distinction between

features (inherent differences) vs. benefits (valued differences—valued by the consumer). In the business setting, then, differentiation is highlighted as a conscious choice, rather than an inherent characteristic.

Differentiation is *preferential difference*: a difference that matters to the person making the distinction. For example, someone may have a degree from a certain university. While there are certainly thousands of people who have this degree, in the pool of candidates for a specific position, this may be the only person who has this degree, which makes this person unique vis-à-vis the other candidates. Whether this degree differentiates this candidate (positively or negatively) depends on the person hiring for the position. If the hiring manager prefers candidates from this university, then this difference matters (positively); if the hiring manager doesn't like this university, this difference matters (negatively). If the hiring manager doesn't care one way or another, then this difference doesn't matter; this difference is not a differentiator—not every difference makes a difference. So, from the hiring manager's perspective, every candidate is different, but only some candidates are differentiated based on their university. And some candidates are differentiated based on their work experience. And so on. Whatever matters to the hiring manager is what differentiates a certain candidate or certain candidates from all the others. In the same manner, a different hiring manager may value different things. A positive differentiator for one manager may be a negative one for another. Differentiation is in the eye of the beholder.

For JL's boss, JL's request wasn't just to be treated *differently* (taking off more time from work than what is considered normal is inherently different than how others are treated); the request was to be treated *differentially* (being given preferential consideration vis-a-vis others who reported to JL's boss). Because when other people—such as JL's colleagues—see that JL

has been approved for four months of leave, they don't just perceive that he is being treated differently; they perceive that he is being treated differentially. That is, JL's boss has chosen to prefer JL more than everyone else—at least for this particular thing. And this is something JL's boss very likely considered when evaluating the request. He likely knew that approving JL's request might encourage others to ask for their own special treatment. And how he handles these requests invokes considerations of fairness and favoritism.

Idiosyncratic Deals: Differentiated Treatment

Rules. Every organization has rules. Employees need to know what to expect from one another. If everyone did whatever they wanted whenever they wanted, it would be chaos. But sometimes, the rules don't apply to the specific situation, and organizations need to be flexible. Some organizations are stricter about following the rules while others are more flexible with the rules. Every organization is some combination of strict and flexible. Some organizations are stricter—they're stable and predictable but can be rigid and stale. Some organizations are more flexible—they're innovative and nimble, but can be chaotic and unpredictable (Rousseau, 2005).

Just as every organization has rules, every organization has exceptions to those rules. In stricter organizations, the exceptions tend to be seen as different. That is, something unique about the person or situation warrants different treatment than prescribed by the rules. In more flexible organizations, the exceptions tend to reflect differentiation. That is, rules are bent or broken based on preferential treatment more so than inherent differences in relationships or circumstances. Organizational factors such as human resources practices, individual managerial practices, and organizational culture influence how strict or flexible organizations are when it comes to exception management (Rousseau, 2005).

What are Idiosyncratic Deals? How do organizations balance following the rules and bending the rules? The primary way is with what are called idiosyncratic deals, or i-deals. I-deals are special conditions of employment negotiated between employees and organizations (Rousseau, 2005). I-deals can vary in scope from a single feature to the entire employment relationship. There are various types of i-deals, such as developmental (like a special training), flexibility (like working from home), and workload (like reduced hours) (Rousseau, 2005; Rousseau et al., 2006). In essence, i-deals allow individual employees to bend or even break the rules—with organizational approval!

I-deals are a strategic tool to address a fundamental management dilemma: how to treat employees similarly and differently at the same time. (Rousseau, 2005) For most people, most of the time, the regular rules apply (managers treat people similarly); but for some people, some of the time, special i-deals apply (managers treat people differently). Done well, researchers argue, i-deals provide flexibility to accommodate special needs or talents, or to reward employees for special contributions. Done poorly, they foster perceptions of favoritism and unfairness. (Rousseau, 2005; Rousseau et al., 2006).

JL's Idiosyncratic Deal. JL wanted to take an extended leave from work which did not comply with organizational policy or practice (at least not in his nor his manager's perception based on their first "negotiation"), thus constituting an i-deal request. How did JL's boss "know" that it was a "no way" when he first proposed his four-month leave? And how did he "know" that he could ask his boss for an accommodation when JL presented his resignation? Was JL's boss following a specific special request protocol? Or was he making things up as he went along? What were the organizational culture and practices related to i-deal requests?

This was the essence of my focus for this study. I wanted to explore how managers like JL's manager experience employees' requests for special treatment. Is it primarily a cognitive or emotive experience? Is the main consideration how the special arrangement would affect the employee, the manager, or the rest of the team? How do concepts of fairness and favoritism play into the experience? What other concerns or considerations do managers have in these situations? The best way to gain exposure to the lived experience of managers in these situations is to go directly to the source: the managers themselves and, specifically, how they themselves make meaning of these experiences.

Leader-Member Exchange: Differentiated Relationships

When It Comes to Idiosyncratic Deals, Managers are Key. Because i-deals are usually negotiated between the employee and the manager, managers are key to the effective utilization of i-deals within the workplace. The manager is usually the one who decides whether to approve or deny the i-deal (Hornung et al., 2009; Laulié et al., 2019); it's the manager who normally determines if the rules are going to be followed or not. But how do managers "know" how strict or how flexible they should be? How do they "know" whether their organization is i-deal friendly or not? Are they supposed to follow the organization's approach or are they free to follow their own judgment? Should they follow the rules or follow their instincts? And will their decision be overruled by someone else in the organization?

A strict manager in a flexible organization could be seen as too rigid and unsympathetic to the needs of employees, while a flexible manager in a strict organization could be seen as too soft and not following the rules. They could ask their manager for guidance, who could ask their manager, and so on, all the way to the top. But who ultimately makes the decision for how the

organization wants to approach rules? And how is this communicated down to the managers? Indeed, when it comes to managing i-deals, managers are in a tight spot!

The Manager-Employee Relationship. In the workplace, we form different relationships with different people. Different relationships are based on individual differences. To be different is to be unique (and everyone is unique). Accordingly, each manager-employee relationship is unique (different) because it involves unique (different) individuals. Managers thus treat different people *differently* because each manager-employee relationship is unique. For example, a manager may spend more time with a new employee than an experienced team member because the new employee has different onboarding and orientation needs than does the experienced person. There is a different type of relationship which requires different interactions. Difference is inherent; it is not a choice.

In addition to treating different people *differently*, people treat different people *differentially*. Differential relationships are based on relational differences. To be differentiated is to be unique to another (e.g., your boss, your colleague, your customers). In other words, while everyone is unique (different), people may be uniquely unique (differentiated) based on the specific relationship with the person determining the differentiation. Managers treat different people *differentially* because managers value different employees differentially, i.e., some more than others. Differentiation is a preference; it's a choice.

So, when it comes to the manager-employee relationship, difference is an individual characteristic while differentiation is a relational characteristic. While each manager-employee relationship is inherently different, managers also choose to differentiate between employees based on preferences. In short, managers differentiate differences differently!

What is Leader-Member Exchange? In the manager-employee relationship, because of power dynamics, it's the manager who exerts more influence over the relationship, i.e., the manager creates differentiated relationships with each employee based on how much the manager values each person. The primary measure of differential manager-employee relationships is Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). LMX describes how leaders favor some team members and disfavor others. Those who are favored enjoy high-quality, socio-emotional exchanges while those who are disfavored form low-quality, transactional exchanges (Liden et al., 2006). While previous iterations of the LMX model dichotomized employees into in-group and out-group status (Dansereau et al., 1975), current LMX theory places employees along a favored continuum without a clear delineation between favored and disfavored (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). LMX has been around a long time and has helped highlight a fundamental insight into workplace relationships: managers treat employees differentially based on their personal preferences.

The Relationship Between JL and His Manager. We don't know from the story what kind of relationship JL had with his manager, but it's reasonable to assume it was a higher quality relationship considering his manager explored and ultimately received approval for JL's i-deal. If JL's manager perceived the relationship with JL as lower quality, he likely would have gladly accepted JL's resignation. Of course, there may have been other factors at play. For example, JL's boss may have believed it would be very difficult to replace JL and thus it was better to let him take time off rather than try to fill a vacancy. But based on research at the intersection of i-deals and LMX, JL's manager very likely weighed their relationship into his decision-making process.

Idiosyncratic Deals and Leader-Member Exchange

Idiosyncratic Deals and Leader-Member Exchange Are Related. Both i-deals and LMX involve differences—one regarding treatment and the other regarding relationships. Both center around managerial discretion. Of course, there's a zone of managerial discretion—it's not unfettered. I-deals can be vetoed by others (e.g., boss's boss; HR). LMX can be challenged by others (e.g., the employee can push back on the type of relationship desired by the boss). But managers are the seat of influence for both i-deals and LMX. I-deals and LMX involve differences and differentiation—differences primarily differentiated by managers.

Idiosyncratic Deals and Leader-Member Exchange Are Correlated. I-deals and LMX are not just related, they're correlated; each affect and is affected by the other (Anand et al., 2010; Anand et al., 2018; Ho & Tekleab, 2016; Hornung et al., 2014; Singh & Vidyarthi, 2018). Rousseau et al. (2006) highlights the close connection between i-deals and LMX:

> High-LMX workers enjoy more opportunities for idiosyncratic behavior—and, presumably, the creation of i-deals—than their low LMX counterparts. Importantly, whether the LMX relationship is based on an employer's regard for a particularly competent worker or merely on a friendship with a less impressive performer determines whether these individually distinct arrangements constitute legitimate i-deals or merely preferential treatment. Nonetheless, having a good relationship with one's manager or other representative of one's employer is likely to make proposing an i-deal easier. (p. 981)

Differentiated Differences

Despite researchers highlighting the connection between i-deals and LMX, they continue to conceptualize them as different forms of differential preference.

Idiosyncratic Deal Differentiation Is Perceived as Fair Flexibility. I-deals are conceptualized as differentiated from shady deals: preferential treatment (favoritism) and unauthorized conduct (usurping). I-deals involve a win-win for both the employee and the organization, whereas preferential treatment (favoritism) benefits the employee more than the organization (Rousseau et al., 2006). Rousseau (2005) specifically notes that this is a hard determination—really a judgment call that can be made differently by different people:

> At times, the boundaries between i-deals and their dysfunctional counterparts [e.g., favoritism] are ambiguous. Both unauthorized and idiosyncratic arrangements can come about under conditions in which a worker has a special relationship with his or her immediate manager…Whether this situation is illicit or preferential *depends on the perspective you take* [emphasis added], pointing to the tension between the perceptions of the involved parties, the arrangement's actual features, and how third parties interpret the situation. (pp. 51-52)

This blurry boundary makes it virtually impossible to delineate between i-deals and their "dysfunctional counterparts." For instance, it's easy to imagine various scenarios where the special employment arrangement benefits the employee just a little more than the organization, but the organization still benefits. It's actually harder to imagine a scenario where the benefits are exactly equal. And who would measure the benefits to determine who benefits more? And how would this be measured?

Leader-Member Exchange Differentiation Is Perceived as Unfair Favoritism. LMX theory has been criticized as aligning with negative favoritism and violating norms of fairness (Dasborough et al., 2009; Liden et al., 1997; Matta & Van Dyne, 2015; Omilion-Hodges & Baker, 2013; Rousseau et al., 2006; Rousseau et al., 2016). LMX scholars continually advocate

that, instead of leaders or managers forming differentiated relationships with followers (evidencing favoritism), they instead "should provide *all* [emphasis original] employees access to the process of LMX by making the initial offer to develop LMX partnerships to each subordinate" (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 229).

Significance

A Focus on Managers

When it comes to both i-deals and LMX, the manager is key. The manager is usually the one who decides on whether to approve or deny an i-deal. The manager is the one who influences the quality of LMX relationship. Researchers say i-deals are fair and LMX is favoritism, but what do managers say? How do managers experience i-deals (requests to treat people differentially) within the context of LMX (forming differentiated relationships)?

A Focus on Meaning

When it comes to both i-deals and LMX, perception is key. Perceptions are best understood qualitatively, not quantitatively. Existing literature for i-deals, LMX, and their intersection focuses on objective measurement. Overwhelmingly, managers, employees, and coworkers are asked to rate the quality of their relationship or the fairness of a specialized work arrangement via Likert-type scales. Not only has this resulted in various challenges (Anand & Rofcanin, 2022), but it fails to address the meaning of these forms of differentiation for those involved. As noted earlier, differentiation is in the eye of the beholder, and the manager is the key beholder within these dynamics. Instead of approaching the phenomenon from a quantitative perspective, I wanted to focus on a qualitative one.

Problem Statement

The Dominant Phenomenological Problem

When looked at together, i-deals and LMX intersect around a fundamental management dilemma: how to treat different people similarly and differently (Rousseau, 2005). Research related to differentiated treatment (i-deals) within the context of differentiated relationships (LMX) is conflicting. On the one hand, managers can utilize i-deals to treat people differentially—this is perceived as fair and therefore good. On the other hand, managers form differentiated LMX relationships within their teams—this is perceived as favoritism and therefore bad. This seems hard to reconcile for managers. Treating people differentially is okay, but having differential relationships is not. Stated differently, treating different people differentially is good (when it's a specialized employment arrangement) but it's also bad (when it's a specialized relationship). What about the opposite: what if a manager treated everyone similarly? According to the experts, treating different people similarly is bad (i.e., not being flexible by approving any specialized employment arrangements) but it's also good (i.e., not forming differentiated LMX relationships). Current research on i-deals, LMX, and their intersection seems to leave unresolved this fundamental management dilemma of how to treat different people similarly and differently.

The Population Affected by the Phenomenological Problem

Because the phenomenon deals with managers' experience with specialized employment arrangements (i-deals) within differentiated manager-employee relationships (LMX), the population affected by this phenomenological problem includes all managers to whom an i-deal has been requested that have multiple direct reports with differentiated relational characteristics.

The Type of Phenomenological Study

This study utilizes a hybrid descriptive-hermeneutic phenomenological method, particularly adhering to Max van Manen's (2023) lived experience human science inquiry approach.

What Type of Phenomenological Material Was Gathered (Lived Experiences)

I gathered the lived experiences of managers to whom specialized employment arrangements (i-deals) have been requested. Their experiences were obtained through a combination of written lived experience descriptions (LEDs) and oral reflections via focus groups and one-on-one semi-structured interviews.

How Understanding Lived Experiences of Managers Might Help With Understanding More Deeply the Phenomenological Problem

Managers' lived experience navigating the apparent tensions between flexibility and fairness in handling i-deal requests within LMX relationships represents an important phenomenon. Existing literature provides limited understanding of how managers themselves experience and make sense of this phenomenon. By eliciting the lived experiences of managers, I hope I've provided clarity regarding the thoughtful practice of treating people similarly and differently in the workplace—at least when it comes to the management of requests for specialized employment arrangements within manager-employee relational dynamics.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, hybrid phenomenological study is to explore managers' lived experiences when employees request special employment arrangements within the context of differentiated relationships to better understand the essence of managers' perceptions and meaning-making of these dynamics. Giving voice to managers' first-person accounts has

hopefully provided a richer understanding of how i-deal processes unfold in practice. As a result of this study, managers may be better equipped to approach employees' requests for specialized employment arrangements with more thoughtfulness and tact, balancing concerns of fairness and favoritism. A phenomenological attitude and approach have hopefully shed light on this phenomenon, as "phenomenological research consists of reflectively bringing into nearness that which tends to be obscure, that which tends to evade the intelligibility of our natural attitude of everyday life" (van Manen, 2016, p. 32).

Research Question

How might employees' requests for differential treatment take shape for managers within differentiated manager-employee relationships?

Scope and Limitations of the Study

Definitions

I-deal request: A request made by an employee for a specialized work arrangement. This request is defined broadly to include official and unofficial requests, i.e., if the i-deal reviewer believes the employee is requesting special treatment, this will be considered a request.

I-deal requestor: The person requesting the i-deal. To aid in the crafting of and ease of reading this text, the i-deal requestor is usually referred to by the term "employee."

I-deal reviewer: The person to whom an i-deal requestor directs an i-deal request. While this is often the i-deal requestor's immediate supervisor, it is not always so. In some situations, the i-deal requestor reports to several supervisors, and makes the request to only one of them. In other situations, the i-deal requestor is encouraged or required to submit their request to someone other than their immediate supervisor, such as the HR department or the company president. To

aid in the crafting of and ease of reading this text, the i-deal reviewer is usually referred to by the term “manager” (even though it may not be the “manager” who received the request).

Delimitations

What Was Included. For pragmatic reasons, I only focused on managers’ lived experiences; employees’ lived experiences were outside the research scope.

What Was Not Included. I didn’t focus on managers’ explicit decision-making criteria or formal processes for addressing i-deal requests (e.g., company policies and procedures). I didn’t focus on the experience of others who were involved with the i-deal request, such as employees, co-workers, managers’ managers and others along the hierarchy, and human resources personnel. I didn’t focus on other aspects of the i-deal lifecycle, such as before and after the i-deal request (Vidyarthi et al., 2022). I didn’t focus on the explicit aspects of the i-deal request/negotiation (e.g., the negotiation black box) (Simosi et al., 2021). In other words, how the employee and manager communicated and negotiated the i-deal was not within the bounds of this study. This study is not about the *mechanics* of i-deals within LMX relationships but rather is about the *meaning* managers make of them.

Limitations

Generalizability. In any qualitative study, there are concerns of generalizing the findings beyond the sample to the larger population (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With phenomenology, this is not really a concern because that’s not the purpose of a phenomenological inquiry. The goal of phenomenology is not generalization; the focus is not on the sample, but on the phenomenon. The purpose of the sample is to gain specific examples that can be combined into a general description of the phenomenon. In fact, perhaps surprisingly (it at least surprised me when I heard of this!) it doesn’t even matter if the examples shared by the participants are true; what

matters is that they *could* be true. Possible experiences are just as valid as real experiences, at least from a phenomenological perspective (van Manen, 2023). Going back to JL's story, a phenomenological inquiry is not focused on JL and his boss, but on their shared phenomenon. And it doesn't matter if JL made the whole story up! What matters is that the story *could* be true and that it could shed light on the phenomenon.

Prescription. Phenomenology is not intended to *prescribe* future behaviors. It is not even designed to *diagnose* present behaviors. At most, it is designed to *describe* the lived experience of past behaviors. If we were to interview JL's boss, we would not be interested in determining *why* he said "no way" only to say "okay" later (e.g., we would not be trying to diagnose his then-current decisions). Further, we would also not be interested in providing JL's boss with suggestions for how to approach similar situations in the future (e.g., we would not be trying to prescribe guidance for future decisions). Instead, a phenomenological view is only interested in *how* JL's boss experienced both situations. What was similar? What was different? What essences or themes of the experience can be elucidated?

Time Limitations. While time is usually a consideration in studying concepts, it is less a concern in studying a phenomenon. A phenomenon by its very nature is a point in time. And how a phenomenon manifests over time is unpredictable. Therefore, it shouldn't matter whether I conducted my study over a short or long duration.

Limiting the Study to Managers. To study the phenomenon in depth, I chose to restrict the study to managers. While there are various interested and affected parties to i-deals, I wanted to focus on managers' perspectives since they are the key decision makers and managers of i-deals.

Limited Knowledge of Managers' Experience or Reflective Ability; Limited Knowledge of My Own Phenomenological Material Gathering and Reflective Ability. While I selected participants based on what I believed to be their strong experience in managing and therefore a strong base on which to speak about i-deal requests, I couldn't have anticipated the depth of their reflections or ability to articulate their lived experiences. At the same time, since this was my first phenomenological study, I also couldn't have anticipated my skill in eliciting and analyzing valuable phenomenological material. In short, while I took steps to ensure a strong methodological practice, my participants and I underwent this process together. That being said, I'm confident that the phenomenological text produced by this study will prove a valuable addition to the i-deal and LMX literature. And I'm confident that the experiences shared by my participants will prove valuable to other managers looking to treat different people similarly and differently with more thoughtfulness and tact.

Literature Review

Organization of the Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to highlight what is known about the phenomenon as well as what remains unknown. I first introduce Ludwig Wittgenstein's beetle-in-a-box thought experiment to highlight the distinction between individual subjectivity and communal intersubjectivity. More importantly, it highlights the different language games utilized by different communities; as it relates to our research study, this manifests as different ways of speaking about the phenomenon among and between researchers and practitioners. I then illustrate how i-deals and LMX may be conceived as beetles—as things having different meaning for different people. I finish by specifying existing gaps in the literature regarding i-deals, LMX, and their relationship stemming from the formation and utilization of these different language games.

Beetles in Boxes

Wittgenstein's Beetle-in-a-Box Thought Experiment

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein (1953/2009) presents his beetle-in-a-box thought experiment:

> Suppose that everyone had a box with something in it which we call a "beetle." No one can ever look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* [emphasis original] beetle. — Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing…the box might even be empty. (§293)

Individual Subjectivity and Private Language

Consider if we were to give a toddler a box and instruct them to open it and tell us what's inside. If they had never learned about beetles, even if there were a beetle in the box, the toddler wouldn't know what to make of it. They will certainly see something, but they wouldn't know what to call it. The toddler has an individual, subjective perception of what's in the box, but has no private language around the concept of beetles with which they can communicate to others about their perception. But it goes further than that. Wittgenstein's primary point is that *no one* has access to any sort of private language to describe their individual, subjective experiences. No one, on their own, can tell what's in their box. In addition, we can't see what's inside anyone else's box. I experience what's in my box and my box alone, and you experience what's in your box and your box alone. We can never access one another's individual, subjective experiences.

Communal Intersubjectivity and Public Language

Meaning is Determined by Communal Use. Intersubjectivity is a term used in philosophy and psychology to describe how individuals can share their subjective experiences, understandings, and interpretations with others. Through mutual understanding and communication, our experiences are not isolated but influenced by social interactions, cultural contexts, and shared meanings. Intersubjectivity highlights the idea that subjective experiences are not solely individual but are shaped by interactions with others and the broader social environment (Schutz, 1932/1967). While we may not be able to access what's inside another's box (their beetle), we share enough understanding of what beetles are—in this context—to communicate intelligibly with one another (i.e., we're likely talking about the insect type of beetles, not the cars commonly known as beetles nor the band of such renown). While I may not know what you're talking about (because your private experiences are inaccessible to me), and

you may not know what I'm talking about (because my private experiences are inaccessible to you), we can still communicate because we share a good enough understanding of each other. Together, we're not talking about our private experiences, but rather our shared understanding of what we suppose are similar enough experiences. We may not be talking about the same thing, but we assume we're talking about things similar enough to find common meaning.

Public Language Is Expressed Through Language Games. Wittgenstein (1953/2009) introduces his concept of language games to explain how we communicate these good enough mutual understandings: "new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten" (§23). Just as games like football or basketball change over time, so, too, do our language games. Our shared good enough understanding—our intersubjectivity—of what beetles are might change as we learn more about beetles or about beetle-like creatures. He continues, "the word 'language-*game*' [emphasis original] is used here to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* [emphasis original] of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (§23). It is through the process of communication that we align with the larger community's "form of life." In other words—whether toddler or adult—I cannot come to know what a beetle is according to the community's understanding of beetles simply by looking into my own box. I have no private language to do this. I must engage in the beetle-related communal language game so others can confirm or adjust my understanding of what's in my box.

Different Communities Play Different Language Games. While meaning is determined by communal use, different communities see the same things differently. Remember, meaning is in the eye of the beholder (or perhaps we should say beholders). As Bal (2012) beautifully articulates:

> While groping to define, provisionally and partly, what a particular concept may mean, we gain insight into what it can do. It is in the groping that the valuable work lies…Even those concepts that are tenuously established [are valuable] primarily because of their potential intersubjectivity. *Not because they mean the same thing for everyone, but because they don't* [emphasis added]. (p. 11)

Bal is referring to how intersubjectivity is communal, but not universal. Some things mean the same thing for some people but mean something different for others. Intersubjectivity is subject to those in agreement—it is not all inclusive. This goes back to our distinction between difference and differentiation. Just as some differences matter and some don't, when it comes to intersubjectivity, some words have a certain meaning for some but not for others. It's a similar concept: the person making the distinction or using the language decides what's meaningful. Different groups of people perceive of things differently, behave differently, and communicate differently. These differences can originate in groups varying in size from small work teams to entire countries.

Different Internal Communities. Organizational climate refers to "the shared perceptions of and the meaning attached to the policies, practices, and procedures employees experience and the behaviors they observe getting rewarded and that are supported and expected" (Schneider et al., 2013, p. 362). Employees in one organization can call a company policy progressive, whereas employees in another organization could view the same policy as traditional. While organizational climate traditionally refers to entire organizations, the same concept applies at the individual workgroup or department level. So even within a single organization, a specific policy could be viewed very differently by different groups. In other words, different smaller groups within a larger group can use different communal language to refer to the same thing.

Different External Communities. On a larger scale, different cultures speak different languages. Hofstede's (2001) groundbreaking work identified six cultural dimensions that vary considerably across different peoples: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity versus femininity, long- versus short-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint. Entire societies communicate very differently along these differing cultural dimensions. While a certain cultural group may have a degree of intersubjectivity around a cultural dimension, when they interact with other cultures, they may find they are playing different cultural language games.

Idiosyncratic Deal Beetles

I-deals are like beetles. They mean different things to different people. They have communal but not universal meaning. Sometimes researchers agree on what they're talking about when it comes to i-deals, but sometimes they don't. Similarly, sometimes practitioners (managers, employees, and coworkers) speak the same language—or play the same language game—when it comes to ideals, but sometimes they don't.

Researchers' Alignment (Intersubjectivity)

There are several aspects regarding i-deals where researchers generally agree—they're speaking the same (public) language, playing the same language game. These involve what i-deals are, what they are not, types of i-deals, the timing of i-deals, and the normative evaluation of i-deals as fair flexibility.

What Idiosyncratic Deals Are. I-deals describe differentiated treatment: "voluntary, personalized agreements of a nonstandard nature negotiated between individual employees and their employers regarding terms that benefit each party" (Rousseau et al., 2006, p. 978). In Rousseau's (2005) initial conceptualization of i-deals, she outlines their criteria:

- individually negotiated by a worker;
- different from the employment conditions experienced by others in that worker's work group or unit, even among those who have negotiated their own i-deals;
- beneficial to both the worker and the employer; and
- varying in scope from a single feature to the entire employment relationship. (p. 8)

What Idiosyncratic Deals Are Not. I-deals are differentiated from manager-initiated role changes (job (re)design). This includes two types of manager-initiated changes: unilateral and mutual (Rousseau, 2005). Unilateral role changes—often justified by reference to the oft-included responsibility in the job description: "other duties as assigned"—are not i-deals, as there's no negotiation involved, just assignment. These are deals arranged by fiat and are usually structured toward a WIN-win purpose (employer benefits more than employee). Job (re)design can take several forms, including job rotation, job enlargement, job enrichment, and job simplification (Rousseau, 2005). A manager-initiated role change can also be obtained mutually, through negotiation. This then changes the deal from a unilateral non-i-deal to a mutually negotiated i-deal.

I-deals are also differentiated from employee-initiated role changes (job crafting). This includes two types of employee-initiated changes: unilateral and mutual (Rousseau, 2005). Unilateral changes, referred to as job crafting (JC), are defined as "physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work" (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p. 179). These could be labelled "other duties as designed". JC and i-deals share the underlying philosophy of individualism (Bal & Hornung, 2019), but JC involves deals arranged without permission and are usually structured toward a win-WIN purpose (employer

benefits less than employee). An employee-initiated role change can also be obtained mutually, through negotiation. This then changes the deal from a unilateral non-i-deal to a mutually negotiated i-deal. Table 1 depicts the distinction between manager-initiated, employee-initiated, and mutually negotiated deals. It also highlights the possibility of misaligned understandings which result from poor or lack of communication or speaking different languages.

Table 1

Idiosyncratic Deals Versus Other Types of Work Arrangements

Type of deal	Manager-initiated non-i-deal (Job re(design))	Employee initiated non-i-deal (Job crafting)	Mutually negotiated i-deal	Poorly/non-negotiated non-i-deal
Description	Other duties as assigned	Other duties as designed	Other duties as aligned	Other duties misaligned
Direction	Top-down	Bottom-up	Face-to-face	Back-to-back
Negotiation	Unilateral (Fiat by manager)	Unilateral (Without manager permission)	Mutual negotiation	Different perspectives
Benefit (Employer-Employee)	WIN-win	win-WIN	WIN-WIN	Different perspectives
Language type used	Similar public language, i.e., job re(design)	Similar public language, i.e., job crafting	Similar public language, i.e., i-deal	Dissimilar public language

Types of Idiosyncratic Deals. I-deals come in many forms. Developmental/advancement i-deals involve skill development customized to an individual, to meet personal aspirations for professional advancement (Hornung et al., 2009; Liao et al., 2016; Rousseau et al., 2006). Examples include taking off work two hours early each Friday to attend an advanced degree program or a junior employee getting to present a key report to corporate executives to gain visibility. Job content i-deals involve changes to the amount or type of work (Hornung et al.,

2009; Rosen et al., 2013). Examples include a reduced workload to help a worker cope with stress or providing more interesting work by allowing someone to work on one larger project rather than many smaller ones. Flexibility i-deals focus on adjustments to working hours, work schedules, or location of work (Hornung et al., 2009). Examples include allowing employees to bank hours for future time off and providing unpaid time off to pursue a personal hobby or interest (e.g., JL's four-month sabbatical). Financial i-deals focus on compensation and benefits (Marino, 2021; Rosen et al., 2013). An example is an employer offering a matching job offer to a candidate or existing employee in response to market data.

Timing of Idiosyncratic Deals. When it comes to timing, some i-deals are negotiated before an employee joins an organization (ex-ante); others are negotiated after an employee has joined an organization (ex-post) (Rousseau, 2005). Ex-ante, also known as recruiting i-deals, tend to focus on economic issues as the potential employee and manager/organization have not developed a working relationship and thus negotiate at "arm's length"; accordingly, these i-deals have little effect on the development of the manager-employee relationship (Rousseau et al., 2006, 2009).

Ex-post i-deals can be a reward for performance or an acknowledgement of need. These i-deals tend to focus on collaboration and interest-based goals as the employee, manager/organization, and co-workers have developed a relationship. From the employee's perspective, they have had time to develop relationships, have insider knowledge of business practices as well as how receptive the manager is to i-deals, and are knowledgeable about existing types of i-deals. From the manager's perspective, they have a sense of the employee's skills, contributions, and interests (Simosi et al., 2021). These reward-type i-deals are often viewed most positively by managers and coworkers (Rousseau, 2005).

Ex-post i-deals can also be in response to a potential employee resignation or threat to quit (e.g., JL's situation). These i-deals tend to focus on economic issues and are the most likely type of i-deal to foster negative perceptions by managers and coworkers (Rousseau, 2005).

Idiosyncratic Deals as Fair Flexibility. Although i-deals create different arrangements for members of the same team (i.e., different people being treated differentially), which creates concerns about fairness (Greenberg et al, 2004), they're almost universally identified by researchers as an appropriate mechanism to achieve fairness (Liao et al., 2016; Rousseau, 2005; Rousseau et al., 2006, 2016).

In her initial conceptualization of i-deals, Rousseau (2005) specifically contrasted i-deals from "shady deals" (p. 44), as illustrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Idiosyncratic Deals Versus "Shady" Deals

	Idiosyncratic Deals	**Preferential Treatment**	**Unauthorized Conduct**
Process	Negotiation	Favoritism	Usurping
Basis	Worker value to firm	Relationship with boss	Breaking the rules
Beneficiary	Worker and firm	Worker and boss	Worker

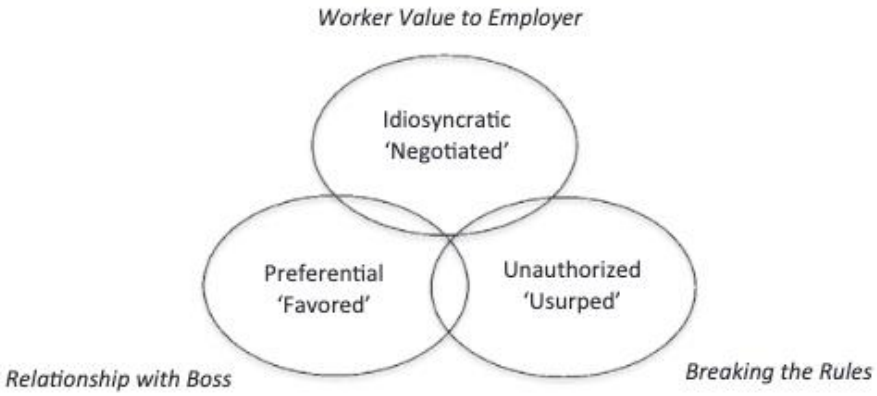
Per Rousseau (2005), i-deals are based on the worker's value to the employer while shady deals are based on the worker's relationship with the manager (e.g., LMX). In the former, the worker and the employer benefit; in the latter, the worker and the manager benefit. But in both situations, it's the manager who makes the assessment. Managers are usually the negotiator of an i-deal with an employee (Hornung et al., 2009; Rosen et al., 2013). The manager determines not only if the i-deal is of value to the employer, but if the worker is of value to the employer. For all intents and purposes, the manager usually represents the employer. But what if the treatment is based on both value to the employer and a positive relationship with the

manager? What if the i-deal results in benefits to the worker, the employer, and the manager? And, again, it's important to highlight that both determinations are made by the same person: the manager.

The distinction between i-deals (fair treatment) and preferential treatment (favoritism) is unclear. The basis of i-deals (worker value to the firm) can easily and often does overlap with the basis of favoritism (relationship with boss). The beneficiary of i-deals (worker and firm) can easily and often does overlap with the basis of favoritism (worker and boss). It's unclear how people (e.g., workers, bosses, coworkers, leaders) distinguish between i-deals and favoritism and how they experience this distinction. Rousseau acknowledges the "blurry boundaries" between i-deals and other types of employment arrangements (Rousseau et al., 2016, p. 191), shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Blurry Boundaries of Idiosyncratic Deals with Other Types of Work Arrangements



Researchers' Misalignment (Subjectivity)

When it comes to i-deals, researchers often disagree—they're speaking different languages, playing different language games. Specifically, researchers disagree on how to measure types of i-deals, the timing of i-deals, and the types of i-deal decisions.

Misalignment Regarding Measuring Types of Idiosyncratic Deals. The most used i-deal scales capture differences between types of i-deals (Hornung et al., 2010; Rousseau et al., 2009; Rosen et al., 2013). These scales are primarily used to distinguish between different types of i-deals when analyzing antecedents and outcomes. Anand and Rofcanin (2022) note the benefits of these scales but argue for a general rather than specific i-deal scale. Because individual employees negotiate i-deals within a workgroup context, at the group level, analyzing a flexibility i-deal against a developmental i-deal poses challenges. The heterogeneity of i-deals within a workgroup suggests a more universal (all types of i-deals) scale could help illuminate i-deal dynamics at the group level. The authors point out that while individuals negotiate different i-deals, the essence of these arrangements is the same; that is, they have each negotiated a specialized work arrangement that has effects on the workgroup. Liao et al. (2016) offers perspective on a more generalized versus a more specific approach: "There is good reason to treat different i-deals contents as distinct variables, just as there is support for examining i-deals as a single general concept. The appropriateness of each approach depends on the nature of the research question" (p. S13).

Misalignment Regarding Measuring Timing of Idiosyncratic Deals. Vidyarthi et al. (2022) outline an i-deal lifecycle, which consists of the following stages: (1) recognition of a potential i-deal, (2) negotiation of the i-deal, (3) execution of the i-deal, (4) renegotiation of the i-deal. Whereas most i-deal researchers measure i-deals during the execution of the i-deal (looking at only those i-deals that have been requested and received), Vidyarthi et al. highlight how this focus misses key stages of the i-deal process. The language of time is not represented by the way many researchers speak about the i-deal process.

Misalignment Regarding Measuring Decision of Idiosyncratic Deals. Ho and Tekleab (2016) noted how previous studies operationalize i-deals as those deals which were successfully requested and received. They disentangled these separate parts of the i-deal negotiation process, bringing awareness to those i-deal requests that were not received. So, while most i-deal researchers mean requested and received when speaking about i-deals, Ho and Tekleab say i-deals mean more than that—they include both those requested and received and those requested and denied.

Practitioners' Alignment (Intersubjectivity)

There are several aspects regarding i-deals where practitioners generally agree—they're speaking the same (public) language, playing the same language game. It's critical to note that this is only within the context of practitioners playing the language game supplied by researchers. In other words, we only "know" how practitioners perceive of i-deals based on the aforementioned ways in which researchers have conceptualized the concept. In other words, whereas the previous section explored how researchers conceptualize and measure i-deals, the following section explores how managers seem to perceive of i-deals based on how they measured them according to the researchers' methods.

Idiosyncratic Deals are Social. The research is clear: i-deals are strongly influenced by preferential relationships. A manager who favors an employee (measured by LMX) is more likely to approve an i-deal (Bal, 2017; Hornung et al., 2010, 2014; Las Heras et al., 2021) and coworkers who favor the employee (measured by Coworker Exchange (CWX)) are more likely to perceive the i-deal as fair (Marescaux et al., 2019; Anand et al., 2010). In effect, the preferential treatment of the i-deal is wrapped up in the preferential relationship of the person(s) assessing the i-deal and those affected by it. I-deals cannot (or at least have not been shown to be

able to) be perceived separate from the involved relationships. The main point: i-deals are a social phenomenon. They are understood and have meaning within a social context.

Idiosyncratic Deals are Cultural. The organizational climate or culture affects how i-deals are managed and perceived. On one end of the continuum are bureaucratic settings that are generally averse to i-deals. On the other end of the continuum are innovative settings that are generally welcoming to i-deals. In between these two extremes are moderately flexible settings that approach i-deals judiciously. As mentioned earlier, groups exist within groups. For example, there can be "pockets of innovation" within bureaucratic settings (Rousseau, 2005, pp. 39-40). Organizations' variance in their level of receptivity to i-deals reflects the dilemma at the heart of i-deals: how to balance the customization designed to benefit individuals with collective effectiveness (Anand & Mitra, 2022).

The larger cultural context influences how i-deals are approached and perceived (Ng & Feldman, 2010; Rousseau, 2005). As Liao et al. (2016) summarize based on their meta-analysis, employees in Eastern cultures place a greater emphasis on collective effort and are therefore less likely to view i-deals positively and therefore less likely to request or approve of them than are their Western counterparts. People may subscribe to different principles of fairness with one valuing equality and the other equity (Leung, 2005), leading to misinterpretation of efforts to be fair. Coworkers with stronger orientation to individualistic (pluralistic) values emphasize equity (equality) and are more (less) likely to approve of i-deals (Anand et al., 2010) In other words, when it comes to i-deals, different internal and external cultures seem to speak different languages.

Idiosyncratic Deals are Personal. While i-deals are social in context, they are ultimately personal as they are inherently an individually-customized work arrangement. Employees want

different things; managers value different things; organizations embrace different things; cultures accept different things. Each i-deal is unique. And for those involved in the i-deal process, no one except the employee can look into the employee's box and describe the i-deal. Findikli et al. (2022) explains how the personal nature of i-deals leads to a lack of universal intersubjectivity: "[t]he majority of research on i-deals has implicitly assumed that subordinates' and supervisors' perceptions of i-deals are accurate and aligned…[h]owever, we know that perceptions are socially constructed, and often do not reflect an objective reality" (p. 34).

Practitioners' Misalignment (Subjectivity)

Because we can't see into another person's box, we don't know how other people see their own deals—do they even see them as "i-deals"? The following sections explore how, using the tools provided by researchers, those involved in i-deals (managers, employees, and others) seem to be playing different language games more often than not.

The Black Box of Idiosyncratic Deal Negotiation. When employees and managers negotiate an i-deal, they're often unaware of what's going on during the negotiation—that is, we are unaware of the specific language used to negotiate i-deals. I-deal negotiation is a "black box" (Simosi et al., 2021, p. 187). Sometimes both parties can leave a negotiation aware of misalignment, but sometimes they're unaware—one side may believe X was negotiated, while the other side believes Y was negotiated. Even more challenging, one party may believe a negotiation took place while the other does not (see Table 1). According to Simosi et al. (2021), "i-deals are largely studied as *fait accompli*, after their creation. How the i-deal agreement was realized, including the interactions that led to their creation, is largely unknown" (p. 187). When it comes to i-deal negotiation, managers and employees could be speaking different languages. We don't know because we can't see into the black box of negotiation.

The Need to Balance Privacy and Transparency. With i-deals, there's a balance of privacy and transparency. An i-deal may look like one from the outside, but it may in fact not be an i-deal but a manager-initiated unilateral job redesign. Or it may be the opposite: employee initiated unilateral job crafting. For legal, policy, or managerial discretion purposes, the details of the deal may not be shared, leaving others to form their opinions without direct access to what's in the box. Rousseau (2005) highlights the opacity surrounding i-deals: "i-deals are common in the workplace, yet their precise makeup is often invisible. Like the greater part of an iceberg, many aspects of i-deals lie below the waterline of public awareness" (p. 7). The opacity surrounding i-deals makes it difficult to tell what language is used to communicate i-deals among interested parties.

JL's Idiosyncratic Deal Beetle

JL's Perspective (What He Saw in His Box). The way JL described it, this was not even an i-deal. Let's review a few of Rousseau's (2005) i-deal criteria against how JL described things.

An i-deal is individually negotiated by a worker. JL said he didn't realize he could negotiate. It's arguable there was no negotiation. JL thought he had two options: stay and forego the vacation or quit and go on vacation. In his view, he wasn't using the vacation as negotiation leverage. Maybe it was as simple as his boss changing his mind.

An i-deal is different from the employment conditions experienced by others in that worker's work group or unit, even among those who have negotiated their own i-deals. We don't know what the situation was before JL's story or what happened after the story ends. If JL's workgroup is like most, his coworkers might have felt emboldened to request their own i-deals (Rousseau, 2005). Three outcomes could have resulted:

(1) Everyone's request is approved. This could negate this criterion as now everyone has a similar employment arrangement; if multiple people have very similar deals, then no one's deal can be considered idiosyncratic.

(2) Everyone's request is denied. This could keep JL's deal an i-deal but foster negative social and emotional consequences within the workgroup (Vidyarthi et al., 2022).

(3) Some requests are approved, and some are denied. This could potentially cause both negative effects from (1) and (2) above. For those who receive approval for their deals, they may not see them as i-deals because they're not unique enough. For those who are denied i-deals, they may likely see the situation as unfair.

Perhaps most challenging in the assessment of this uniqueness criterion for i-deals is that no two deals are exactly alike. Some people may ask for one or two months off (maybe they can't afford to take four months off), and others may ask for six months off. Are these similar enough to JL's deal (thus negating his i-deal) or are they different than his (thus retaining his i-deal and creating separate i-deals within the same workgroup). And who would make this determination? Likely, each interested party would make their own determination, highlighting the social yet individual nature of these beetle-like i-deals.

An i-deal is beneficial to both the worker and the employer. JL didn't mention any consideration of how it could or did benefit anyone besides himself. Recall that the primary distinction between an appropriate i-deal and an inappropriate shady deal is who benefits. In the former, the primary beneficiaries are the worker and the organization; in the latter, the primary beneficiaries are the worker and the manager (Rousseau, 2005). In this situation, who benefited? It can be easily argued JL benefited, as he was able to take his desired trip. The organization likely benefited because they were able to retain a valued employee…so maybe this was an i-

deal after all. But JL's manager likely benefited because he didn't have to complete exit processes for JL and recruit his replacement, and he was able to build some trust with JL…so maybe this was a shady deal after all. But who determines these benefits to tell the difference? Is it possible something can be an i-deal and a shady deal simultaneously? Is it possible for something to be fair and unfair (favoritism) at the same time. Probably, if we stand back from trying to determine what "is" and get comfortable with understanding what "might be" for different people at different times…if we get comfortable exploring these concepts like beetles.

JL's Manager's Perspective (What He Saw in His Box). We don't know what JL's manager saw in his box because he wasn't the one telling the story. On the one hand, we might assume he saw it as a request for a work-life balance deal, where JL was simply looking to take some time away from work to focus on personal interests. On the other hand, we might assume he saw it as a threat to quit, where JL was demanding an unapproved accommodation under threat of resignation. The only way we could know for sure is by asking him directly.

The Incommensurability of JL's Idiosyncratic Beetle. Overall, as JL's situation illustrates, determining whether something "is" an i-deal is difficult. It's virtually impossible to do so by contemplating how other people view the deal from their perspective. There are simply too many variables at play to see i-deals as a concrete versus abstract concept.

Leader-Member Exchange Beetles

The LMX relationship is like a beetle. It means different things to different people. These relationships have communal but not universal meaning. Sometimes researchers agree on what they're talking about when it comes to LMX, but sometimes they don't. Similarly, sometimes practitioners speak the same language—or play the same language game—when it comes to LMX, but sometimes they don't.

Researchers' Alignment (Intersubjectivity)

There are several aspects regarding LMX where researchers generally agree—they are speaking the same (public) language, playing the same language game. These involve what LMX is, the timing of LMX, and the normative evaluation of LMX as unfair favoritism.

What is Leader-Member Exchange. LMX describes differentiated relationships: how leaders favor some team members and disfavor others. While previous iterations of the LMX model categorized employees into in-group and out-group status, current LMX theory places employees along a favored continuum without a clear delineation between favored and disfavored. But the overall message is still the same: managers prefer some over others.

Leader-Member Exchange is a Process. The manager-employee relationship occurs through a process. Graen and Scandura (1987) relied on role theory (RT)—which suggests that role-making processes result in differentiated role definitions and thus differentiated LMX relationships within work groups (Graen, 1976)—to formulate three stages of development: role taking, role making, and role routinization. Later, Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) adapted this three-phase model of LMX development to the more commonly referred to stages of stranger, acquaintance, and maturity, and characterized each stage according to a leadership theory. Phase one (stranger/role taking) is characterized as transactional leadership where one person takes the initiative in contacting another for the purpose of an exchange of valued things (Bass, 1985). Phase two (acquaintance/role making) is characterized as laissez-faire leadership where leaders give followers a high degree of independence and freedom to formulate their own objectives and ways of achieving them (Lewin et al., 1939). Phase three (maturity/role routinization) is characterized as transformational leadership where leaders and followers help each other advance to a higher level of morality and motivation (Burns, 1978).

Leader-Member Exchange Reflects Unfair Favoritism. Researchers acknowledge the inherent differentiated preferences of people, i.e., it's natural to favor some people over others. As Bratton (2023) succinctly states: "Not all relationships are created equal" (p. 156). Scandura and Meuser (2022) echo this, saying: "The reality is that a leader and followers will form differing quality of relationships. Differentiation is both inevitable and complex" (p. 327). However, despite the inevitable reality of differentiated relationships, researchers insist the differentiated manager-employee relationship measured by LMX is not good as it represents unfair favoritism (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Rousseau et al., 2016).

Researchers' Misalignment (Subjectivity)

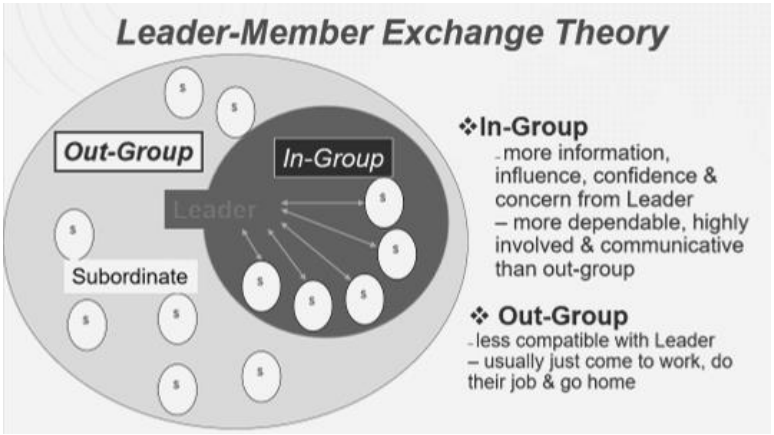
Researchers don't always speak the same language when referencing LMX—they're speaking different languages, playing different language games. Specifically, researchers disagree on what it means when referring to types of LMX, how to measure LMX, and how to address the resulting favoritism of LMX.

Misalignment Regarding Describing Types of Leader-Member Exchange Relationships. Researchers speak different languages when it comes to the types of leader-member exchange relationships. One of the original descriptions of these types of relationships was Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL) (Dansereau et al., 1975), which described an in-out dichotomy: in-group employees were separate from their out-group counterparts, the former being favored by managers and the latter being disfavored. VDL gave way to the current LMX description, which places employees not into discreet in-out groups, but along a favored continuum: managers favor some employees over others along a spectrum (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Despite the shift from a dichotomous to a continuous characterization of the leader-member relationship, researchers usually refer to employees dichotomously: as high-quality

(what was formerly called the in-group) or low-quality (what was formerly called the out-group), as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Leader-Member Exchange Theory In- Versus Out-Group



Misalignment Regarding Measuring Leader-Member Exchange. Different scales measure different things. LMX has usually been conceptualized and studied as a unidimensional construct, of which the most used scale is the LMX-7 (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), which contains seven items. However, Dienesch and Liden (1986) proposed a multidimensional means to understand LMX, suggesting three types of relationship exchanges to affect overall LMX: contribution, loyalty, and effect. Liden and Maslyn (1998) added yet another dimension, professional respect, and developed a newer multidimensional measure of LMX, the MDM-LMX (Multidimensional LMX), which contains 12 items covering the four dimensions. However, Liden and Maslyn acknowledged that professional respect may operate independently of the exchange relationship; that is, one can understand another's professional reputation before and separate from engaging in a direct relationship with them. Sin et al. (2009) also found evidence for this. In their evaluation, LMX agreement was lower for professional respect than for the other three dimensions using the MDM-LMX instrument, suggesting that professional

respect operates outside of the LMX exchange relationship. Bernerth et al. (2007) developed the LMSX (Leader-Member Social Exchange) unidimensional instrument, which contains 8 items, to focus on the underlying social exchange aspect of LMX. Likewise, Vidyarthi et al. (2010) developed the LMXSC (LMX Social Comparison), which contains six items, focused on more directly measuring the social comparison dimension of LMX.

Different people measure different things. Ironically, while LMX is a dyadic model of relationship quality between leaders and followers, most studies only examine one perspective (approximately 90% of LMX studies identified in Sin et al.'s 2009 meta-analysis), usually that of the followers (Gooty & Yammarino, 2016; Matta & Van Dyne, 2015). Gooty and Yammarino (2016) sum up the state of LMX measurement: "LMX is a dyadic model of relationship quality between leaders and followers yet most studies rarely conceptualize, measure, and analyze study data at the dyadic level of analysis" (p. 916).

Misalignment Regarding Leader-Member Exchange Prescription. Most researchers argue that LMX should be reduced or removed as it represents a negative management practice of favoritism. However, their specific view of the proper prescription for LMX's inherent favoritism differs.

In 1995, when Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) first introduced LMX, they presented not only the diagnosis of differentiated manager-employee relations (LMX), but they also presented a prescription to LMX: the leadership making model (LMM). However, 30 years later, the specific managerial actions or behaviors of LMM have never been clearly articulated. Graen and Uhl-Bien's original LMM concept included several time-intensive practices aimed at fostering deeper manager-employee relationships: 6 two-hour sessions covering LMX for managers followed by a one-on-one conversation between managers and employees (Graen et al., 1986). Taken together,

these practices would be difficult to implement on a wide-scale and routine basis as part of effective managerial practice. Uhl-Bien and Graen (1995) noted that the LMM "needs to be further tested through empirical documentation of the manner in which leadership relationships develop" (p. 239).

Interestingly, Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) acknowledge the limits of LMM while still arguing for its adoption. They concede that the LMM approach is more aspirational than practical, stating:

> Whether all these [LMM] offers will result in high-quality relationship development is *problematic (and unlikely)* [emphasis added], but as long as the offers are made, the LMX process may be perceived as more equitable, and the potential for more high-quality relationships (and hence more effective leadership) will be increased. (p. 233)

The point, they say, is not to achieve high-quality relationships across the board (which they claim are "problematic (and unlikely)," but to try to do so. Of course, if managers succeeded in developing exclusively high-quality relationships with everyone in their workgroup, then the fundamental descriptive aspect of LMX would collapse; if everyone has high-quality relationships, then the differentiation described by LMX would no longer exist. Interestingly, the underlying concept behind why there are differentiated relationships in the first place is because managers have limited resources; they can't devote resources equally throughout a team (Rousseau, 2005). LMM thus pushes for equal resource allocation, without acknowledging the necessary trade-offs, namely reducing the number of resources that can be dedicated to those the manager deems best suited to maximize those resources. In other words, the LMM prescription fails to account for the constraints inherent in the LMX diagnosis.

Some researchers offer an alternative prescription to address LMX's supposed favoritism. Instead of focusing on enhancing the quality of each dyadic relationship, an alternative approach is to focus on the alignment of perceptions regarding the relationship between dyadic partners. Matta and Van Dyne (2015) found that "LMX agreement is just as, if not more, important for employee motivation and behavior than LMX quality" (p. 1701). Taking a more pragmatic approach than Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), Matta and Van Dyne (2015) argue for managers to engage in sensemaking, stating: "interventions targeted toward ensuring that both sides of the dyad view the relationship similarly would be worthwhile, especially since *it is not feasible to expect that supervisors will develop high-quality LMX relationships with every subordinate* [emphasis added]" (p. 168).

Yet a third language has recently entered the prescriptive field. Instead of arguing for the fostering of non-differentiated all high-quality relationships or for the fostering of acceptance and recognition of differentiated relationships, Scandura and Meuser (2022) call for managers and employees to recognize the inherent personal and dynamic nature of relationships. "Different people have different preferences for the kinds of relationships they want in general and with their bosses," they explain, adding that "[i]t may be the case that not everyone wants the same level of high-quality relationship or that what high-quality means may differ" (p.330).

In summary, in response to the resulting favoritism researchers see as inherent within LMX, three varying prescriptions are offered: Graen and Uhl-Bein's exclusively high-level relationship prescription, Matta and Van Dyne's sensemaking prescription, and Scandura and Meuser's acceptance prescription. When it comes to what to do about LMX, different researchers use different language games.

Practitioners' Alignment (Intersubjectivity)

There are several aspects regarding LMX where practitioners generally agree—they're speaking the same (public) language, playing the same language game. Again, as I pointed out with i-deals, this language is specific to the language provided by researchers regarding LMX. We don't know what language managers normally use to talk about LMX—that's one of the purposes of this study.

Leader-Member Exchange is Social. LMX is a social phenomenon. It is understood and has meaning within a social context. Both leader and follower (or manager and employee) mutually determine the type of relationship that develops between them (Dulebohn et al., 2012).

Leader-Member Exchange is Cultural. The organizational climate or culture affects how LMX relationships are managed and perceived. Within organizations, cultural differences affect how different the different relationships tend to be. Cultures or climates that are more collaborative have lower levels of LMX differentiation (the variance between the highest and lowest quality relationships within a group); cultures or climates that are more competitive have higher levels of LMX differentiation (Herrero & Bornay-Barrachina, 2022). As Scandura and Meuser (2022) note: "It is highly likely that social expectations for "leader" likely differ across cultural lines, and the nature of the LMX relationship discovered in the Western context may not in fact be universal" (p. 328). Perhaps counterintuitively, collectivists cultures have higher variation in relationships, i.e., they have more clearly identified in vs. out groups, i.e., they show more favoritism, than individualistic cultures (Leung, 2005).

Leader-Member Exchange is Personal. LMX is a relational concept. As such, it holds power based on its ability to accurately describe how both parties in the relationship view the relationship. In this fundamental area, LMX is found wanting. Gooty and Yammarino (2016) highlight how "the existence of shared relationship perceptions formed one of the original Graen

and Uhl-Bien (1995) gold standards for LMX theory" (p. 929). They continue by noting the discrepancy between the original conceptualization and the current state of LMX research, where leader-follower variability in LMX perceptions "has been largely ignored or treated as error or indicative of quality of data" (p. 916).

In perhaps the most salient study demonstrating the personal nature of LMX, Matta and Van Dyne (2015) explored the different personal perceptions of LMX. Dyadic dispersion LMX (DDLMX) refers to the variance between leader and follower perceptions of their dyadic LMX quality (Gooty & Yammarino, 2016). Citing previous studies that have found a very low correlation between manager and employee LMX perceptions—0.29 (Gerstner & Day, 1997); 0.37 (Sin et al., 2009)—the authors contend that focusing on LMX alignment may be more valuable than focusing on quality. In other words, seeing the beetle similarly is more important than what's actually in the box (because we can never really know what's in the box).

Figure 3

Two-by-Two Matrix Juxtaposing Ratings of LMX Quality with Rating Source

		Leader LMX rating	
		Low LMX Leader views relationship as primarily transactional	**High LMX** Leader views relationship as primarily socio-emotional and going beyond transactions
Subordinate LMX rating	**High LMX** Subordinate views relationship as primarily socio-emotional and going beyond transactions	**Transactional / Socio-emotional expectation discrepancy** Leader and subordinate experience discrepancies in roles, expectations, behaviors, and resource exchanges *(Quadrant 3)*	**Socio-emotional role agreement** Leader and subordinate experience consensus in socio-emotional roles, expectations, behaviors, and resource exchanges *(Quadrant 1)*
	Low LMX Subordinate views relationship as primarily transactional	**Transactional role agreement** Leader and subordinate experience consensus in transactional roles, expectations, behaviors, and resource exchanges *(Quadrant 2)*	**Socio-emotional / transactional expectation discrepancy** Leader and subordinate experience discrepancies in roles, expectations, behaviors, and resource exchanges *(Quadrant 4)*

As shown in Figure 3, Matta and Van Dyne (2015) found that the hierarchy of DDLMX fell as such:

- Most preferred: Quadrant 1 where both parties perceive of the relationship as high quality
- Less preferred: Quadrant 2 where both parties perceive of the relationship as low quality
- Least preferred: Quadrants 3 and 4 where both parties disagree on the relationship quality

In other words, it's better to agree even that the relationship is low quality than to have one person perceive the relationship to be high quality while the other perceive it to be low quality. Matta and Van Dyne (2015) advocate for the recognition—by researchers and practitioners—of the importance of alignment in conjunction with quality, arguing that "the full story of LMX cannot be told without also including the concept of agreement" (p. 173).

This perspective aligns with shared reality theory (SRT), which involves the perceived achievement of mutual understanding, working intersubjectivity, or shared reality (Echterhoff et

al, 2009). Perhaps the most illustrative example of how LMX is like a beetle is that LMX perception between manager and employee is largely invisible: "only an outside observer with access to both sources of information would be in a position to assess this factor" (Graen, 1976, p. 1207). In other words, the manager doesn't know what the employee sees and the employee doesn't know what the manager sees—even though they're theoretically looking at the same thing. When it comes to LMX, it seems that more often than not, managers and employees do not see eye to eye; LMX is in the eye of the beholder.

Practitioners' Misalignment (Subjectivity)

Because we can't see into another person's box, we don't know how other people see their own relationships—do they even see them as "LMX"? Again, it seems that when managers use the tools provided by researchers, they often play different language games.

The Best Managers Play Favorites. LMX researchers generally agree that managers in fact relate to people differentially, i.e., managers play favorites. They also generally agree that this is not a good thing, and managers should strive to treat everyone the same. Interestingly, based on perhaps the largest applied management study ever conducted, a key distinguishing feature of great managers is that they play favorites. In fact, treating everyone similarly is seen as poor management practice, as it disincentivizes the engaged employees from working hard—it creates a regression toward the mean (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999). In theory managers should not play favorites, but in practice the best ones do.

The Too-Much-of-a-Good-Thing Effect. For some manager-employee relationships, the relationship is both high and low quality. It may be high quality for both, but then shift to low quality for the employee, but still be high quality for the manager. Neither know for sure what the other is thinking—neither know what the other sees in the other's box.

For example, Ionescu and Iliescu (2021) found support for the Too-Much-of-a-Good-Thing (TMGT) effect related to LMX. TMGT describes how something that is initially positive can become negative in too high a dose (like eating donuts!). For LMX, this was found to create a curvilinear relationship between justice and performance. In environments where justice was perceived to be low, LMX progressed linearly: higher quality relationships drove increased performance. But in environments where justice was perceived to be high, LMX progressed curvilinearly: higher quality relationships drove increase performance up to a point, at which it then drove a decrease in performance. The authors concluded this was due to too much stress at high levels of relationship quality resulting in a diminishing of returns. They found that as the quality of relationship increased, employees' stress decreased as there was a clear benefit to having a better relationship with one's manager. However, at a certain point, the relationship between LMX and stress flips—as the quality of the relationship continues to increase past a certain point, employees' stress increased. The benefit becomes a burden. So, when it comes to the manager-employee relationship, there really is such a thing as too much of a good thing.

The curvilinear nature of the relationship between LMX and stress highlights the inherently personal nature of LMX. How is a manager to determine how much quality is too much? If a manager were to implement the LMM as Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) suggest, how would they know when enough is enough? If a manager were to engage in sensemaking to align perceptions as Matta and Van Dyne (2015) suggest, how would they know where in the relational curve they currently sit? And as applied to Matta and Van Dyne's (2015) LMX perception framework (see Figure 3), the TMGT effect could shift a relationship from the most preferred position (quadrant 1) of high manager-high employee aligned perceptions to one of the least preferred positions (quadrant 4) of high (manager)-low (employee) misaligned perceptions.

And it's unlikely either the manager or employee could or would know whether or when this shift has occurred!

JL's Leader-Member Exchange Beetle

JL's Perspective (What He Saw in His Box). As mentioned previously, we don't know much about the relationship between JL and his manager—except that JL said he liked working at the organization, he felt comfortable asking for time off to take his trip, and he was ultimately approved to take his trip. So, it's likely he perceived they had a higher-than-normal quality relationship.

JL's Manager's Perspective (What He Saw in His Box). We don't know what JL's manager saw in his box because he wasn't the one telling the story. On the one hand, we might assume he saw the relationship as low quality because in the first meeting, he denied JL's request. On the other hand, we might assume he saw the relationship as high quality because in the second meeting, he approved JL's request. Did their relationship change in the days between the two meetings? Unlikely. More likely, JL's manager evaluated the trip as a combination of the trip and their relationship. The only way we could know for sure is by asking him directly.

The Incommensurability of JL's Leader-Member Exchange Relationship Beetle. Overall, as JL's situation illustrates, determining whether a relationship "is" a higher or lower quality relationship is difficult. It's virtually impossible to do so by contemplating how other people view the relationship from their perspective. There are simply too many variables at play to see leader-member relationships as a concrete versus abstract concept.

Gap in the Literature

A review of the literature leads back to the research question: How might employees' requests for differential treatment take shape for managers within differentiated manager-

employee relationships? To address this question, we must explore not the language games of i-deal and LMX researchers but instead turn toward the language games of the managers who live with these requests and related relationships. When it comes to abstract concepts like those involved in our phenomenon, "the attempt to find a uniform definition hinges on the assumption that when we are using the same word, we mean the same thing" (Veen et al., 2020, p. 112).

Researchers' Language Games

Researchers have defined *a* public language of i-deals, LMX, and the relationship between the two concepts. According to researchers, i-deals are a positive management practice reflecting the fair flexibility of differentiated treatment, LMX is a negative management practice reflecting the unfair favoritism of differentiated relationships, and the two are strongly correlated. According to researchers, i-deals affect and are affected by LMX; and LMX affects and is affected by i-deals. For example, existing high-quality LMX is correlated with greater likelihood of manager i-deal approval (Bal, 2017; Hornung et al., 2010, 2014; Las Heras et al., 2021). And i-deal approval can enhance the LMX relationship (Anand et al., 2018; Singh & Vidyarthi, 2018). Also, the perceptions of i-deals are influenced by LMX (Ho & Kong, 2015; Marescaux et al., 2019). However, "[w]e do not know much about whether the exchange precedes the perception of a high-quality relationship or whether the relationship emerges first, followed by the offering of benefits," note Scandura and Meuser (2022), continuing, "[t]his distinction matters, given that the issue of fairness emerges if opportunities and resources are provided based on affect and not performance contributions" (p. 327). In other words, when it comes to i-deals and LMX, we can't tell which is chicken and which is egg.

These characterizations represent *a* but not *the* language of these concepts and their relationship, as different researchers disagree when it comes to how to define, categorize, and

measure i-deals and LMX. Different researchers use different public languages; they play different language games.

Practitioners' Language Games

Most of the public language of practitioners related to our research question that we are aware of consists of pre-determined labels, categories, and measures of "i-deals" and "LMX." And even when using this language, practitioners don't seem to be speaking the same language. Matta and Van Dyne (2015) make a strong suggestion that, because of the low alignment between dyadic perspectives regarding the LMX relationship, managers should focus on creating alignment before addressing the quality of the relationship. That is a good goal. But I argue there is a needed step before this. We need to ask practitioners how they describe the phenomenon themselves—without the pre-determined labels, categorization, and measurement instruments. Before we concern ourselves with disagreement between managers and employees, we might ask whether they're playing the same language game in the first place.

How do practitioners describe the differentiated treatment labelled by researchers as "i-deals"? How do they describe the differentiated relationships labelled by researchers as "LMX"? How do they describe the relationship between the two—and do they see a relationship at all? Do their descriptions align with researchers' descriptions—do they play the same language game as researchers? Do they describe differentiated treatment and differentiated relationships in terms of fairness and favoritism—do they see the former as fair flexibility and the latter as unfair favoritism? Like with the researchers, it is very likely that one group of managers will describe these concepts using one language game while another group uses another language game.

Researchers have called for qualitative studies to explore how practitioners describe and understand "i-deals" (Gascoigne & Kelliher, 2018) and "LMX" (Scandura & Meuser, 2022). Yet

no one has studied these interrelated concepts phenomenologically. Instead of providing managers with pre-determined labels, categorizes, and measurement instruments, managers in this study were encouraged to speak to these concepts using their own public language. The unique experiences of the group of manager participants were combined into *a* possible public language shared by this unique group of managers. The aim of this study was to reveal the existence of *a* language game, it was not to produce *the* language game of managers. That would be impossible because our phenomenon of interest is made up of beetle-like phenomena.

Methodology

Of course it's all happening inside your head…

but why on earth should that mean that it's not real?[1]

(Rowling, 2007, p. 723)

Design and Rationale

The Methodological Fit with the Research Question

One's research method should fit the issue under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the literature review section, I argued that i-deals and LMX are like beetles. The relationship between the two, and specifically, how managers experience employees' special requests (i-deals) within the context of their differentiated manager-employee relationships (LMX), is the primary focus for this research study.

There are two primary approaches to a research study: quantitative and qualitative. I've identified several issues with the predominantly quantitatively-focused approach adopted by researchers to date, including researcher misalignment regarding i-deals (e.g., types of i-deals, timing of i-deals, decision of i-deals) and LMX (e.g., types of LMX, measuring LMX, LMX prescription). This is also reflected in practitioner misalignment regarding their perceptions of i-deals and LMX, due to dyad, team, organizational, social, and cultural differences. In short, researchers can't seem to agree on what i-deals and LMX really are, and managers and employees in turn can't agree on how they perceive of these things!

As noted, both i-deal and LMX researchers have called for more qualitative approaches to support the existing knowledge base related to these concepts. Qualitative research "is based on the methodological pursuit of understanding the ways that people see, view, approach, and

[1] Dumbledore to Harry Potter.

experience the world and make meaning of their experiences as well as specific *phenomena* [emphasis added] within it" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 7). Of the various types of qualitative research, phenomenology is most specifically focused on understanding these specific phenomena.

Phenomenology

What is Phenomenology? Phenomenology comes from the Greek *phainomenon*, which means appearance. "In its root meaning, then, phenomenology is the study of *phenomena*: literally, *appearances as opposed to reality* [emphasis added]" (Smith, 2018). "Phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising [*sic*]," Moran (2000) states, "which emphasizes the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as *whatever appears in the manner in which it appears* [emphasis added], that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer" (p. 4). Phenomenology aims to study phenomena "as they appear, reveal and show themselves, and as they give themselves in our consciousness, before they have even been named, conceptualized, abstracted, and/or theorized" (van Manen, 2023, p. 3). Whereas other forms of qualitative inquiry seek to understand how groups of people orient around an issue, the psychological basis of decision making, or the individual, subjective experience of someone, phenomenology is focused on understanding the underlying phenomena at work in our everyday lives.

Phenomenological Approaches. Within the phenomenological tradition, there exists two main approaches to studying phenomena: transcendental phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology.

Edmund Husserl: Transcendental Phenomenology. Edmund Husserl is considered the founder of phenomenology. His transcendental, or descriptive, approach emphasizes three key

concepts: (1) epoché, or bracketing, where the researcher intentionally sets aside any preconceived notions about the phenomena in order to focus on the essence of the phenomena—what Husserl (1900/2001) famously referred to as a turning to “the things themselves” (p. 168), (2) phenomenological reduction, where the researcher describes the essential structures of consciousness, and (3) eidetic variation, also known as imaginative variation, where the researcher varies aspects of the phenomenon to distinguish that which is essential from that which is not. In his phenomenology, "we must exclude all empirical interpretations and existential affirmations, we must take what is inwardly experienced or otherwise inwardly intuited as pure experiences, as our exemplary basis for acts of ideation" (p. 109).

As Finlay (2009), describes it, the aim of the epoché, or bracketing, “is to connect directly and immediately with the world as we experience it—as opposed to thinking about it. Here judgments and theories are temporarily suspended to see the world afresh” (p. 476). This does not come naturally to us. “Though one is always conscious of one’s consciousness, one does not naturally busy oneself with it; attention is naturally straightforward, non-reflective,” explains Dorion Cairns (2010), one of Husserl’s closest followers. He goes on, “The unnaturalness of reflection…consists perhaps in a natural disinclination to reflect and is continuously operative against whatever scientific or nonscientific motives incline one to reflection” (p. 23). What Husserl introduced to philosophy was a way of focusing on phenomena directly, setting aside our preconceptions and preconditions to see and understand things as clearly as possible.

Martin Heidegger: Hermeneutic Phenomenology. Martin Heidegger, perhaps Husserl’s most famous student, diverged from his teacher’s descriptive orientation and developed an interpretive or hermeneutic orientation to phenomenology, which focuses on three key concepts:

(1) Dasein, or being-in-the-world, which emphasizes the contextual nature of human existence; (2) the hermeneutic circle, where the researcher iteratively oscillates between interpreting the whole and the parts of lived experience descriptions, and (3) throwness, which refers to the contingent nature of existence based on historical, cultural, and social contexts (Heidegger, 1927/2010). Heidegger's focus is to "let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself" (p. 32).

Significantly, Heidegger is credited with creating an "ontological turn" in phenomenology, shifting from Husserl's exclusive focus on epistemology, or how we *know* things, to his focus on ontology, or how we *are* in relation to things (Vagle, 2018). Because of Heidegger, interpretive phenomenologists are as interested in the subjects being in relations with the object as they are the essence of the object (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2016, 2023). Finlay (2009) explains that "for hermeneutic phenomenologists, meanings can never be fixed – they are always emergent, contextual and historical. These meanings shape our understandings and need to be taken into account" (p. 479). Or as Heidegger (1927/2010) put it, "understanding is always interpretation" (p. 144).

Max van Manen: Lived Experience Phenomenology. Max van Manen's lived experience phenomenology combines Husserlian and Heideggerian orientations into a hybrid lived experience phenomenology. His approach focuses on three key concepts: (1) epoché, or phenomenological attitude, where the researcher suspends any preconceptions regarding the phenomenon, (2) hermeneutic phenomenological reflection, where the researcher continually writes and rewrites as a process of uncovering the meaning of lived experiences, and (3) lifeworld existentials, which are universally experienced heuristics with which phenomena can be characterized (van Manen, 2016). In the epoché we see the connection to Husserl; in the

reflection we see the connection to Heidegger; in the existentials, we see van Manen's unique contribution to phenomenology. As van Manen (2016) states:

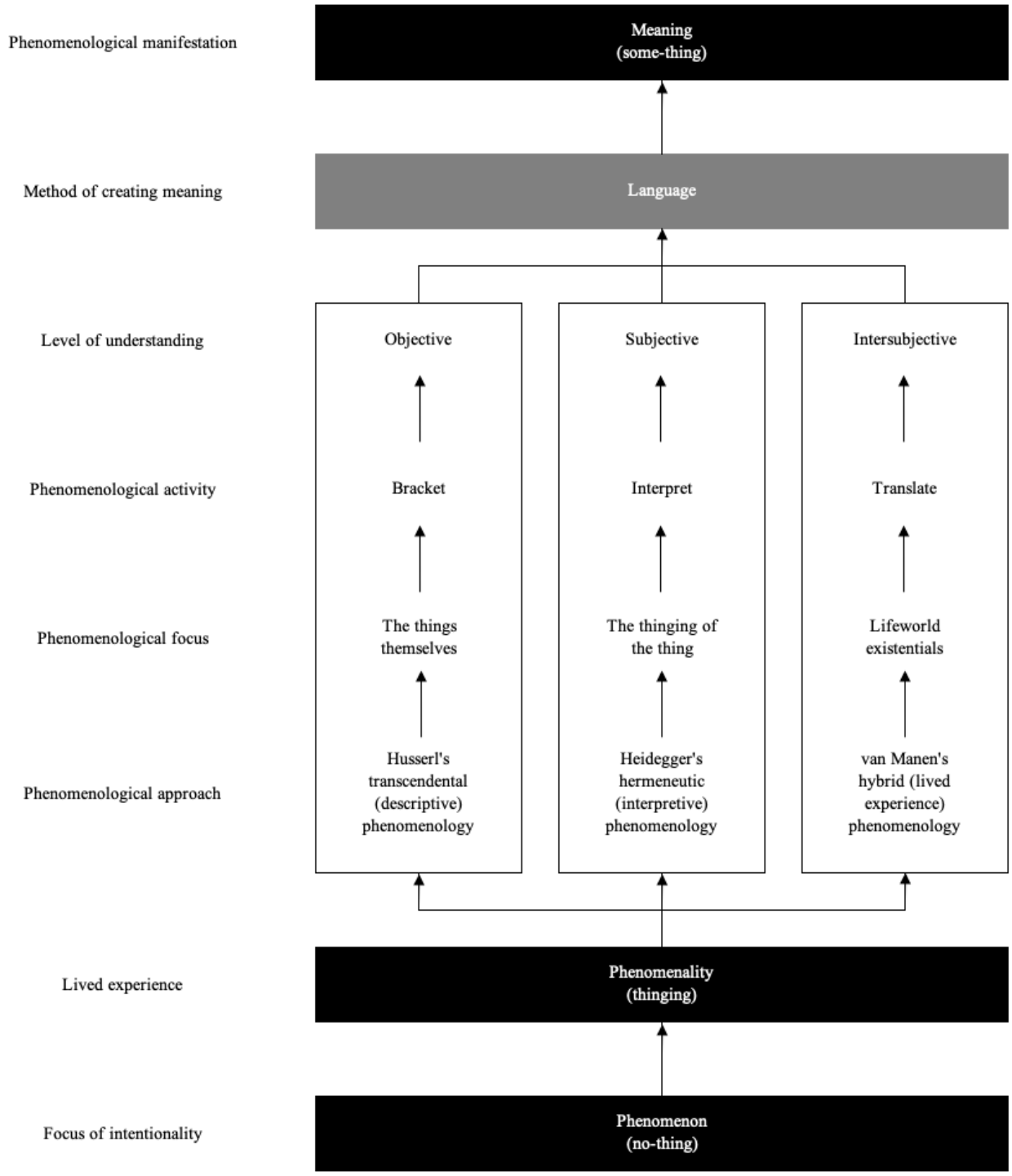
> Hermeneutic phenomenology tries to be attentive to both terms of its methodology: it is a *descriptive* (phenomenological) methodology because it wants to be attentive to how things appear, it wants to let things speak for themselves; it is an *interpretive* (hermeneutic) methodology because it claims that there are no such things as uninterpreted phenomena. The implied contradiction may be resolved if one acknowledges that the (phenomenological) "facts" of lived experience are always already meaningfully (hermeneutically) experienced. Moreover, even the "facts" of lived experience need to be captured in language (the human science text), and this is inevitably an interpretive process. (pp. 180-181)

The focus for van Manen is the iterative process of reflecting and writing to elucidate a possible shared meaning of the appearance of the phenomenon (even if that meaning is only shared between the researcher and a single subject) using rich, evocative language.

The Phenomenological Process. As van Manen (2016) says, "[w]hat then is the relation between language and experience? It seems that with words we create some-thing (concepts, insights, feelings) out of no-thing (lived experience)" (p. xviii). Phenomenology, then, is the process whereby we create some-thing out of no-thing, as depicted in Figure 4. Like an iceberg, what we see (the some-thing) represents but a small part of what lies beneath the surface. In phenomenology, we might equate language with the surface of water; that is, language serves as the threshold between our intersubjectively-understood and communicated meanings and the phenomena underlying them.

Figure 4

The Phenomenological Process



Phenomenon. At the foundation of any phenomenological process lies a phenomenon. A phenomenon is an empirically-understood occurrence or experience that appears or manifests to

us in our conscious experience. It's not a thing in the material sense of the word; it doesn't exist in reality, only in our minds. It's not *nothing* in the sense that it has no meaning, but it's *no-thing* in the sense that it doesn't exist in concrete form. As such, we cannot directly access a phenomenon.

Phenomenality. Phenomenality is often discussed in terms of qualia—the introspectively occurring phenomenal aspects of our mental lives. Qualia are the subjective "feels" associated with experiences. Phenomenality is the quality of "what it is like" to have a particular conscious experience, such as the redness of red, the taste of an apple, or the feeling of happiness (Smith, 2018). Phenomenality is inherently tied to the first-person perspective; it describes how someone subjectively experiences or feels things. Phenomenality cannot be measured—empirically or otherwise—and cannot be communicated—publicly or otherwise. Phenomenality is the individual, subjective *perception* of phenomena. "[E]very distinct phenomenon is characterized by its phenomenality: the intentional ways that the phenomenon gives itself, shows itself, or appears in consciousness," explains van Manen (2016), noting that, "there are various modalities in which the phenomenality of a phenomenon may appear or give itself" (p. 454).

Whereas a phenomenon is how a no-thing appears in its essential structure of appearing to consciousness (i.e., how it appears *generally*), phenomenality is how that specific no-thing appears to a specific person in a specific time and place (i.e., how it appears *specifically*). Just like no one can look into anyone else's box, no one can directly access another person's subjective experiences. "Whereas one subject can indeed verify another's statements about physical affairs," explains Cairns (2010), "it is impossible for one subject to verify another's statements about psychic affairs.—Or at least that it is impossible to verify the latter in the same way and with the same certainty" (p. 21). Importantly, as I described earlier regarding the

dynamic nature of i-deals and LMX, phenomenality is not *a* thing per se, rather, it is *some* thing to *some* one at *some* time in *some* place. Or as van Manen (2016) puts it: "a phenomenon is never really a static object but rather as Heidegger says the *thinging of a thing* [emphasis added]. It is this thinging that is given in the event of the appearance of the phenomenon" (p. 308).

Phenomenology is thus the study of phenomena by way of phenomenalities: phenomenology is the philosophical study of how objective, empirical phenomena give rise to subjective, experiential phenomenalities. Henry (1999) makes this connection clear:

> The genuine object of phenomenology is phenomenality, because phenomenality constitutes our access to the phenomenon; in its very phenomenalization, phenomenality opens the path which leads right up to the phenomenon. Now, in its ultimate possibility, the [phenomenological] method is nothing other than this openness of a path leading to the phenomenon; it allows us to apprehend the phenomenon and to know it. (p. 344)

By gathering the phenomenological material of various individual's unique phenomenalities, we can evoke a generalized sense of meaning of the underlying phenomenon. In other words, while the goal is to elucidate the phenomenon of our research question, that is impossible as phenomena are not directly accessible. Instead, we look at how phenomena give themselves to individuals via phenomenalities.

Language. But we don't have direct access to either phenomena (because they don't exist in any way that can be accessed by our senses) or phenomenalities (because we can't see into another's box). So, then, how do we come to make meaning of phenomena? Through our shared, public language games. For van Manen (2016), language is the bridge between no-thing and some-thing: "the great paradox of language [is] that it always abstracts from the concreteness of the world which it was responsible for creating in the first place" (p. 128). On the one hand,

writing is part and parcel of van Manen's phenomenology. "Phenomenological inquiry cannot really be separated from the practice of writing," he states. And yet, "the problem of writing is that one must bring into presence a phenomenon that cannot be represented in plain words—it would escape all representation" (pp. 466, 471). Language both obfuscates and limits our ability to see and speak about phenomena; at the same time, it also clarifies and enables our ability to communicate with one another about them. Language is imperfect, but it is the only way we can dialogue with one another about phenomena.

Meaning. All phenomenologists seek to arrive at meaning; all phenomenologists create some-thing out of no-thing. But they go about the creating process differently. For Husserl, the focus is on the phenomenon (the no-thing). While he acknowledges the existence of phenomenalities, through the epoché and bracketing, we seek to reduce or even remove their influence on the clear seeing of the phenomenon, emphasizing an objective understanding of the phenomenon.

For Heidegger, the focus is on how phenomenality (the *thinging* of the no-thing) manifests to the experiencer. Bracketing is impossible—we can never eliminate our perspectives when assessing our perceptions. Instead, we should focus on the interpretive (hermeneutic) process whereby *how* we see is as important as *what* we see, emphasizing an individual, subjective understanding of the phenomenon.

For van Manen, the focus is on understanding both *what* we see (Husserl's descriptive approach) and *how* we see (Heidegger's interpretive approach) through linguistic heuristics. Our language games serve to translate our lived experiences into meaning; they are how we create some-thing out of no-thing. As he explains, "language creates and describes an *intersubjective* [emphasis added] lifeworld. By learning a language, we learn to live in collective realms of

meanings…we recognize *differentiated* [emphasis added] possibilities of meaning that adhere to the socio-cultural context to which a given language belongs" (van Manen, 2016, p. xiii). His approach is oriented around seven lifeworld existentials that encapsulate shared structures of consciousness, emphasizing a communal, intersubjective understanding of the phenomenon.

The Phenomenology of Idiosyncratic Deals and Leader-Member Exchange

For this study—where we tried to determine how managers distinguish between different and differentiated treatment and different and differentiated relationships—van Manen's considered approach to language is apropos. When researchers talk about i-deals, LMX, and their relationship, they think everyone is using the same public language to talk about the same thing, but what people are doing is using the researcher-supplied public language to talk about their some-things. There are two inherent challenges with this model. First, as to language, as explored in the literature review, there seems to be misalignment between the language games researchers are playing and the language games managers and employees are playing. Second, as to phenomenology, researchers are talking about no-things as if they were things; they're talking about things that have *real* meaning as if they were *reality*. Meanwhile, managers are talking about some-things. That may explain why the alignment between perceptions regarding i-deals and LMX relationships is so low: it seems that people are speaking different languages—they're talking about different things (no-things versus some-things).

In this study, therefore, I focused on (a) the no-thing (our phenomenon) by way of (b) how it manifested to the managers (their phenomenalities) as described by (c) their language games (their some-things). By exploring and combining their individual, subjective experiences, distilling them down to their essential meanings, and crafting a generalized textual description of

the shared phenomenon, I offer a potential lived experience description that can be utilized by practitioners and researchers toward a more thoughtful and tactful practice.

Participants

A sample of sixteen managers was recruited from various organizations. I started with my network (purposive) and welcomed any additional participants identified by existing participants (snowball) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The former approach provided fifteen of the participants, while the final participant came from the latter approach. Inclusion criteria involved: (a) a minimum of three years of management experience, (b) experience managing a team of at least three direct reports, and (c) experience handling at least three i-deal requests from employees. This ensured a deep pool of experience from which managers could elicit lived experience descriptions.

Participants were recruited via a variety of methods. I reached out to my existing network via phone calls and email. I had planned on expanding my recruitment to my professional network on LinkedIn, if needed, but this was unnecessary as I was able to obtain a sufficient sample size via purposive sampling. I've noted in the findings section some aspects of participant demographics, such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, industry, region of managerial experience, and years of experience.

Procedures

Step 1 (Summer 2024): I submitted for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

Step 2 (Summer 2024): After obtaining IRB approval (a copy of the IRB approval letter is included as Appendix A), I recruited managers to serve as participants (a copy of the recruitment email is included as Appendix B).

Step 3 (Fall 2024): After obtaining consent from each participant (a copy of the oral consent form is included as Appendix C), I requested each manager write a narrative of a specific personal experience related to the phenomenon of interest. These lived experience descriptions (LEDs) (van Manen, 2023) served as a primary phenomenological material for the study, providing a window into the subjective, lived experiences of managers as they encountered and responded to these requests. A copy of the LED protocol is included as Appendix D. As suggested by Vagle (2018), I provided managers an example of a bad and good LED, using a different phenomenon to not influence their responses to our phenomenon under study. These examples are from van Manen's (2023) descriptions of keeping a secret and are included as Appendix E. All sixteen participants submitted an LED.

Step 4 (Fall 2024): I held the first of two semi-structured focus group dialogues to explore collective experiences and perceptions related to the phenomenon. This discussion provided an opportunity for participants to share and compare their experiences, and for me to identify common themes and meanings. The focus group was held virtually via videoconference based on the participants' availability. This focus group consisted of 45 minutes of dialogue followed by 15 minutes of a reflective report-out summary facilitated by me (Peoples, 2021). A copy of the focus group interview protocol is included as Appendix F. There were four participants in this first focus group.

Step 5 (Fall 2024): I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with managers using open-ended questions (Smith et al., 2021) to explore the phenomenological material gathered from their LEDs and the first focus group dialogue. These interviews involved a back-and-forth movement between the managers' described experiences and my own pre-understandings and interpretations, with the aim of uncovering the essential structures and meanings of the

phenomenon, as seen through their understanding of the giveness of their phenomenalities. The one-on-one interviews took place either in person at a place mutually determined by me and the participant, or virtually via videoconference. The one-one-one interview protocol is the same as the focus group protocol, a copy of which is included as Appendix F. Fifteen participants did this first interview.

Step 6 (Winter 2024): I drafted an initial phenomenological text (van Manen, 2023). I analyzed the LEDs and focus group and individual interview transcripts using the hermeneutic circle, which involved an iterative process of reading, reflecting, and interpreting the phenomenological material to identify key themes and patterns. This analysis was guided by my theoretical and experiential pre-understandings and proceed through three stages: (1) holistic reading, where I read the entire text of the LEDs and focus group and interview transcripts to get a sense of the whole and to identify the overall meanings and themes; (2) selective reading, where I engaged in a more detailed reading, highlighting and identifying specific statements and phrases that appeared essential to the phenomenon—phenomenalities that resonated with a possible public language of the phenomenon; and (3) detailed reading, where I engaged in a line-by-line reading of the gathered material, reflecting on the meanings of each sentence or cluster of sentences and how they related to the phenomenon as a whole. This phenomenological text was shared with all sixteen participants, and we arranged for follow-up one-on-one interviews based on the relationship between the individual's shared lived experience, the initial phenomenological text, and their interest and availability (van Manen, 2023).

Step 7 (Spring 2025): I conducted second round one-on-one interviews with participants interested and available to continue exploring this phenomenon in depth. We reflected on the draft phenomenological text which evoked the shared experiences gathered in the fall. As this

interview primarily involved reflecting on previously gathered material and the phenomenological text, it was unstructured, therefore there is no corresponding protocol provided in the appendix. Thirteen managers participated in this second interview.

Step 8 (Spring 2025): After all the second-round interviews were complete, I conducted the second of two focus groups. Like the second-round interviews, the primary purpose of the second focus group was to reflect on the gathered phenomenological material and the emerging structures of consciousness as written in the draft phenomenological text. As such, this was an unstructured process, and no corresponding protocol is provided in the appendix. Three participants were able to join for the second focus group.

Step 9 (Spring/Summer 2025): I crafted the final evocative phenomenological text (i.e., the findings and discussion sections in this dissertation). Throughout the research process, I engaged in ongoing reflexivity and self-examination to become aware of my own pre-understandings, biases, and limitations in accessing and interpreting the lived experiences of others. This reflexivity was crucial for maintaining the integrity and trustworthiness of the hybrid phenomenological approach. I present the findings of the study in the form of a rich, interpretive text that weaves together the managers' written and oral lived experience descriptions, my interpretations, and theoretical insights from phenomenology. I hope this text provides a nuanced, multi-layered understanding of the essential structures and meanings of the research phenomenon. I structured the text around key phenomenological existential themes (van Manen, 2023) that emerged from the analysis, with each theme explored in depth through a combination of participant quotes, interpretive commentary, and philosophical reflection.

Not every participant was expected to participate in every step. I had anticipated that some participants might participate in a focus group and one interview; others might only

participate in the focus group, while still others might participate in both focus group and both interviews. I left it to each participant to determine their own level of participation. To my delight, most participants participated in multiple touchpoints: everyone sent me an LED and thirteen of the sixteen participants did both hour-long interviews.

Here is a summary of the research timeline:

- Step 1. Summer 2024: IRB submission
- Step 2. Summer 2024: Participant recruitment (*n*=16)
- Step 3. Fall 2024: Lived experience descriptions (LEDs) (*n*=16)
- Step 4. Fall 2024: First focus group (*n*=4)
- Step 5. Fall 2024: First round of one-on-one interviews (*n*=15)
- Step 6. Winter 2024: Crafting of first draft of phenomenological text
- Step 7. Spring 2025: Second round of one-on-one interviews (*n*=13)
- Step 8. Spring 2025: Second focus group (*n*=3)
- Step 9. Spring/Summer 2025: Crafting of final evocative phenomenological text

Phenomenological Material Gathering

Dahlberg et al. (2008) suggest gathering phenomenological material as a better reflection of the process involved in phenomenological research versus the typical phrase of collecting data. Van Manen (2016, 2023) echoes this point, explaining how data is information best suited for processing and analyzing content whereas phenomenological material is designed to elicit meaning.

As described in the procedures section above, the participant managers were provided with various avenues to offer forth their individualized phenomenalities, from which a more generalized perspective of our research phenomenon could be discovered. I personally conducted

all participant interactive activities, recording them via video/audio recordings (with participant permission, of course), as well as personally transcribing all communications. My personal involvement was essential as it was important to not only be attentive to what was said, but to also be present and attuned to what was *not* said, as "certain inflections, tones, accentuation, tempo, acceleration, modulation, and things that may go 'unsaid' are all part" of the relevant phenomenological material (Peoples, 2021, p. 54). Beyond verbal language, I also attended to body language, as it's estimated that 65% to 70% of what is communicated is done so non-verbally (Birdwhistell, 1970/2010). Sapir (1927/1949) noted that body language "seems to operate in accordance with an elaborate and secret code that is written nowhere, known by none, and understood by all" (p. 556).

As the crafting of an evocative hermeneutic phenomenological text is considered a co-creative process (van Manen, 2023), in addition to gathering phenomenological material from participant managers, I also maintained a journal to expose my biases and continually reflect upon them (Wong, 2020). After all, the phenomenological process "can bring to light unexpected riches that go beyond findings and outcomes. The relational process of engaging research itself can be transformative for both participant and researcher" (Finlay, 2009, p. 477).

Phenomenological Material Analysis

My analysis of the phenomenological material gathered in collaboration with my participants consisted of several components: (1) Husserlian-inspired descriptive analysis staying focused on the phenomenon (via their described phenomenalities); (2) Heideggerian-inspired whole-parts-whole interpretive analysis, which involved an iterative processing through the hermeneutic circle, where the parts informed the whole and the whole informed the parts—where I kept in mind the balance of summarizing communal themes while retaining the essence of the

phenomenon; and (3) utilizing van Manen's phenomenological existentials heuristic to organize emergent themes.

Beyond this general structure, I tried to avoid a definitive step-by-step approach to the analysis of the phenomenological material. As Vagle (2018) explains, van Manen is "quite serious in his resistance to *a priori* steps and structures in the name of precision, exactness, and rigor, as he believes that devising a methodology to accomplish these attributes can stifle the very fabric" (p. 62) of this approach to human science research. With this in mind, I intentionally chose an "analog" approach to analyzing the phenomenological material: I did not utilize any technological tools to aid in the analysis. I didn't want any formula or algorithmic structure to influence the identification, elucidation, and communication of the emerging themes or structures of consciousness which seemed to emerge to me and my participant managers.

Through my process of continual reading and reflecting through writing—to be "continuously confronted with the phenomenon" (Linschoten, 1987, p. 115) while also practicing an "active passive attitude and patience" of standing away from the material to let my subconscious mind dwell on meaning (van Manen, 2023, p. 17)—I hope I've been able to combine the managers' experiences into *a* public language of our research phenomenon.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, I employed several strategies, including: (1) member checking, where I shared the emerging themes and interpretations with participants to ensure that they resonated with their lived experiences and to incorporate their feedback into the final analysis; (2) thick description, where I provided rich, detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences and the context of the study, allowing readers to assess the transferability of the findings to other contexts; and (3) reflexivity, where I engaged in ongoing

self-reflection and bracketing of my pre-understandings and biases, to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' lived experiences (van Manen, 2023).

Ethics

This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines, including obtaining informed consent from all participants, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, and ensuring that participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time (Smith et al., 2021).[2] I was attentive to any potential power dynamics or vulnerabilities in the researcher-participant relationship and took steps to minimize any risks or discomfort for participants (Wong, 2020). All participant identities have been masked using pseudonyms (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Summary

If we go back to the story introduced at the beginning of this text, the experience of JL's boss is ultimately unique. Yes, there are plenty of other employees who ask their bosses for special treatment. Sometimes they're turned down (as what happened at first) and sometimes they're approved (as what happened the second time). And sometimes they're rejected only to be approved later (as what happened in JL's case). But JL and his boss shared a unique experience—not just unique in the situation but unique to each of them in their own perspectives. And yet, in a sense, their experience is also universal. Exactly what is unique versus universal about their experience—about this specific phenomenon—is what the phenomenological method seeks to identify and understand. A phenomenological mindset recognizes the uniqueness of each situation and each perspective. Instead of using an example to build an inductive argument for how managers generally should handle these types of situations, phenomenology aims to simply offer the example as simply that: an example. Nothing more, nothing less. The point of

[2] No participants withdrew from the study.

phenomenology is not to provide direction for future action, but to reflect deeply on the meaning of past thought and action, with the hopeful purpose of providing insight for a considered approach to similar, but always different, always unique situations. As van Manen (2016) puts it: "The paradoxical thing about anecdotal narrative is that it tells something *particular* while really addressing the *general* or the *universal* [emphasis original]" (p. 120).

Findings

Introduction

In this findings section, we dive into some of the most pertinent experiences shared by our research participants. Through van Manen's hybrid phenomenological lens that has guided this inquiry, I sought not merely to catalog these experiences but to illuminate the existential depth and intersubjective meaning that emerges when managers encounter employees' requests for special treatment. Through the use of a traditional framework with which we can organize these reflections, I first highlight how managers sometimes take a more objective, analytical approach to the phenomenon. I then offer another perspective, reflecting on how managers often take a more subjective, reflective approach to the phenomenon. This movement from the objective to the subjective—from clarity to uncertainty—mirrors the phenomenological journey from the natural attitude toward a deeper existential awakening found within the phenomenological attitude.

Research Question

How might employees' requests for special treatment take shape for managers within differentiated manager-employee relationships?

Summary of Findings

Participant Characteristics

Who are the participant managers? This is a group of sixteen managers, representing diverse industries (banking, food manufacturing, healthcare, law, material handling, and talent consulting), diverse geographical areas across the United States, and diverse work experience in terms of years of work experience (from 3 to 45), total employees supervised (ranging from 5 to 400), and number of requests for special treatment managed (from four to "thousands"). On a

personal note, one of the participants is my former neighbor while two are my current neighbors, one was my direct report while another was my boss, one was a former colleague and three are current colleagues, one is a former student and another is a former instructor of mine, and one is a related family member. Each participant has been given a pseudonym: Participant A will be referred to as PA, participant B will be referred to as PB, and so on.

Table 3

Participant Characteristics[3]

Pseudonym	Age (range)	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Industry	State/Region of management experience	Years of work experience	Years of management experience	Current employees supervised	Total employees supervised over career	Most employees supervised simultaneously	Least employees supervised simultaneously	Number of requests for special treatment managed
PA	35-44	Female	White	Healthcare technology	New England; Texas	20	16	7	100	35	5	25
PB	35-44	Male	White	Banking	Oklahoma	20	15	5	30	7	3	20
PC	65+	Female	White	Healthcare	North Carolina	35	24	0	30	15	3	15
PD	45-54	Male	White	Food manufacturing	Oklahoma	24	18	12	40	12	3	>70
PE	35-44	Male	White	Healthcare	Oklahoma	11	5	60	80	60	4	5-10
PF	35-44	Female	Asian American	Legal	Virginia	20	4	3	5	3	1	4
PG	45-54	Female	White	Healthcare	Kansas	20	20	38	Hundreds	38	3	Hundreds
PH	35-44	Female	White	Hospital administration	New England (10 in NYC; 7 in Boston)	17	13	14	40	15	3	100
PI	25-34	Female	White/ Hispanic	Healthcare	Texas	3	3	5	5	5	0	<10
PJ	45-54	Male	White	Material handling	Oklahoma	28	28	6	100	12	1	Thousands
PK	55-64	Male	White	Consulting	New Mexico	40	30	1	300-400	80	1	Hundreds
PL	35-44	Female	White	Talent consulting	Midwest/West US	14	9	0	10-15	8	2	5-10
PM	35-44	Female	American Indian/ White	Hospital pharmacy	Oklahoma	17	12	15	100	44	3	10
PN	65+	Male	White	Healthcare	Texas (12); Virginia (15)	45	40	0	49	12	5	6
PO	45-54	Male	White	Healthcare	Midwest	25	23	0	58	25	4	25
PP	35-44	Female	White	Healthcare	Texas; D.C.; Remote-first role for 10 years	17	12	6	30	9	1	20

[3] As we'll see in the discussion section, any form of participant categorization can be useful in some ways and a hindrance in other ways.

What did they say—individually? Between the two focus groups, lived experience descriptions (LEDs), and one-on-one interviews, the phenomenological material gathered provided almost 230,000 words describing their experiences with the phenomenon. That equates to over 900 pages in a traditional book format.

Table 4

Participant Participation and Word Counts

Participant(s)	Focus-Group	LED	Interview-1	Interview-2		
Focus Group 1 (PB, PG, PH, PI)	7,320	n/a	n/a	n/a		
Focus Group 2 (PG, PL, PP)	11,554	n/a	n/a	n/a		
PA		362	7,038	n/a		
PB	FG1	624	6,768	10,789		
PC		614	5,775	6,420		
PD		550	6,706	n/a		
PE		451	6,064	6,702		
PF		628	9,890	7,101		
PG	FG1, FG2	365	n/a	n/a		
PH	FG1	580	8,420	9,430		
PI	FG1	667	8,603	7,365		
PJ		259	7,923	4,246		
PK		498	6,986	7,216		
PL	FG2	1,387	7,475	7,148		
PM		298	5,639	3,634		
PN		523	6,021	6,715		
PO		1,321	6,987	6,743		
PP	FG2	600	6,946	9,680		
Total	**18,874**	**9,727**	**107,241**	**93,189**	**229,031**	**Total words**

What did they say—collectively? After gathering all this rich phenomenological material from these individual, subjective experiences, the task turned to identifying any shared, intersubjective meaning from among these experiences—identifying any shared structures of consciousness which makes up the phenomenon. Working collaboratively with the participant

managers/co-researchers, we looked for phenomenological themes that seemed to resonate for them—not just the "them" as individuals but the "them" as a group of participant managers.

When I say phenomenological themes, I'm speaking of something very specific. These are not mere categories or patterns in the gathered phenomenological material, but what van Manen (2016) describes as "the structures of experience as we live them"—the fundamental ways in which human consciousness organizes and makes sense of its encounters with the world (p. 90). We did not set out to try to find any truth here; there is no secret or treasure we tried to unearth. We simply tried to find a common way of understanding the meaning of this experience. I love how van Manen (2016) puts it: "Phenomenological themes are not objects or generalizations; metaphorically speaking they are more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes" (p. 90).

What is a web without knots? A web has structure because of the knots; the knots create the structure. In van Manen's metaphor, themes are the knots in the webs of our lived experience. They help us structure our experiences so that, instead of experiencing life as one discreet experience after another without any discernible meaning tying these experiences together, we experience life as a meaningful whole, marked by the thematic knots of meaningful experiences.[4]

7Q Framework

[4] As will be noted in the discussion section, Martin Buber's relational philosophy or philosophy of dialogue extends beyond this phenomenological perspective, elucidating a mode of engagement where one sees not the web, not the knots which create the web's structure, nor even the ropes themselves. Instead, the focus goes beyond sight, straight to the relationship between the observer and the observed. That is, instead of seeing either the web, the knots, or the ropes in their discreet characterizations, we instead turn to, as Husserl would say, the thing itself. Buber's relational philosophy reaches beyond experience (phenomenology's focus) to pure encounter.

How did we go about organizing the managers' experiences into these phenomenological themes? I turned to the oldie-but-goodie framework of the seven questions (7Q): who, with, what, where, when, why, and how. For Aristotle, distinguishing these elements of circumstance allows us to describe and evaluate moral action. With apologies to Aristotle, I prefer Thomas Aquinas's re-statement of Aristotle's elements: "For in acts we must take note of *who* did it, by what aids or instruments he did it (*with*), *what* he did, *where* he did it, *why* he did it, *how* and *when* he did it [emphasis original]" (Aquinas, 1265-1273/1952, I-II, q.7, art.3).

Analyzing the Request—The Objective 7Q

Initially, it seems most managers approach special requests through what I term the "Objective 7Q"—a systematic, analytical examination of the request's concrete dimensions. This represents what phenomenologists call the "natural attitude"—the everyday, taken-for-granted orientation toward the world that treats phenomena as discrete objects to be analyzed, categorized, and managed. In describing their experiences with these requests for special treatment, the participant managers touched on all of Aristotle's seven elements. Yet even as they attempted to maintain this objective stance, the very effort to describe their experiences began to reveal the inadequacy of purely technical approaches to what are fundamentally existential encounters. For example:

How is the employee asking for the request? Is the employee asking me directly, or are they asking someone along the chain of command, perhaps trying to get tacit approval from me without directly asking me? Is the employee making a formal request, or are they insinuating their desire for special treatment? Is the employee making the request on their behalf only, or have they garnered support and are making the request on behalf of a group of employees

(strength in numbers)? Some specific examples illuminate that how the request is delivered influences the manager's reception:

- PA about the style of approach: “How the employee brings the request to the manager matters. Are they asking or telling? The latter is going to lead to more scrutiny.”
- PI about the secretive nature of the approach: “She requested that I not tell my director...she wanted to keep everything private.”
- PL about the thoughtfulness behind the approach: “This time I could sense some anxiousness in her and something made me stop what I was doing, and I asked if she wanted to go somewhere private.”

What, exactly, is the request? Is it a request for work flexibility, such as working from home more than what's allowed? Is the request for a promotion or pay increase outside the typical schedule? Is the request to break not just internal company policy, but the law? Is the request a pitch for innovation—that we can do things better than the status quo and the requestor is the person to spearhead such effort? The nature of requests varied dramatically across participants, from routine scheduling adjustments to complex accommodations that challenge organizational norms. Some specific examples reflect how requests can range from minor flexibility to major rule exceptions:

- PB about a health-related request: “She has some health issues of a vague nature that can't necessarily can be pinned down, and we don't necessarily have a tiered system of who gets an office and who gets a cubicle, but we kind of do, and she's not at the office level, but we have an office available, which allowed her to have a space, a clean space where you can say, don't clean in here, and she has an air filtration system. But the dynamics of how maybe people are perceiving the tiers, and that she somehow jumped

things, and also the somewhat not spurious, but vague nature of the allergies makes it a little hard to pin down."

- PI about a working space adjustment request: "She specifically came to me and asked that if we could align her work schedule with my work schedule and if she could take really important meetings from my office."
- PL about a professional advancement request: "She said, 'I want to become a Senior Consultant (which would be a promotion for her) and I want permission to move to [another state] and work from there, remotely.'"

With what means is the employee making the request? Are they pointing to an urgent need that, if not accommodated, would lead to their resignation (as JL's situation was apparently interpreted by himself and his boss!)? Are they making the request through a surrogate (e.g., asking someone else besides me for the special request)? Are they pointing to a similar deal someone else has, thus claiming there is precedent for their request? Some specific examples show how the approach matters as much as the content:

- PE about a request made through a surrogate: "I should be clear that the request was actually made through a surrogate. So, the request came to me from this person through our operations manager."
- PH about a request involving multiple escalation tactics: "So first it was like a work schedule request and then it was like a family thing. And now it's like a workplace accommodation."
- PO about a request that seemed like emotional manipulation: "Sometimes, it seemed like emotional warfare, as if the employee was guilt tripping me for asking him to follow the rules!"

Why does the employee need or want this request? Is the employee facing a personal challenge that requires accommodation? Is the employee seeking career advancement? Is the employee testing boundaries to see what they can get away with? Does the employee feel they are entitled to this special request because of their specialized contributions to the team or the organization? Does the employee have a personal need or want that conflicts with our policies and practices? Does the employee simply want to be treated specially because they see themselves as, well, special? Some specific examples shed light on how understanding the employee's motivation influences the manager's response:

- PB about a request grounded in a personal need: "Her husband is the head baseball coach for the local high school and because of scheduling and logistics, she would be taking the kids to the practice field."
- PI about a request arising from issues with the work environment: "The other two would be talking in the background and would be laughing...when I'm on calls, can you guys stop?"
- PL about a request oriented around professional and personal integration: "She mentioned that [this city] just wasn't a long-term option for her. She was outdoorsy and also looking to find a partner, which she was having a difficult time doing in [this city]."

Who is the requestor? Do I have a positive or negative relationship with this person? Are they a high performer or a low performer? Is this someone who rarely asks for special treatment or is this a serial requestor? Does this person have any special relationships with important people within the organization? Does this person have a special skill set which gives them leveraging power? Some specific examples highlight how the relationship dynamic fundamentally shapes the experience:

- PA about a repeat requestor: “I think it tends to be the same people who feel okay to do that and kind of come back with recurring requests...typically, you find the same kind of key offenders.”
- PE about a connected employee: “This particular person I met prior to me taking this role...his wife is the executive assistant for the Dean of the College.”
- PH about a high-performing technologist with negotiating leverage: “He's got a skill set that we really can't replicate quickly.”

When would the request apply? Is the request made during a particularly busy period when the manager might be more likely to quickly approve or deny the request? Is it made during annual review periods when there is already discussion about changes? Is this a one-time request, is it a pilot, or is it something that would be permanent? When do I, as the manager, need to decide? Is this urgent? Is there a triggering event? When did this request originate? Am I inheriting a previous special arrangement from a previous manager, i.e., I’ve just started managing this employee, but they had a pervious arrangement that I’m now expected to honor? Some specific examples illustrate how timing creates different pressures and implications:

- PA described a situation where timing created complexity: “We had someone who had been with us for two years and was asking for a promotion outside the normal cycle. The timing was terrible because we were in the middle of budget planning and hadn't allocated for any additional promotions. But this person had just received another job offer and was giving us a chance to match it. Do I stick to our promotion timeline that was decided months ago, or do I respond to what's happening right now? The policy says promotions happen during annual reviews, but the business reality is that good people sometimes get other offers.”

- PD about a time-limited trial: “I agreed to do it, but I only agreed to do it for a period of time. I think I agreed to do it for right around four months.”
- PI about the difference between a new employee (who’s asking for a request before building social capital) versus a trusted employee (who has built such capital over time): “It's really difficult, because I think that it is like a puzzle trying to put it together. Being in a management position, you do want to be seen as fair and all of these things…but, at the same time, I do think it's also fair to say, hey, that person, they've worked with that person for 20 years, they have an amazing working relationship, there's a lot of trust there. If they're asking for something it's probably because they actually need it versus someone you just met, like Joe Schmo, like I just met you.”

Where does the request occur? Are we a more rules-based or values-based organization? The former is more likely to be strict regarding the rules; the latter is more likely to be more flexible regarding the rules. Are we more of an individualistic or collectivist culture, especially when it comes to how we make decisions? Do we work primarily in-person or remote? Remote work seems to have more flexible expectations regarding the rules, simply due to the more limited ability of managers to directly observe their employees’ adherence to the rules. Some specific examples demonstrate how organizational culture shapes the request and response:

- PH about the impact of team size and organizational culture: “If there's a large group of employees, those tend to have like more rigid policies. And if it's like really small groups, you can...make different sort of justifications…I work for an organization that is employee friendly, which I value...we as managers are encouraged to be thoughtful and open with employee requests.”

- PK about the balance between a rules-based versus values-based culture: “we strive for being a values-based organization, but what limits our values is our rules, and we have to have rules, so that we can be a value-based organization.”
- PO about different types of rules and their arbitrary nature: “Because ultimately, that rule, who says 48 [hours to complete patient charts]? Why not 72? Why not 24? Why not seven days? The board didn't say this had to be done. CMS doesn't say it has to be done. The Joint Commission doesn't say it has to be. Like, there's no hard, fast 48. That was just kind of the consensus rule... It's like, if we don't get paid if it's not done in 48 hours by the payers that's a harder rule than like, we've done some research, and we feel like this is best practice.”

It is certainly valuable to explore further the specifics of the special requests through this Objective 7Q framework. However, while important in the day-to-day life of managers and employees, this is not the focus of our research question. Ultimately, we're not focused on how our participant managers *manage* these requests; we're focused on how they *experience* them[5]. Instead of exploring what managers *do with* these requests, we wonder what these requests might *do to* them.

Internalizing the Request—The Subjective 7Q

Overall impressions. In describing their experiences with these requests for special treatment, the participant managers also seemed to touch on the 7Q, but from a more introspective, existential perspective. This shift from objective analysis to subjective reflection

[5] As noted in the previous footnote, this focus on managers’ experience was the intended aim during the phenomenological material gathering phase. As will be explicated in the discussion section, I believe me and the co-participant managers uncovered something that reaches beyond experience. Or perhaps it might be better said that it operates in parallel to experience.

represents a movement from the natural attitude toward a more reflective, questioning stance—what Husserl (1900/2001) called the "phenomenological reduction" and what Heidegger (1927/2010) understood as the authentic confrontation with one's own existence.

It seems that for them as managers, an employee's request for special treatment didn't just challenge their managerial skills, it also challenged their conceptualization of how they and their colleagues manage rules and decision making—for special requests and in general. And, often, this led to an even deeper questioning of their own relationship to the rules and to those who make the rules.

It seems the essence of this phenomenon is uncertainty. Uncertainty about how to manage this specific request. Uncertainty about how those around us manage rules and decisions. Uncertainty about whether and how we fit in. In fact, the truth may be simpler and more unsettling: these managers have stumbled onto a central problem of institutional life, which is that rules cannot govern their own application, and someone—some actual person—has to make decisions that can't be fully justified in advance.

Specific impressions. For each heuristic/element, I first offer some introductory remarks about how the heuristic/element pertains to this phenomenon. Then, I attempt to give form to the heuristic/element via a single illustrative experience or related experiences. The use of a single person's experience is certainly not reflective of the depth and richness of the participant managers' reflections as a whole; it's pragmatic only—otherwise, this findings section would become overly unwieldy (if not so already!). I finish each heuristic/element with some impressions of the specific illustrative experience provided.

How am I supposed to know what to do? Responding to an employee's request for special treatment inherently involves a challenge to the rules. I haven't been guided on how to

handle these types of requests, yet I have to decide. But there are so many factors to consider, so many people who might be affected, so many possible consequences I can't anticipate. It leads me to question myself: Am I making decisions or am I just making things up?

Illustrative experience. Our first illustrative experience offers an introspective look not at how decisions are made, but why they're so fraught with uncertainty. To put things into context, PB explains that he has never been trained how to handle these special requests: "I guess they're kind of counting on that you have experience, that you've worked through these things before, and they've gone through that in the hiring process. They don't have to micromanage you as you manage. So, maybe anecdotally, along the way, asking, hey, what do you do with something like this? But not direct, intentional coaching in this regard."

Despite this seemingly universal lack of training—of knowing what to do—PB has seen many managers make quick, decisive decisions regarding special requests. He shares his initial reaction to these quick rule-based decisions, saying, "Organizationally, I don't know, you either have way too much power or not enough introspection or something like that, because this is a special request. There is a policy in place that we are certainly navigating. How can it be so easily changed? What's the point of the policy if we can do it that quickly? So, either this isn't going to go through or why is the policy there?"

PB has been there himself. When asked if he made a quick decision he later regretted, PB said, "Yeah, that's the worst. You feel like it means you acted...the implication for yourself is just—and this is what I have in hindsight now—you go, that's not good management, that's just going off of feelings, that's not thinking through all the implications. Besides the fact of having to let this person down and change course, which erodes trust, which makes you seem unreliable, fickle, however you want to say it. And I've had bosses in the past that I felt answered off the

cuff, and then did a lot of walking back, and it just kind of consciously or subconsciously trained me to go, well, let's see what the real answer is a couple weeks from now. It's kind of like when you're a kid and you ask—one parent's very permissive and the other's real strict—and the permissive one says "yes" and the real answer comes back and it's actually "no", here's why, and that just recalibrates your brain to go, okay, well, this person is not really in charge. So, I don't want that feeling from people looking towards me. I don't want the negative feelings for myself that I've let somebody else down."

Despite these dynamics at play, ultimately someone needs to make a decision. Like many of our participants shared, PB constantly battles a sense of lingering doubt about such decisions, saying, "If all these people are upset, does that make it the wrong decision? Not necessarily. I know I stand by this, it's a hard thing, but we're doing this because we see the path ahead and it's the way we're going. Whether it's organizationally or from team members, they might get upset no matter what you did. So, you have to get to a point of somewhat self-actualization, realization, go, this is why you're in the chair that you're in. Make hard decisions, stick by them. At some point you have to have a level of certainty, which now I know is accompanied by taking your time, thinking it through, asking the right people. So "right decision" ultimately, if you're in a position that you have been paid to fill, and it's the decision that you've thought through and stand by, it's the right decision. Because you have to make a decision either way. By making a decision or by not making a decision. The implications for all the people that are watching—inaction or action either way is going to make some kind of message, either to that person or to a larger group."

PB described the cognitive and emotional challenge of making decisions without clear guidance: "You're trying to balance so many things at once. What's fair to this person, what's fair

to their colleagues, what's the precedent this sets, what are the budget implications, what does HR think, what does my boss think, what if this person quits, what if other people find out and want the same thing? And at some point you realize you can't analyze your way to certainty. You just have to decide and hope for the best. But that doesn't make it feel less like you're just making it up as you go along."

Illustrative experience impressions. In the end, like most things in a manager's life, it's perhaps unknowable what one should do in these situations. PB shared some of the challenging dynamics at play that have led him to take a deliberate, collective, yet confident approach when it comes to making decisions about requests for special treatment. He shared that his approach to these requests does not lie in how he was trained to handle them (which he wasn't), but in his lived experiences of being on both sides of the request and response.

As most of the managers shared, they never received training on how to handle these situations. No one ever sat them down and said this is how you should handle it when someone asks for your permission to bend or break the rules. So, it only makes sense that a certain level of uncertainty attends to this phenomenon. And yet, the manager must make a decision. Even if that decision is to get more people involved in the decision.

What are the relevant rules? Rules include both explicit rules (e.g., policies and procedures) and implicit rules (e.g., practices and norms). Do we even know what the rules are? Do we say one thing but do another? Why do we even have rules if we don't follow them? We are social beings, which means we tend to act in groups. It's one thing when a small pocket of mavericks is pushing against the rules; it's another thing when it seems most people are rebelling against the rules. It makes one wonder if the rules are really the rules or if there's another set of

hidden rules everyone seems to be following. It leads me to question myself: Am I following the rules or am I following the crowd?

Illustrative experience. PM was challenged with enforcing the attendance policy for a valuable employee who had trouble getting to work on time because she was a single mother with a young child. As she explains, "We feel like if she didn't have this job, she's not going to be able to pay for her kid, that kind of stuff. And so, we just did not follow a policy on that. And she's still here. I feel you have to balance your conscience, too. I don't feel right about this, but it's also not super—on the scale of bad things—I don't think it's that bad. Now, I will say one time I came in and she didn't have childcare, and she needed her mom to come and get him. I come in and she's sitting in the break room with him. And that's where I drew the line. I said, we are a pharmacy. There are dangerous drugs everywhere. You cannot have a child in here."

PM offers a contrasting situation, explaining, "The other situation was with a female worker who, she had a ton of tardies. We sat down and I said, according to the policy, these are the tardies, this is a level one, it's really not a big deal, and it's a rolling calendar, so some of them fall off. She freaked out, and was like, this isn't right, because I have sick kids, and I'm like, actually, it's not your sick kids, these are tardies, you're not making it here on time, and she freaked out, and she took it to HR. But it was so black and white, it wasn't a gray."

In explaining how she approached these seemingly similar situations with very different approaches, PM uses HR as an example. She says, "I know that there can be some loose things with the attendance policy. In the past, in our dealing with HR, it's like, yes, there is the policy, but they don't always stick to it to a T. There's this weird thing: let's say you have five occurrences, or five tardies, or five absences. After that, you get a level one. And then after the next one, it's a level two. But let's say that I don't—me as the manager—I don't put it in the

computer. Then the ones that you've had in that between time don't count because you didn't have your sixth one documented. There are all these weird loopholes. Usually HR is like, I know that these are documented, but you need to give them a second chance. I've seen this happen and heard the feedback. I knew that my decision to support that would be supported by HR."

Finally, PM says, "Sometimes, even when I talk to HR, if I have a real question about a policy or something feels gray, we have an HR business partner, and I'll call them and be like, what do you think about this, because for the most part, I think you have to be in compliance with certain policies, but you can be gray on some of them. They really do try to side with the employee most of the time. That's my takeaway from the interactions I've had with HR. It's a lot of money for turnover, to train someone new, you really want to keep employees that are good. I feel like there are times when our attendance policy says one thing, but the reality of what goes on in our workplace says another. We have people who are constantly late or calling in or things like that, and nothing happens. Well, okay then, it's not really a policy; it's more like a guideline because nothing really happens if you don't follow it."

Illustrative experience impressions. PM's reflections highlight the subjective nature of how she manages. For some things, she doesn't feel comfortable enforcing the rules because what the employee is doing is not that bad in her eyes. For other things, though, she holds to the rules because what the employee is doing is bad. (Even though the offenses to an outside observer seem to be of a very similar nature.) Of course, PM is the one making the decision here—which from an organizational standpoint is probably how it should be.

A few other interesting points. First, even in the presence of a clear policy (like for attendance), the enforcement of the policy is largely determined by people. If PM enters the tardies in the system, eventually they add up to a certain level. But if PM chooses not to enter

anything in the system, there's nothing to trigger the policy, and HR—ostensibly responsible for enforcing policies—can't get involved without proper documentation. And in some cases, HR even advises managers not to document certain policy violations so that they're not on the record. Second, even when things are documented, HR can advocate for employees to be given a "second chance." They can adjust data to determine if and when a policy has been overstepped. Third, and most importantly, PM's actions seem less of a rogue manager arbitrarily enforcing a clear-cut attendance policy, and more of an adaptable manager utilizing discretion in when to take a hard stance on attendance and when to cut someone some slack. Even more, it seems she either learned from or has engaged in lockstep with her supervisor and HR in terms of being consistently inconsistent. As many of the participant managers have similarly shared, when it comes to enforcing the rules, there seems to be both a set of official and unofficial rules at play.

PM is acknowledging the difference between written and unwritten rules, which leads to the question: which rules should be followed? The written rules provide clarity and predictability. But the unwritten rules acknowledge the reality and complexity of people's lives. When the written and unwritten rules don't align, PM experiences a tension she articulates as her professional duty (following the attendance policy) versus her moral duty (recognizing a vulnerable single mother's circumstances). What PM decides to do—"balance your conscience"—suggests that she's developed her own approach to navigating competing rule systems. But this approach also leaves her questioning whether organizational policies really function as policies if they're not consistently enforced.

With what means do I decide? Together, the participant managers highlight how the decision to follow external rules or internal instincts is itself a judgment call. Sometimes it's clear there are rules which should be followed. Other times, not so clear. Sometimes you decide to

follow the rules and sometimes you chose to follow your instincts, i.e., ask for forgiveness versus permission. Other times, someone else intervenes and lets you know that that's not your decision to make. And all these factors seem to change on a regular basis. Do I use an external frame of reference (the rules or those who make the rules—the rulers) or my internal frame of reference (my judgment based on my experience). It leads me to question myself: Am I required to follow the rules or rulers, or do I get to follow my instincts?

Illustrative experience. As one of 32 partners at her law firm, PF is a key decision-maker. But she's frustrated at the "rough-shod approach" her partners take with origination. Here's the situation in her own words: "Here's a sticking point always for attorneys and shareholders, is when it comes to origination—that's the credit that we track to if you bring in a new client. There's a pot of origination that gets to be divided up between the people who share, who brought the matter in. When I bring a matter in, I try to be very generous and share with people who have helped to bring matter in or share with people who are doing the lion's share of the work. But we don't have any consistency as to how each shareholder does it. So that, to me, is an example of, how can some shareholders get away with always keeping origination at 100%, even though they're clearly getting other people to help bring the business in or getting them to do some of the work? Why am I sharing when this person's allowed to get away with not? That's an awkward situation because that's directly tied to compensation. And no one wants to talk about that. Especially at a law firm!"

After she clarified that there's no policy around origination, I asked her if she wished there was, to which she responded, "I wish there would be, but there would never be a policy with 32 different people with 32 different approaches. What I wish that we would have is more conversations about it because I do think that there are guidelines that we could talk about. Even

if it's just as simple as, how do most of the people in the business group do things? How do most people in the government group do things? Just having the conversation about it, because my expectations with this particular partner clearly were born out of my experience, having seen how other people shared with me as I was coming up and then, of course, how then I in turn did it with my understanding of what does origination mean. Origination means I'm bringing in work for the firm, therefore I should get credit for that. That's why it matters so much. So, my expectations clearly are born of observing some common practices. And so, when this one seems so far afield even from that, even knowing people do things differently, I felt that compulsion to say something. I do think that there is a possibility of sitting down and having a policy about it, even if it's just as simple as, when you're thinking about origination, these are the factors that we would like for you to consider. If you don't consider a factor or if you consider something else, find some way to document it somehow so that if ever someone comes back later and wonders, you've at least got justification for departing from it. But knowing the partners that I have, I don't necessarily know that that's ever going to happen. But I think it's possible."

Finally, PF adds: "People tell me we can't have a one size fits all approach. There's a lot of times when I'm raising ideas where the answer is no, because what I'm proposing somehow—even though it's not what I'm proposing—is a one size-fits all answer. That you can't do that with 32 different shareholders. And there seems to be this preference for things happening organically. I get that a lot. We want things to happen "organically". I'm like, what does that mean? I don't know what that means! Just more ways of telling me no."

Illustrative experience impressions. PF is sharing a perspective that many managers shared during the research process: while she experiences special requests directed to her as a manager, she also has a vast array of experiences of special requests she herself has requested as

well as special requests she is affected by and invested in—she is what Rousseau (2005) calls an "interested third party" (p. 137)**.** In short, many i-deals in the real world lack the objective distinctions between manager-employee and interested third parties that make for easy identification and assessment; many i-deals are messy, involving complex human dynamics.

PF is trying to find a balance between objective policies and subjective preferences. While she would love the clarity and predictability a policy would provide, she recognizes it's untenable given the current partnership mindset. What she'd settle for are guidelines or factors to be identified so they are at least considered (or explanations can be provided for why they weren't considered). This seems to provide a compromise between rules and intuition—objectively-subjective or subjectively-objective.

Similar to what many of the managers said, PF acknowledges that there likely will never be one-size-fits all approach or policy to inherently complex decisions. She even claims she wouldn't want that. What she does want is dialogue. She wants the hidden culture to be brought into the light, not to be codified, but to be examined. To be shared as a useful framework for critical thinking and development of practical wisdom.

Why are they asking me? Rules are collectively decided (e.g., policies) or embraced (e.g., practices). No one person—myself included—is responsible for developing the rules. Why, then, am I being asked to bend or break them? This theme highlights the challenge most of the participant managers expressed which can be characterized as how we make decisions, specifically in terms of what role does one play in the decision-making process. On the one hand, one may feel compelled to maintain the status quo; otherwise, they may feel like, in granting the employee permission to bend or break the rules, they, too, are bending or breaking the rules. On the other hand, one may also feel compelled to challenge the rules, because sometimes rules are

made to be broken; if we always maintain the status quo, we'll never change. After all, if we want to do things differently, we have to do things differently. But is it one's place to make the decision either way? What is the scope of one's managerial authority? It leads me to question myself: Am I breaking the rules or am I breaking the status quo?

Illustrative experience. PO was a newly appointed CEO of a healthcare organization. One of the most powerful physicians was notorious for not completing patient charts in a timely manner. The previous administration looked the other way since this physician was bringing in a lot of revenue. It quickly became apparent PO had a situation on his hands. He tried to get the physician to comply with timeliness expectations but struggled to gain traction.

I asked PO, "What would you say to somebody who, they're not familiar with management, they're not familiar with how these things work. And maybe they were to come to you and say, what's the problem here? You have a rule or a policy or a practice. You have this best practice of 48 hours to complete charts, and you're the one in charge. Just tell them to do it! And hold them accountable. What would you say to somebody who's just like, it doesn't seem complex. There's a rule, he's not following it. Go through accountability steps." PO replied, "Yeah, I heard that! This is the expectation or you're out. That's exactly how it came across from the other people, actually. It's like, cut the cord, that's why they pay you the big bucks."

But, as PO explained, things are rarely that simple. He expressed, "It would just always depend. If there were other stresses on the organization or on me, I've got another meeting coming up on this thing, I'm gonna need this physician on my side. How hard do I really push him because I know in three days, I've got this other meeting and it's related to something else that's important, so maybe I back off. If I didn't have a meeting coming up, I'm just like, I'll burn the bridge…so be it! And then we'll see where things go in a month. Maybe it'll blow over. So, it

would always depend. I try to explain people, you guys might look at me as I have all this power, but I don't. And in a non-profit organization you try to lead people you have no control over, and it's more influence than direct authority. Like, 'you work for me, get your charts in order or you're out.' It's just not that simple. And having to explain to some of our management, and even board members, the dynamics and undercurrent, that took some time."

When asked, "How do you know whether or not you can make an exception to the rules?," PO replied, "Maybe, is it a little implied that as a leader of a department or staff or organization that you do have some sway to change things if you don't feel like they're going to help the long-term goals of the organization. And if it's going to be a barrier to that, maybe we should change it. So, we have a little implied power maybe, or authority to at least explore changing it. And that just comes in the job description, maybe?"

Illustrative experience impressions. I find it interesting to see the challenging spot PO found himself in—not unlike the situations in which many of the participant managers found themselves. He had people challenging him to hold this physician accountable to the rules. It seems simple enough: there are clear rules, someone is not following them, so time for disciplinary action. But PO knows there are so many considerations that come into play when addressing adherence to rules. For instance, he may be looking at the bigger picture rather than at these specific rules. And, besides, it seems that at the heart of the matter lies this paradox: managers or leaders are afforded some level of implied authority and, at the same time, they really only have influence and no true authority. Managers and leaders cannot make people follow the rules, yet they are held accountable for people following the rules.

Who's asking? Not that it should matter, but it does. I want to treat everyone equally, but I must acknowledge that I don't. Our participant managers expressed a consistent tension:

wanting to treat everyone equally but recognizing that people are different and should be treated differently. They play favorites, but they don't want to be accused of favoritism. They want to make decisions objectively, but they recognize they're not purely objective—they're biased both positively and negatively. It's almost as if their knee-jerk response to the question of who's asking, is, "it doesn't matter." But this is shortly followed by an acknowledgment (or apology) by saying, "yeah, it actually does matter." They also shared a tension between wanting to be perceived as fair, yet not being sure exactly what fairness is, or how one can reconcile treating people differently with being fair. It leads me to question myself: Am I playing favorites or am I playing fair?

Illustrative experience. PL shared a fascinating experience of a direct report asking to relocate to another state and work remotely. PL had intimate knowledge with such a request because she herself asked for the exact same thing in the past. PL was denied her request and shared as much with the employee but assured the employee she'd advocate for her. Of course, PL was aware that, in advocating for her employee's request, she was, in effect, re-advocating for herself as well—a double-barreled request, if you will. Strength in numbers, right?!

PL had a very strong relationship with this employee. When asked, "Do you think that your relationship with her influenced how you addressed her request?" PL replied, "Absolutely! Yeah, I think I would be lying if it didn't. Because I know that in other situations, similar things have been requested, and I've always carried the message forward, but I may not have fought as hard for somebody if the quality of the relationship wasn't like it was with this one person in particular. So yeah, I think I would be lying if I said that it didn't impact. I was just really compelled to make sure that she had what she needed to be successful…When I think about other situations of similar nature where somebody has asked for something, I would say there are

things that I do very similarly across all that—that is my attempt to make the decision itself most objective. In another situation, if it was a different employee with maybe less quality of the relationship or closeness, I think I would have still escalated their request, I still would have continued to check in, but I don't think my need—my internal need or desire to solve the problem—I think it would feel different. I still think my actions leading towards the outcome—as long as they were a strong performer and I was looking to retain them—I think my actions would have stayed the same, but I think how I was feeling on the inside about that experience would have been very different."

Upon reflecting on how she processed this experience, PL eloquently describes this transition from objective to subjective analysis: "The things that come to my mind is—and I would say this is probably a result of my personality, which is, I'm a pretty data-driven, objective person—so that is where I would start... But I think that's just the nature, part of who I am as a person. And then what plays in after that is—based on that objective framework—would my response to that request be fair? Would it be perceived as fair and equitable across the team? And I think you and I spoke about this during the first conversation, but I do think—again, this is my nature—there's an interpersonal element to how close is this person to me? How much do I want this for them? And that is, to me, a result of how connected we are as humans."

Illustrative experience impressions. Like so many of the participant managers shared, PL is slightly apologizing for her tangling of the relationship with the request. She twice says, "I would be lying" if she said the relationship didn't impact the request. It's as if PL would prefer to say the relationship didn't matter but ultimately acknowledges that it did.

PL says that she acts the same, but feels differently, based on the relationship. This is about as spot on toward the tension as it gets. This also gives credence to why a qualitative

approach brings value. Sure, in a quantitative study, we could ask managers to assess their feelings, but using what instrument? Here, PL doesn't articulate how she feels different, just that she does. It's a different vibe more so than a specific emotional difference.

For PL, her external actions may seem—or even be—the same, but her internal feelings, needs or desires, are different based on the relationship with the requesting employee. And, perhaps most importantly, PL walks us through her movement from a more objective analysis of the request to a more subjective meaning of the connection she has with the requestor. She thus eloquently articulates her transition from the natural to the phenomenological attitude in her experience with this phenomenon.

When do I get to make decisions? Author Gretchen Rubin (n.d.) once said, "Rules cause constraints but they don't constrain. Rules are decisions made in advance." If rules are decisions made in advance, where does that leave room for adjusting to today's reality, e.g., this specific special request? It leads me to question myself: Am I managing previous decisions or am I allowed to manage in the moment?

Illustrative experience. People transition all the time. People join and leave organizations frequently. Even more frequently, people move within organizations, from team to team and thus from manager to manager. It's common practice for an employee to negotiate a special deal with one manager and then transition to a new manager. The question becomes whether the new manager will honor the existing deal. PH was one of those managers who inherited an employee with a special deal—one that has been in place for five years.

PH describes the challenge of trying to unwind this special arrangement (or the equally challenging approach of continuing to live with it), saying, "I have one person who's very, very independent. I've come around to the idea that there's enough value there, everyone's on board

with him being very independent. Personally, as a manager, I'd like to know his hours, his in-person schedule, and the expectations. And maybe assign some projects, because I don't think it's a 40-hour a week job. But that's been the long-standing arrangement that other people have accepted and allowed. I think that's a special arrangement cause it's a little bit outside the bounds of the job description and what most people do. And it's fairly problematic for the team, but not enough to the point that I've pushed change. I've asked a lot of questions about it, but I haven't gotten rid of that special arrangement."

She goes on to describe how this deal is affecting not only herself but her direct report—the employee's direct manager, saying, "I realize his direct manager doesn't really want to lose him, because he's got a skill set that we really can't replicate quickly. So, we're trying to be thoughtful and trying to meet him as far as we can. But I don't think we can meet this guy where he wants to be. It's caused other problems, and I think it's probably run its course. I think it maybe made sense when we made the original decision, but it may not make as much sense now. And then the risk there is that I don't think we can retain the employee if we change the arrangement. So, that's a factor that matters. I don't know what could tip the scales. Something might. It's imperfect but not imperfect enough at this point in time."

PH describes what the experience has been like for her personally: "I think that's part of this management life, and I think they're really hard to unwind—special arrangements that are in existence that aren't hurting anyone. I've tended to let them lie unless there's significant problems. It's tense. I feel unsettled. But I'm fine with my own discomfort. There are just certain things that, like the hill I want to die on kind of stuff. I'm definitely more comfortable with special arrangements that I've been party to; more than special arrangements that I've been gifted."

Illustrative experience impressions. There a several things this experience highlights that seem to resonate with not just PH, but with most of the managers who shared about inheriting a special deal "gift."

First, these special deals are dynamic. What made sense in the past may not anymore. Or it may make sense to keep the deal but change some of its characteristics to better suit current circumstances. The situation has changed, and perhaps so should the deal (the previous decision). PH, like many managers, is struggling with finding a balance in terms of honoring a past decision with making a new decision. Would a new decision (such as to stop the arrangement) be "better" than the previous decision? Says who?

Second, no deal (or any management decision) operates in a vacuum. They're not evaluated solely on their merits; there are usually various considerations at play. As a manager, you pick your battles. For instance, perhaps the previous manager who arranged the special deal is still with the organization and can weigh in on the matter, but perhaps the manager has moved on and is no longer available.

Third, specialized work arrangements often involve various second order effects. Besides their operational effects, these arrangements tend to involve a lot of emotionality, not just for the person with the arrangement, but for the manager, manager's manager, co-workers—all sorts of people. Like most management decisions, the real challenge is not just making a decision for this situation right now but recognizing that most decisions will have trickle down effects that are hard, if not impossible, to anticipate.

How does one find that balance: embracing the structure (constraints) desired by those who made the rules in the past while simultaneously not being held hostage by those same rules? If every decision made in the past is disregarded, then there would be no point in making rules at

all—for now or for in the future. We need to be able to predict—at least to a degree—what to expect when dealing with each other. And yet, we want the freedom to explore new ways of interacting that inevitably emerge.

Where do I fit in? Marketing guru Seth Godin (2017) has a saying: People like us (do things like this). When an employee requests special treatment, they are, in effect, saying they want to do something like *that* instead of like *this*. If we allow the employee to do *that*, then perhaps it reflects a deeper issue: perhaps this person isn't, in fact, one of *us*. People like *them* (do things like *that*). And if I, as the manager, approve of *that*, then does that mean that I, too, am one of *them* instead of one of *us*? It leads me to question myself: Am I one of us or am I one of them?

Illustrative experience. This experience also involves an inherited deal. PP describes the situation, "I have a new direct report, who has a bit of an attitude in that, he believes that he is right in every situation. He's very good. He works with one of our largest clients, he's worked with them for a long time, he knows everything about them. Like, important to retain, important to keep at our company. But the way that he speaks to people, intentionally or not, can be very off-putting to others. I'm now in the situation, having just inherited him from another manager—the other manager was like, 'do what you want, you're important, push the envelope, this and that,' on one side. On the other side, people that we work with in other areas of the organization, coming to me and telling me that they have people in their departments that are resigning because of the way he speaks to them."

PP expresses her displeasure with this situation, saying, "It feels like a headache because it's a little bit of like, old guard allowed this to happen, and in some ways, created a bit of a monster. We let this guy go forth and have all of the knowledge in the world and is really

hardworking and is very successful in what he's been doing, which is great. But at the same time, we let these behaviors that we don't necessarily want to foster as an organization or don't align with our organization's value, culture, everything that we aspire to be and aspire to do. It was a little bit of management that was okay with the strong performance before, and was willing to overlook the attitude, the communication, the behavior, and all of that. And so, in some ways, we created this monster. And now comes the new sheriff in town—which is me—and that new sheriff now has to clean all of that up and try to back away from that kind of behavior, while still getting the really great performance in the work and everything else that we want. It's tough. It's really puts me in a uniquely tough position because other people have let this—people who were colleagues of mine and they were the same level; this person actually reported to my boss for a while. So more senior folks were also condoning this level of behavior and not being able to address it or work with it. It's a headache. And it's a bit of a frustration to say, okay, now, on top of everything else that I also get to inherit with this, I get to try to clean this up as well, which is tough."

I asked PP, "Do you think that this situation has affected how you relate to this other manager or other people who this person reported to?" PP emphatically said, "Yes! You start to question where their focus is. Or where are they focused? How are they spending their time? Are our values aligned? Do we care about the same things? I think it's caused me to question the other folks that have been a part of this throughout that time."

I asked what that was like, to which she said, "Uncomfortable. Had some explicit conversations about it, where they were kind of brushed to the side, to be honest with you. A little bit of like: 'I think that him challenging other people is actually a really positive thing.' Sure…but making people cry, I'm not sure that's a positive thing. I think there's probably a

balance in there. There's a little bit of, I call it Teflon behavior, in that nothing sticks to them, and it rolls right off. They're like: 'Yeah, that's tough for you. You really have to figure that out!' I'm like, what?! A lot of accountability here; extreme ownership; Teflon on the other side…that happens sometimes in organizations."

Earlier in the interview, PP said, "I like to think of everyone on a level playing field" and "I aspire to treat everyone the same." I asked her if she thinks other people in the organization think differently based on how they seemed to look the other way, allowing this employee to develop a sense of entitlement, to which she responded, "Yes. I think based on this example, the answer has to be yes. Certain behaviors are okay (if you're a high performer; you're getting results) and certain behaviors are not okay (if you're not). And that means you're probably not treating everybody the same; you don't have everybody on the same level playing field."

Illustrative experience impressions. PP feels like she inherited a monster. The monster that was created or at least allowed to develop by her colleagues, including those in senior leadership roles, which includes her boss. She's having to clean up the mess that others made. PP shares deeply about some dissonance between herself and her peers. She feels disconnected from others in that they don't feel a sense of ownership over this situation. Not my problem! You need to fix this (mess that we created). Accountability over here; Teflon over there. Importantly, she repeatedly refers to her colleagues as "them" instead of "us" throughout her reflection. I believe this is very telling, as it highlights the dissonance between her experience and what she believes their experience to be. Ultimately, PP is at least partly questioning if this is where she belongs. If these are her people.

This situation highlights the way special requests and the resulting special work arrangements can greatly affect a manager—not just in how they approach their work but in how

they identify with their workplace. PP was "gifted" this new employee who came with a special work arrangement in place. Her management of this special arrangement has uncovered some fundamental differences between her values and the values of previously trusted colleagues all around her. She feels like she's having to clean up a mess she didn't create (a common management experience) but, more importantly, a mess that others seem to be happy to tolerate (a less common but even more challenging management experience). Ultimately, she might have to decide whether she wants to be the kind of person to clean up these types of messes or the kind of person who can learn to tolerate them like those around her seem to do.

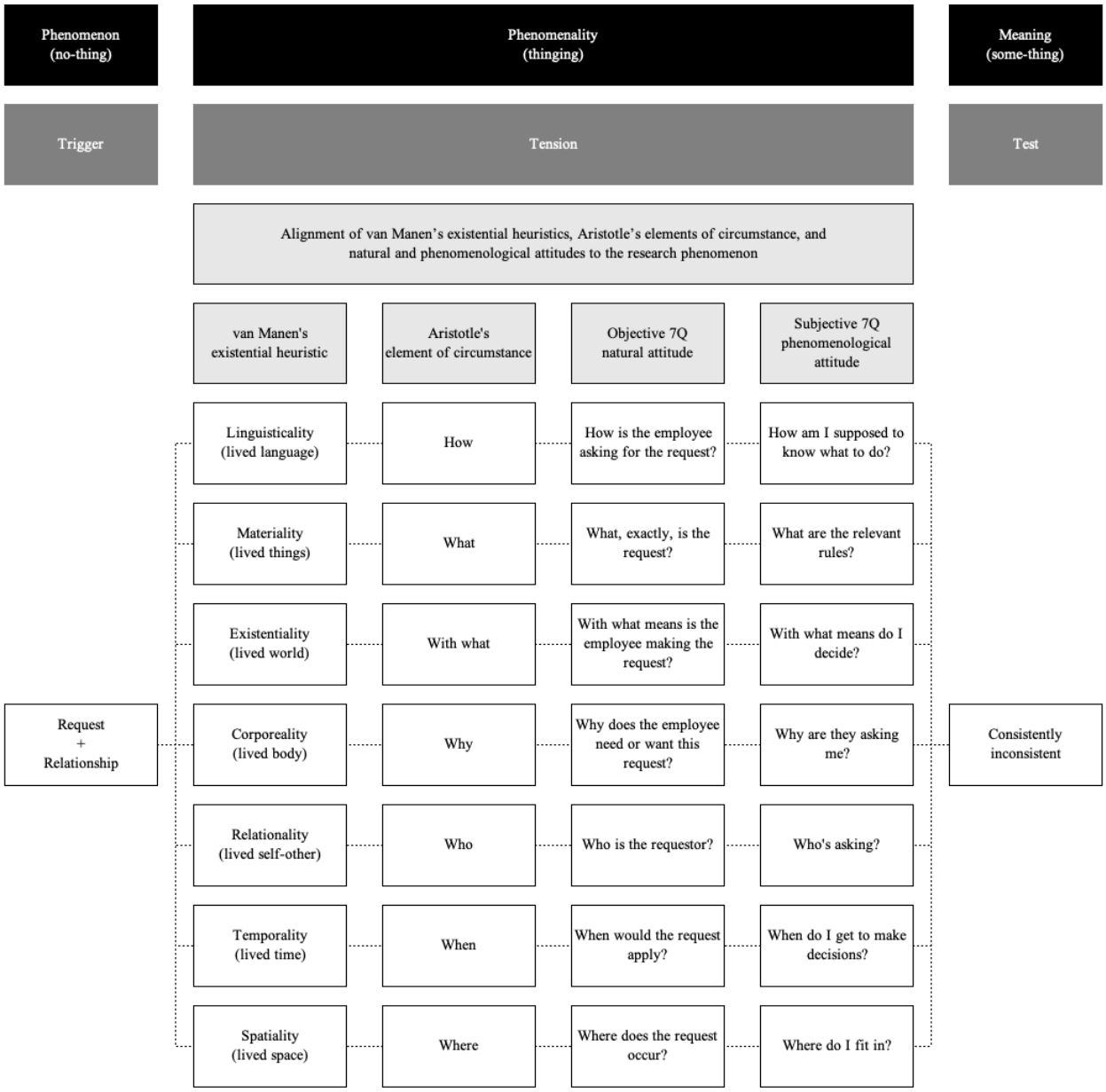
Conclusion

Figure 5 provides a visual alignment between van Manen's existential heuristics, Aristotle's elements of circumstance, and natural and phenomenological attitudes to the research phenomenon. Through explicating both an external, objective perspective (the natural attitude) and an internal, subjective perspective (the phenomenological attitude), we can explore the meaning of the phenomenon for our participant managers through a prism of lived experience dynamics.

Figure 5

Alignment of van Manen's existential heuristics, Aristotle's elements of circumstance, and natural and phenomenological attitudes to the research phenomenon[6]

[6] This order of van Manen's existential heuristics, Aristotle's elements of circumstance, the Objective 7Q, and the Subjective 7Q frameworks will become clearer in the discussion section.



Based on the lived experiences shared by our participant managers, while there are certainly individual nuances when it comes to how they experience this phenomenon, a set of shared experiences seems to have emerged. These shared experiences represent what Husserl (1900/2001) recognized as "essential structures" of consciousness—universal patterns of meaning that emerge across different individuals confronting similar existential situations—or what van Manen (2023) recognized as existential heuristics—universal themes of human life. I

hope that through sharing these illustrative experiences, I've somehow touched upon their shared collective experience. In doing so, I hope to offer practical insight for other managers who experience these requests for differentiated treatment within differentiated workplace relationships. As van Manen (2016) said, "we gather other people's experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves" (p. 62).

The Trigger: The Request

Our phenomenon is triggered by someone challenging the rules—asking for approval to bend or break the rules. The manager to whom this challenge is directed is faced with what to make of the rules—what they are (presently), how they came to be (their past), and what they should be (in the future). If indeed rules are decisions made in advance, how does that leave room for judgment in the present and planning for the future? An overly strict approach prioritizes the past over the present and the future. And in doing so, priorities the people who made the rules—whether they're still around or not. An overly flexible approach prioritizes the present and future over the past, which focuses on the present decision makers. Neither approach is inherently better than the other.

But you have to choose; you can't have it both ways. Perhaps in the abstract (like when you're making the rules), but not in the concrete (like when you have to apply the rules). When an employee pushes against the rules, the manager (or whoever makes the decision) has to choose. They have to decide. They can say they defer to the decision made in the past and those who made it then. Or they can say they're open to defying those rules or even changing the rules and placing their trust in who's around now. There are decisions which seem easy to make (easy no's and easy yes's); it seems that most people would agree for these. But there are many

decisions that are harder to determine. Not just because the decision is more complex, but because there are no clear answers.

If there's a word that might sum up the managers' experience with this challenge of an employee's request to bend or break the rules, it would be visceral. Here's how several of them described it:

- As soon as I heard from this team member, I sensed the ask for special accommodation was coming given prior experience. The room seemed to still a bit—and I very much felt myself bracing for what the ask would be. I felt uneasy in my stomach, and my mind began to anticipate how others who are adhering to the parameters may feel upon finding out should I move forward with the exception. I also felt irritation that there was no gratitude for the investment by the company, but rather, a focus on the challenges with commuting to this location. Ultimately, I approved this request and did not feel great about doing so. I made that decision based on the big picture of this person's work. (PA)
- She walked into my office for our weekly meeting and asked if she could shut the door. Noise carries down my hallway and sensitive information can easily make its way to unintended ears, and so her request had implications. My mind began to race as I considered the possibilities of what may come next. Has something happened to her family? Is there a dispute with a coworker? Is she changing jobs? Have I done something wrong? The tension in the room was palpable…I was worried at the thought of losing her or additional stressors in her life that she might want to discuss…She sat down across from me in a club chair. For the first time in a while, I was aware of the chair's size in comparison to the desk in front of me. On its own the chair would look fine in a living room but across from my desk its diminutive nature became more exaggerated. Perhaps it

was the closed-door nature of the conversation but seeing her small stature in a small chair across from me increased my sympathy for what would come next…I felt tension in my forehead as a literal and figurative headache might be in my future. (PB)

- I stand up, stretch, take a deep breath to mentally prepare myself for the work ahead, when the unmistakable chime of a Teams call starts coming in. My heart immediately starts racing and I groan looking at the caller ID. It's one of my direct reports calling me. He is one of the lowest performers on my team. He struggles to conduct the duties of his job without the constant oversight that I simply don't have time for. I don't immediately answer the call. I send him a quick Teams chat letting him know that my meeting just ended and I need a bio break, but can ring him back in a few minutes if it's urgent. He responds about 5 minutes later, it's urgent, he needs to talk to me. I sigh then walk to the kitchen to get a Topo Chico. Whatever he urgently needs to discuss with me will feel better if I'm hydrated. Because we work directly with clients, I'm filled with anxiety expecting the worst. Could it be an operational issue that will immediately throw my evening into a tailspin? Do we have a provider complaint? Are we missing a crucial deadline. I decide to get it over with, take a deep breath and call him back. (PP)

Special treatment requests represent moments where normal organizational categories become insufficient. They force managers to operate in what participants called "grey areas" where policies provide incomplete guidance and relationship quality—among other factors—becomes a significant factor in decision-making.

The Tension: The Space

Between receiving a request and responding lies a space of genuine choice where managers must navigate competing frameworks: organizational consistency versus individual

needs, formal policies versus cultural norms, rule-based fairness versus relational responsiveness. We'll explore this space of tension in detail in the discussion section. At this point, it's worth pointing out that perhaps the greatest tension managers face is finding a balance between their management duty and their human duty, especially when those two do not seemingly overlap. On the one hand, managers recognize the tension that comes from the sometimes-dueling responsibilities of being a person and being a manager:

- I think there's nothing wrong with employees asking for special treatment. I feel like that's baked into my job and I have no feelings about that one way or the other. I think what makes that hard is just there's humanity behind it, trying to balance meeting the people where they are and the business side of it, too. It depends on the ask. If you have someone in front of you that's like, I really need to leave at 2 o'clock because my kid gets out of school, I will have to quit this job if I can't do it, and if you can't meet that need, that feels awful. But there's some things that we just can't make happen. I get that as a person in the same phase of life—I value my flexibility—but if I can't offer that to someone else, that doesn't feel great. But, in my role, me as a person and me as a manager, sometimes there's space between those, right? (PH)

On the other hand, others question the separation between the person and the position:

- Ultimately, I think it's kind of how the world is wired and built. It is about networking. It's about a person that not only performs, but how they interact with others. And I don't necessarily feel bad about rewarding someone who performs well and works well with others. There's always the comic picture of somebody that just brown noses—a sycophant—and does whatever the boss says, and oh wow, they got special treatment. I feel like I can sense those people and know what their game is. But I don't have much of

an apology for a performer who works well with others, including that means me. There's somewhat of a symbiotic relationship where I think they're beneficial to me, they're beneficial to the organization. I don't have a problem of giving them different treatment…I think there's something to be said for, not that you need to make me happy and make me laugh and we go golf together, but you work for me, and I have a certain expectation of how we're going to interact, and if you're openly doing it poorly, and I've asked you to work on A, B, and C, and you choose not to, then I will not be inclined, when my requests aren't being heard or followed, to do something for you. (PB)

- I think it comes to what you were saying, it's relationships. When I think about people who rave about the best managers they've ever had, time and time again, it's always about a manager who just seems to give a damn. Maybe they weren't experts at knowing what sport your kid was playing, but they knew at least your kid's names, and they knew well enough to ask about them and to care about what's going on in your life to know. Just to go out of their way to recognize you're living a life as well. You've got a life outside of this place and all that. I think there's something there about cultivating relationships. I think that's why, corny as it is, team building, all that kind of stuff, really does help make a difference…That stuff matters. It certainly matters when you're talking about who am I going to give a second chance to, or a third, or fourth, or fifth chance to; if you have that connection, it really makes a difference. So there's something there about relationships that you're hitting on. But relationships are hard and it takes both people to be willing. (PF)
- That's what strikes me is, these decisions that leaders have to make—some of them are very objective, some of them are very subjective—independent of those two things, we

still are part of it in terms of, there is still a human making this decision based on the information that's available to them. And it's almost impossible to separate the decision from the leader. (PL)

The Test: The Response

This phenomenon highlights the evolution managers often make from rule-following to judgment-based decision-making. It seems a possible meaning of this shared experience is a journey. A journey that starts with an employee's questioning of the rules and ends with their own questioning. A questioning of their own relationship with the rules. A questioning of the people around them. And, ultimately, a questioning of themselves. Several managers describe their changing experience with this phenomenon based on their experience and maturity:

- Part of my growing up as a leader and maybe hopefully getting better as I aged and had years under my belt, I was probably previously a little more, no, we're not doing that. I feel like one of the things I learned in some of my other roles was not everybody has to manage this way, or maybe not everybody has to do this exact thing, and let's look more at the outcome and let's be open to flexibility for how to get to it. By the time I was in this situation, I had had other scenarios where I was a little more in a box in how I would handle it. So on the positive side, I was a little bit more open to figuring out what was up underneath this different request. (PC)
- That's why I think having experience and promoting an experienced manager—so they've worked some, they've seen things, you maybe have worked as a supervisor so you have that real-world experience to where you can help with that scale... I do kind of feel...it's just like instinct to me. Sometimes you just have a gut feeling for things and how you feel. (PM)

- I became more confident making those decisions the older I got, and the more experience I got. Young managers often will be very black and white, because they don't have the experience yet and they know that they don’t have it yet. They don't have the self-confidence yet to be a leader, and say, my judgment tells me it's okay to go outside the policy this time. Younger managers have, I think, a more difficult time with that because they've got less experience and less confidence. (PN)

Finally, several managers reflected in their second interviews of how learning more about how others have experienced similar situations has helped them better understand not only how they themselves have experienced this phenomenon in the past but how it may inform and influence how they approach it in the future. As one of the younger managers shared:

- It's been really interesting to dive into this phenomenon and really contemplate it, because there's been a lot of like, oh, that's interesting, a lot of dialogue and thought that's really piqued my interest. I think my main takeaway is that…it's very abstract and either decision is not necessarily right or wrong; you're just making a choice. I think knowing that is going to be very helpful for me in leadership moving forward. Also, I think I feel a little more comfortable maybe not being as fair all the time. Talking about it and contemplating what is fair, or why we feel like we have to be that way, or why can't we make exceptions. Just like challenging that kind of norm and recognizing that it’s human nature to maybe like someone more. Or if there's someone that is a phenomenal worker and you trust them, it's okay to maybe trust someone over the other person. You don't have to give the same treatment to every single person, but while maintaining those minimum standards of this is the policy. But these unique requests, I think it makes me feel a little more comfortable being able to sit there and question my first, like, gut

> reaction of feeling, okay, well, I have to be fair. Do I? Why? Or making me really contemplate the choice a little bit more and maybe makes me feel a little more confident. But not only that, it's really interesting to think that, out of everyone that you've spoken to, they all feel that way. They all feel that's their role or they feel like they have to stick within that box. So it's comforting a little bit to know that it's not just me having to think about that at work and that it's something that we all experience. (PI)

This recognition represents a profound existential insight: the movement from seeking external validation for one's choices toward accepting responsibility for decisions made in the face of moral ambiguity. It's the difference between trying to be right and trying to be honest about the impossibility of being definitively right. If we think of the manager's role as a test, it's the difference between knowing the right answer (i.e., following the rules) and knowing what the test is for (i.e., the practical implications of learning how to make decisions). It exemplifies what van Manen (2016) describes as the transformative potential of phenomenological reflection: the way in which attending carefully to lived experience can generate new possibilities for "thoughtful action: action full of thought and thought full of action" (p. 128).

Discussion

Introduction

I started this investigation with what I saw as a gap in the literature at the convergence of idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX): what is it like for managers when they are asked to treat different people differently? On the one hand, researchers argue managers should treat different people differently (e.g., via i-deals); this reflects good management practice of fair flexibility. On the other hand, the same researchers argue managers should treat different people similarly (e.g., forming high-value LMX relationships with all employees); differentiated manager-employee relationships reflect poor management practice of unfair favoritism. For this research project, I'm not interested in whether managers *should* treat different people differently. Nor am I interested in whether managers *do* treat them differently. What I am interested in is *how* managers experience employees' requests for differential treatment, which takes place in the context of differentiated manager-employee relationships.

To date, most i-deal and LMX literature has focused on measuring how managers manage these requests for special treatment through quantitative measures. What's been missing is more qualitative-oriented approaches to understanding this managerial phenomenon. And, as far as I've been able to ascertain, there has been no phenomenological study specifically exploring this commonly-experienced yet not-well-understood area of managerial practice. So, I asked sixteen managers with diverse experiences to delve into what it is like for them when they handle employees' requests for special treatment. In other words, when different people ask to be treated differently, how do managers experience such requests—not necessarily what do they do with them? In effect, I focused not so much on how managers manage these requests, but how they manage themselves when faced with them.

As expected, managers often assessed the requests against some sort of analytical decision-making framework, as highlighted in the Objective 7Q. Also as expected, when the Objective 7Q proved insufficient for some of the knottier requests, managers took on a more internal, reflective perspective, as highlighted in the Subjective 7Q. Having personally experienced my share of these types of requests, this was not surprising to me. What I did find surprising was—after mulling over the shared experiences of these managers obtained through various touchpoints—how common various existential challenges were to the managers.

I repeatedly found myself asking the managers some variation of this question: how did you know what to do? To which the managers almost always responded with some variation of this response: I don't know. It's a good thing I wasn't looking for answers, because the managers didn't seem to have many! Not in terms of how they *did* handle these requests, to be sure, but also not in terms of how one *should* handle these types of requests. Instead of answers, what my co-participant managers and I uncovered is, I believe, much more valuable. The lived experiences of the managers reveal a complex dynamic that defies description. But wait…I cannot simply state that I'm unable to adequately describe the managers' experiences with this phenomenon. While I think that's true (as I'll explain in this discussion section), I think I can allude to, or point to, their experience using something other than direct language.[7] Therefore, in this discussion section, instead of turning toward the managers' specific phrasing of their lived

[7] Besides, it would be quite the discussion section if I were to simply state that this phenomenon—like virtually all phenomena—defies description! While it might certainly give hope to future Ph.D. candidates that their conclusion is already pre-determined and, thus, they might save themselves countless hours and energy in stumbling upon such conclusion on their own, it doesn't do much to demonstrate how I myself arrived as this conclusion. It doesn't demonstrate the phenomenological method in action. And so, I proceed to lay out how I got to where I got to.

experiences as we did in the findings section, let us turn toward a more immediate, a more visceral perspective.

Let us turn to Lewis Carroll's classic tales of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (henceforth referred to as *Wonderland*) and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (henceforth referred to as *Looking-Glass*). Phenomenologists often turn to the arts and literature when seeking to give meaning to phenomena:

> [O]ften an appeal to poetry and literature is almost unavoidable in that poetic language with its use of symbolism is able to refer beyond the realm of what can be said "clearly and distinctly." In other words, [many people] feel that in human reality there are certain phenomena which reach so deeply into a man's life and the world in which he lives that poetic language is the only adequate way through with *to point* [emphasis original] to and so to make present a meaning which we are unable to express clearly in any other way...[While] poems and novels do not "prove" anything, [they] can be enormously helpful in bringing certain phenomena closer to us and thus in making us "understand" them, helping us to understand ourselves and the world in which we live. (Kockelmans, 1987, p.ix)

Both of Alice's dream adventures take part within a motif of rule-governed activities: cards in *Wonderland* and chess in *Looking-Glass*. Seeing Alice struggle to make sense of her circumstances—balancing her understanding of the rules with her intuition—may help to bring our phenomenon closer to us so that we may understand it better. Through the use of Alice as a trope, instead of trying to describe our participant managers' experience with this phenomenon "clearly and distinctly," I only hope "to point" to the experience, which likely defies any

definitive meaning which can be found via language, so that we can better "understand" it, and in turn, help us better "understand ourselves and the world in which we live."

Figure 6

Alice[8]

[8] Cover illustration from *Alice in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass* by L. Carroll, 2005. Copyright 2005 by Anne Bachelier. Reprinted with permission of the artist. Anne Bachelier's copyright approval e-mail is included as Appendix G.



The Space Between

Before we turn to specific aspects of the phenomenon, let us first acknowledge the space in which these experiences unfold. Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl purportedly said: "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom" (Covey, 1989, pp. 69-70).[9] Applied to our research phenomenon, this space represents the manager's reflective pause (the space) between the employee's request (stimulus) and the manager's decision and its enactment (the response). Our phenomenological investigation reveals that this space is far from empty—it is populated by what van Manen (2023) calls the "lived existentials" of human experience (see Figure 5): linguisticality (lived language), materiality (lived things), existentiality (lived world), corporeality (lived body), relationality (lived self-other), temporality (lived time), and spatiality (lived space).

Special Requests and the Space Between

This space, often hidden in the rush of daily organizational life, becomes suddenly visible when an employee makes a request that falls outside normal protocols. In that moment, managers described feeling suspended between competing demands—the pull of organizational rules, the weight of relationships, the uncertainty of precedent, and the anxiety of potential consequences. This space is simultaneously a burden and an opportunity—a burden because it demands decision-making without clear guidelines, and an opportunity because it allows for authentic response to human need.

[9] Apparently, while this quote is almost universally attributed to Frankl, there's no specific evidence of this quote in any of his writings. Most people attach the quote to Frankl based on Stephen Covey's attribution of it to him.

Turning to the Request

It seems that most requests are pretty straightforward; the decision seems to be rather black and white. After all, in most organizations, most of the rules are for most of the people most of the time. Therefore, in most situations, the special request is responded to with an easy yes or an easy no.[10] But sometimes, special requests are not so easy to manage; the decision seems to be rather grey. This often calls for the creation of specific rules for specific people for specific times.

Wittgenstein's Certainty Gradient: The Normal-Abnormal Distinction

To understand how managers experience these types of employee requests, let's first examine the nature of the "normal" against which such requests appear as exceptions. Wittgenstein (1953/2009) offers insight into the phenomenon of special requests through his analysis of what constitutes "normal" versus "abnormal" circumstances within language games (§§142-148). For normal cases, "we know, are in no doubt, what we have to say in this or that case," i.e., the situation is rather black or white. But "the more abnormal the case, the more doubtful it becomes what we are to say," i.e., the more grey the situation appears. "And if things were quite different from what they actually are," Wittgenstein concludes, "if rule became exception, and exception rule; or if both became phenomena of roughly equal frequency --- our normal language-games [and the rules upon which those language-games are based] would thereby lose their point" (§142). This distinction, while appearing merely technical, actually points toward a fundamental phenomenological insight: that human understanding operates

[10] As noted in the findings section, managers often started with turning to the request, adopting an objective, natural attitude toward the phenomenon. This was represented in the Objective 7Q section.

through a complex interplay between the familiar and the strange, the typical and the exceptional.

Alice's Normal-Abnormal Distinction

In *Looking-Glass*, Alice is engaged in a curious dialogue with the famous Humpty Dumpty. At one point, she tries to offer Humpty Dumpty a compliment on his belt. But she immediately regrets her remark because she can't tell if it is in fact a belt or a cravat: a neckband that served as the forerunner to the modern necktie. "If only I knew," she thought to herself, "which was neck and which was waist!" (Carroll et al, 2000, p. 211).

You see, to know whether belt or cravat, Alice needs to know the difference between neck and waist. But to know *that* difference, she must know the difference between neck and waist not generally, but specifically, of a "humanoid ovoid" and—indeed, as astutely pointed out by Peter Heath (1974) in his companion text to Alice's Adventures, *The Philosopher's Alice*—"the only one of his class" (p. 188).

Figure 7

Humpty Dumpty[11]

[11] From *Alice in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* by L. Carroll, 2005, p. 57. Copyright 2005 by Anne Bachelier. Reprinted with permission of the artist.



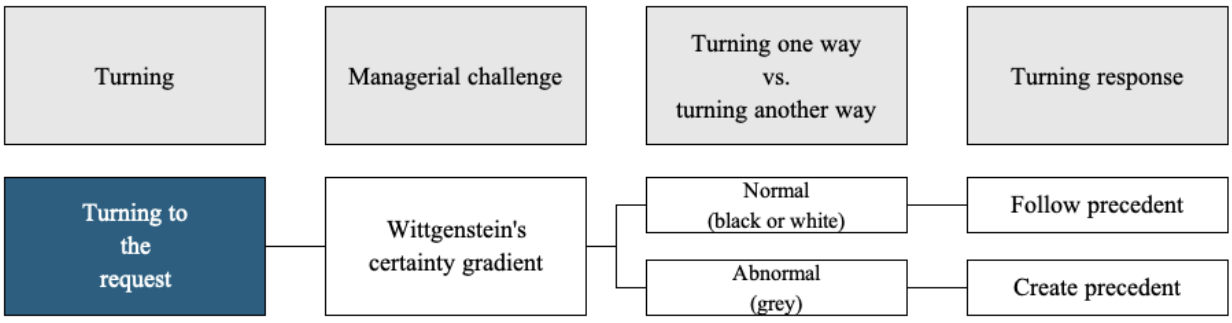
Alice is faced with a quandary: the thing tied around Humpty Dumpty's…neck…waist… might be a normal belt or a normal cravat. But in this instance, it's certainly at least a little abnormal. If it's a belt tied around his waist, it's normal, but if it's a belt tied around his neck, it's abnormal. Similarly, if it's actually a cravat tied around his neck, then it would be normal, but the same cravat tied around his waist, that would be abnormal. The point is that Alice can't decide if the belt-cravat is normal or abnormal because it depends on the surrounding circumstances.

Alice's quandary seems remarkably similar to that of our participant managers, where she is challenged with "knowing" what is arguably unknowable (how, indeed, would she know the difference between Humpty Dumpty's neck and waist as he's a one of one—a truly idiosyncratic case? She could possibly consult a humanoid ovoid expert—that would be quite the specialized area of expertise, indeed!). Failing that, there really is no way for her to "know." Ultimately, she's bailed out by Humpty Dumpty who tells her what it is.[12] But how does Humpty Dumpty know what it is?

Special Requests and the Normal-Abnormal Distinction

Figure 8

Turning to the Request



[12] Of course, I'm not going to tell you—you can find out for yourself and decide if you think Humpty Dumpty is correct in his interpretation!

Rules define and describe what's considered "normal" behavior within an organizational culture. Special requests seek, by their inherent deviation from the rules, approval for "abnormal" behavior. The question really becomes: how abnormal is the requested behavior—how abnormal is abnormal? How special is this special request? An employee asking to leave five minutes earlier than normal is likely to be perceived by a manager as making an abnormal request, but barely so; it's an abnormal request…with a lowercase a. That same employee asking to leave five hours earlier than normal would likely be perceived as making an abnormal request...with a capital A. In the former instance, the employee leaving five minutes early likely wouldn't cause a stir throughout the organization, but in the latter instance, the employee leaving five hours early might make people question what work hours really mean.[13]

The challenges managers face is that the line between "barely abnormal" and "very abnormal" is not written down anywhere and often can't be articulated even by the people making these distinctions. It exists in that twilight zone of institutional knowledge that everyone is supposed to understand but no one is allowed to admit they're making up as they go along. Recall Sapir's (1927/1949) reflection on body language, which seems to operate "in accordance with an elaborate and secret code that is written nowhere, known by none, and understood by all" (p. 556). Like reading body language, it seems managers are supposed to intuitively understand where the line between normal and abnormal lies when it comes to special requests.

The point here is that turning to the request doesn't seem to offer adequate guidance to the manager, as any special request by nature is abnormal vis-à-vis the normal rules, but it

[13] For this example, let's assume the employee is not making a request tied to utilizing paid-time-off (PTO), as that would simply be incorporating the PTO rules to account for the early five-hour departure. What we're referring to here are employees wanting to reduce their working hours under the existing rules constituting the expected work schedule.

doesn’t clarify how abnormal it is (when does the example request above go from barely abnormal to very abnormal: at 30 minutes; at an hour; at three hours?). This is a judgment call which operates within the space between the request and the response.

Turning to the Rules

When faced with an employee's request for special treatment, managers often turn to the rules for guidance. By rules I'm referring to both official rules such as policies and procedures (i.e., what we say we do), as well as unofficial rules such as norms and practices (i.e., what we actually do).

Wittgenstein's Rule Following Paradox

The principal challenge with trying to find meaning within the rules is that rules by themselves do not provide any meaning (similar to how the requests themselves do not provide meaning). As Wittgenstein (1953/2009) so deftly outlined in *Philosophical Investigations*, rules don't contain internal truth. Instead, the meaning of rules emerges through their application within particular contexts and communities. This creates what has become known as the "rule-following paradox": if rules could determine their own application, then there would be no need for interpretation or judgment. Yet if rules require interpretation, then the interpretation itself requires rules for its application, leading to an infinite regress.

Wittgenstein famously argues that for rules, "any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning" (§198). He sums up the rule following paradox:

> This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule…[and] if every course of action

can be brought into accord with the rule, then it can also be brought into conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here. (§201)

In short, every rule needs someone to interpret it, but the act of interpretation can't itself be governed by rules without creating an endless chain of "rules for interpreting rules for interpreting rules." At some point, human judgment has to enter the picture. This paradox has generated two primary philosophical responses, each with profound implications for how managers might approach special requests.

Essentialism versus Existentialism

The essentialist approach argues that rules do indeed contain objective meaning that can be discovered through careful analysis. Essentialist managers seek clarity through comprehensive policy analysis, consultation with higher authorities, and appeal to established precedents. They assume that there are right answers to be discovered and that their job is to become skilled enough to find them. The slippery slope of the essentialist approach often results in the application of rules where common sense would otherwise intervene. In other words, a pure essentialist manager would apply rules in absurd contexts where the rules—to a reasonable manager—would not apply. With a purely essentialist approach—if we allow managers to stringently apply rules no matter the context—we are essentially sidestepping the space between stimulus and response, leaving us as automatons simply applying pre-determined responses to categorically “appropriate” stimuli.

In contrast with the essentialist approach, the existentialist approach embraces the radical freedom that emerges from the recognition that rules cannot determine their own application. If meaning cannot be discovered in rules themselves, then managers must create meaning through their choices and take full responsibility for the consequences. Existentialist managers

acknowledge that their decisions cannot be fully justified through appeals to external authorities. Instead, they focus on developing authentic responses that align with their deepest values and commitments, even when—especially when—those values conflict with institutional expectations. However, the slippery slope of the existentialist approach often results in the disregard of rules that seem to apply intuitively to the situation at hand. As Wittgenstein (1953/2009) notes: "I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem correct to me is correct. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'correct'" (§258). With a purely existentialist approach—if we allow managers to make up their own rules— we create chaos in the space between stimulus and response, leaving us to wonder why we have rules at all.

In summary, essentialism often leads to absurd rule application, while existentialism often leads to nonsensical rule interpretation. This tension points toward one of the central problems in moral philosophy: the relationship between universal principles (e.g., Kant's (1785/1998) categorical imperative) and particular judgment (e.g., Aristotle's (350 BCE/1999) phronesis or practical wisdom).

Alice and the Rule Following Paradox

Alice's adventures in Wonderland ends with her as a surprising last-minute witness in a tart trial.[14] As Alice is beginning to wake from her dream, she's returning to her normal height, which means she's growing at a rather astounding rate relative to everyone else in the courtroom. As she heads to the witness stand, she inadvertently tips over the jury box, spilling the jury-creatures onto the crowd. The King, who is serving as judge over the trial, is quite dismayed at this, and tries to expel Alice from the courtroom. He reads from his notebook: "Rule Forty-two.

[14] What is a tart trial? Well, it's obviously a trial to determine who stole the tarts!

All persons more than a mile high to leave the court." Alice challenges his assessment of her height, but more importantly, calls him out on this "rule." "I sha'n't go, at any rate," she says, "besides, that's not a regular rule: you invented it just now." "It's the oldest rule in the book," said the King. "Then it ought to be Number One," said Alice. Unsurprisingly, the King has no rebuttal for her claim on this matter and chooses to change the subject (Carroll et al, 2000, p. 120).

Figure 9

Alice's Evidence[15]

[15] From *Alice in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* by L. Carroll, 2005, p. 97. Copyright 2005 by Anne Bachelier. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

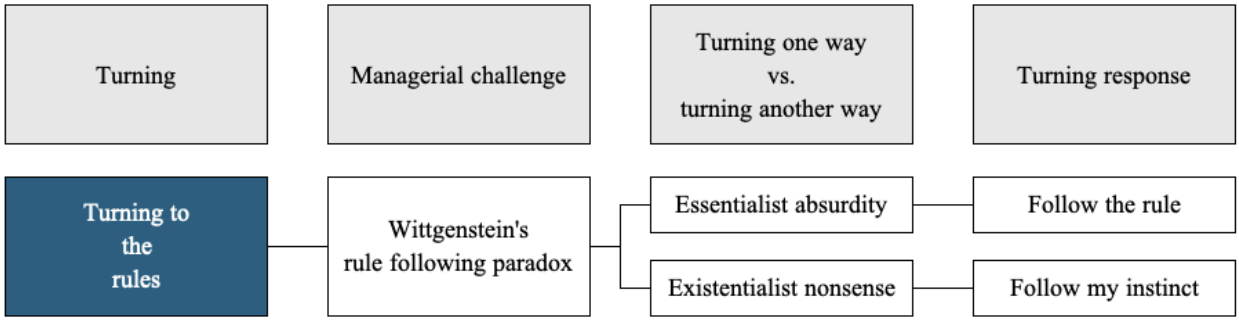


Here we see both the essentialist and existentialist approaches and the tension between them. The King adopts an absurd essentialist mindset, insisting that Alice leave the court as she's too tall to remain in it according to Rule 42. In essence, the King's argument is that he has the power to create rules, he has created a rule, so the rule must be adhered to—even though Alice is decidedly not "more than a mile high." But what were to happen if a defendant in a trail were "more than a mile high"? Would there be no trial for such a person? And, indeed, it makes one wonder what triggered the creation of such a rule in the first place—Alice is definitively not a mile high, but perhaps the King fears she will eventually get to that height! Alice, in turn, adopts a nonsensical existential mindset, insisting on staying in court as Rule 42 doesn't apply to her. In essence, Alice's argument is that she is the arbiter of which rules do and don't apply to her. But even if it's not a regular rule, but rather one the King just invented, why should it not apply to her? When do rules have to be broken in, as it were, for them to be enforceable? The King and Alice are at an impasse, in large part due to their differing philosophical perspectives of the nature of truth and how that applies to rules—specifically Rule 42 in this case.

Special Requests and the Rule Following Paradox

Figure 10

Turning to the Rules



The appeal of essentialism to managers is rather obvious: it promises that someone, somewhere, has thought through these problems and created guidelines that will tell you what to

do. In fact, something my co-participant managers and I often discussed is the concept that perhaps special requests are already "baked-in" to the rules—that unless a request was really abnormal (again, who's to say when something would be considered really abnormal—abnormal with a capital A)—something *like* it has already been considered and the current rules or "form of life" already account for it. Therefore, this specific request (like most special requests) should be denied as the current rules reflect our current cultural preferences. The frustration comes when you discover that no amount of policy manual reading can resolve the fundamental ambiguities of human situations.

The appeal of existentialism is also rather obvious: it emboldens managers to interpret rules according to their own proclivities. Participants repeatedly described encounters with rules that seemed clear in the abstract but became ambiguous when applied to specific situations. The rule itself—whether written policy or informal guideline—could not resolve the question of how it should be applied. And so, it fell upon the manager to fill in the gap between rule and guidance. The frustration many managers faced was not knowing exactly how to fill that gap or being worried that their approach would be criticized by others.

The genius of Wittgenstein's analysis lies in showing how both essentialist and existentialist responses to the rule-following paradox fail to capture how meaning actually emerges in lived practice. Neither the search for inherent meaning nor the assertion of radical freedom adequately describes how managers actually navigate special requests. Instead, as philosopher Saul Kripke (1982) argues in his influential interpretation of Wittgenstein, meaning emerges through ongoing community practices rather than through either abstract rules or individual interpretation (pp. 89-113). Managers develop their responses to special requests not

by discovering hidden truths or exercising pure freedom, but by participating in the evolving practices of their organizational communities.

Turning to the Rulers

So, it seems turning to the rules may not shed light on how to handle the space between the request and response. An alternative approach managers seem to take is to turn to the rulers: those who make the rules.

Wittgenstein's Ruler Problem

Beyond the challenge of rule interpretation lies an even more fundamental question: how do we evaluate the reliability of those who make and enforce the rules? This question becomes particularly acute in organizational contexts where managers must simultaneously embody institutional authority while maintaining their credibility with employees who may question that authority. Nassim Taleb's (2001) formulation of "Wittgenstein's ruler" provides a powerful framework for understanding this dynamic:

> Unless the source of a statement has extremely high qualifications, the statement will be more revealing of the author than the information intended by him. This applies to matters of judgment. According to Wittgenstein's ruler: Unless you have confidence in the ruler's reliability, if you use a ruler to measure a table you may also be using the table to measure the ruler. The less you trust the ruler's reliability, the more information you are getting about the ruler and the less about the table. (p. 40)

Alice and the Ruler Problem

In Wonderland, Alice finds herself standing in front of an approximately three-inch tall mushroom—which was coincidentally the same height as herself and the curious caterpillar perched upon the top of the mushroom. Alice and the caterpillar engage in quite the existential

dialogue about being and ontology. Eventually, she explains that she would rather not remain three inches tall. To which the caterpillar—after sliding off the mushroom and staring to crawl away—remarks: "One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter." Confused, Alice thinks to herself: "One side of *what*? The other side of *what*?" "Of the mushroom," the caterpillar clarifies, apparently able to read her mind.[16]

What would *you* do if you were Alice, standing in front of a perfectly round mushroom and having to decide which side is which? Alice is as confused as you might be, but eventually decides to just reach as far round the mushroom as she possibly can and breaks off a piece from each "side." "And now which is which?" (Carroll et al, 2000, p. 53) she deliberates, as I'm sure you might have done if faced with her dilemma. She nibbles a bit of the piece in her right hand and...[17]

Figure 11

Caterpillar and Alice[18]

[16] Mind reading appears repeatedly in both Alice adventures; later on, we'll see how important this concept is to our research phenomenon.

[17] Again, I could easily tell you what happened, but it will be so much better for you to find out for yourself!

[18] From *Alice in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* by L. Carroll, 2005, p. 39. Copyright 2005 by Anne Bachelier. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

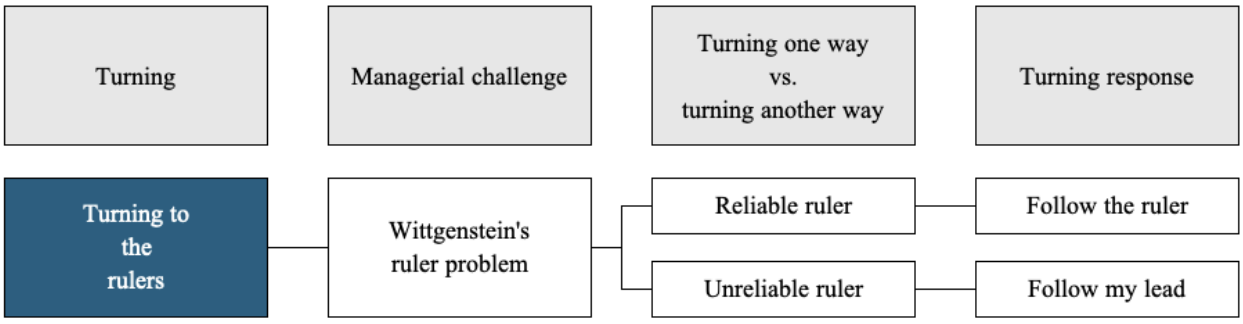


And so, we have Alice needing to make a decision, but unsure of whether the ruler can be relied upon. That is, the ruler (the mushroom) doesn't seem to provide clarity as to the rule (which "side" will make her grow taller versus which "side" will make her grow shorter). In the end, Alice just guesses. Which is probably the only reasonable choice she could make given the circumstances. It seems the best we can ask of anyone is that they reach as far as they can to each "side". Of course, some can reach farther than others. But, since we can't tell what part of the mushroom is what, reaching further than another doesn't help one better access different "sides." Indeed, if you were standing at a different place relative to Alice, does that change which "side" is which?[19]

Special Requests and the Ruler Problem

Figure 12

Turning to the Rulers



When employees request special treatment, the ruler problem becomes acute because managers must simultaneously embody organizational authority while maintaining their credibility as fair and reliable decision-makers. If managers approve too few, they risk being seen

[19] Alice scholar Martin Gardner notes that Carroll mentions Alice's dilemma stemmed from the mushroom being perfectly round, and yet Carroll's previous iteration of the story distinguished between the top and bottom "sides." Was the reference to the roundness done afterwards? And roundness still doesn't clarify whether the "sides" refers to the cap, gills, or stalk. In other words, in this example, it's unclear *what* ruler is to be used, if any at all!

as inflexible rulers who lack the judgment to respond appropriately to unique circumstances, i.e., they appear absurd (purely essentialist). If they approve too many, they risk being seen as inconsistent rulers who can't be trusted to apply policies fairly, i.e., they appear nonsensical (purely existentialist).

Complicating matters is who the managers themselves, as one type of ruler, turn to for guidance when faced with these more difficult, grey special requests. In other words, which rulers do the managers themselves turn to? Our participant managers frequently found themselves caught between different human rulers who embodied conflicting expectations or who failed to provide consistent guidance. Turning toward the rulers also seems to fall short in helping managers respond to the special request, as the rulers are often a step or two removed from the practical realities of the circumstances giving rise to the special request. The rulers must make general rules that apply to most situations. But the special request implies a special situation, to which the manager—who is much closer to the situation—is being called upon to respond.

Managers recognize the power structures within the organizational system. They understand there is a general understanding of the rules, often represented by the official rules as codified in the policies and procedures and the unofficial rules as demonstrated by the behavioral practices of the people in charge. In many respects, the rules often say more about the rulers than they do about the rules. This explains how, when a new leader takes over a team or an organization, the unofficial rules might change even though the official rules haven’t. It’s not so much that we believe the rules have inherent meaning to them (i.e., essentialism) nor that they mean what individual people want them to mean (i.e., existentialism), but rather that once *we* have decided on what the rules mean, then they mean what *we* say they mean.

The deeper issue that Wittgenstein's ruler problem reveals is not that managers lack adequate standards for decision-making, but that the very notion of a completely reliable standard may be philosophically incoherent. As rulers themselves, managers are acutely aware of their own unreliability, of their own inconsistency. As for rulers to whom they turn to for clarity, managers are equally aware of how unreliable and inconsistent others are as well. We are, after all, human, and humanity is tied up with a level of unpredictability. In the end, managers and their managers are unreliable rulers and are therefore unable to provide clarity in effectively managing special requests.

Turning to Reason

Having explored the challenges of rule interpretation and ruler reliability, we now turn to what might seem like a more promising foundation for managerial decision-making: reason itself. If neither the rules themselves nor the authorities who interpret them can provide definitive guidance, perhaps managers can turn to the underlying logic or reasoning that should govern organizational decision-making. What seems to be the predominant reason for the type of behavior called into question in this interface between the request and the rules? If a manager can identify the reason, then it seems reasonable they can apply an appropriate response. Yet as our phenomenological investigation reveals, the appeal to rational deliberation introduces its own complexities and paradoxes.

Wittgenstein's Skeptical Problem

Kripke (1982) uses Wittgenstein's rule-following paradox as a foundation for understanding what he calls Wittgenstein's "skeptical problem." Where most philosophers

interpret Wittgenstein's private language argument[20] as beginning in §243 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Kripke argues that the argument begins much earlier, with the rule-following considerations starting around §137 (pp. 7-54); to make sense of the private language argument, Kripke contends, one needs to first make sense of the rule following paradox:

> [F]ollowing §243, a 'private language' is usually defined as a language that is logically impossible for anyone else to understand. The private language argument is taken to argue against the possibility of a private language in this sense. This conception is not in error, but it seems to me that the emphasis is somewhat misplaced. What is really denied is what might be called the 'private model' of rule following, that the notion of a person following a given rule is to be analyzed simply in terms of the facts about the rule follower and the rule follower alone, without reference to his membership in a wider community. (p. 109)

Wittgenstein, according to Kripke's interpretation, demonstrates that an individual by themselves can never know whether they are actually following a rule correctly; every application of a rule involves an interpretation, and every interpretation can be contested or understood differently. This creates what Kripke calls a "skeptical paradox"—if no fact about our mental states or dispositions determines what we mean by our words, how can communication be possible at all? (pp. 60-69). In other words, if we can't communicate to ourselves (much less to others) why we do what we do (e.g., whether we are following a certain rule or not) then we cannot be said to have a private language at all.

[20] Recall from the literature review section that Wittgenstein used the beetle-in-a-box thought experiment to support his argument that internal, subjective (i.e., private) language is not possible; we do not use language individually, only socially.

Wittgenstein's Skeptical Solution

Kripke (1982) argues that Wittgenstein's response to this skeptical problem is not to solve it in the traditional sense[21], but to dissolve it by showing how meaning emerges through community practices rather than through individual psychological states (pp. 89-113). We don't follow rules correctly because we have some inner mental mechanism that determines the right interpretation—we follow rules correctly because we participate in shared "forms of life" that make certain responses appropriate and others inappropriate. As Wittgenstein (1953/2009) notes:

> That's why 'following a rule' is a practice. And to *think* [emphasis original] one is following a rule is not to follow a rule. And that's why it's not possible to follow a rule 'privately'; otherwise, thinking one was following a rule would be the same thing as following a rule. (§202)

The skeptical solution, "turns on the idea that each person who claims to be following a rule can be checked by others," Kripke (1982) explains. He continues: "Others in the community can check whether the putative rule follower is or is not giving particular responses that they endorse, that agree with their own. The way they check this is…a primitive part of the language game" (p. 101). He utilizes a striking metaphor for emphasis:

> Does this mean that Robinson Crusoe, isolated on an island, cannot be said to follow any rules, no matter what he does? I do not see that this follows. What does follow is that *if* [emphasis original] we think of Crusoe as following rules, we are taking him into our community and applying our criteria for rule following to him. The falsity of the private model need not mean that a *physically isolated* [emphasis original] individual cannot be

[21] A "straight solution" would involve disproving the "skeptical problem"; the "skeptical solution" acknowledges the "skeptical problem" and offers a practical way to work with it.

said to follow rules; rather that an individual, *considered in isolation* [emphasis original] (whether or not he is physically isolated), cannot be said to do so. Remember that Wittgenstein's theory is one of assertability conditions. Our community can assert of any individual that he follows a rule if he passes the tests for rule following applied to any member of the community. (p. 110)

The "skeptical solution"[22] thus suggests that what we call "following a rule correctly" is better understood as "acting in ways that our community recognizes and accepts." Each community develops a "form of life" which governs behavior. While rules cannot be followed privately, they can be followed publicly, insofar as individuals' behaviors can conform to the expectations and meanings found within the larger community. Rules, therefore, can never be private phenomena, but exist only as intersubjectively agreed-upon public phenomena. Rules are like beetles!

In summary, the skeptical problem is that we cannot tell—by looking at an individual *in isolation*—whether that person is following a rule. Moreso, the person themself cannot tell if they are following a rule (we have no private language that can demonstrate this). The skeptical solution is that we can tell—by looking at the same individual *within a community*—whether that person is following the community's intersubjectively-agreed upon "form of life" regarding such rule (and we can do so via our intersubjectively agreed upon language games around rules).

The Challenge of Community

Something Kripke doesn't extrapolate upon is the challenge of identifying to which community's "form of life" one is referring to when following the rules. While it may be the case

[22] Technically, this is not referred to as Wittgenstein's skeptical problem and solution, but rather as Kirpkenstein's—Kripke's Wittgensteinian strawman who holds these views.

that a community has a certain way of doing things, it is also usually the case that another community has a different way of doing things. For Robinson Crusoe, which community on the island is assessing his rule following vis-à-vis their "form of life"? And what happens if and when multiple communities have different "forms of life" to which Crusoe is subjected to scrutiny?

Within any organization, there are multiple communities, or cultures, at work. As organizational scholars Buckingham and Coffman (1999) argue, an organization doesn't have *a* culture; it has as many cultures as it has managers. While I'm not sure a company has quite as many different cultures as it does managers, I think Buckingham and Coffman make an important point: that within an organization, there are multiple cultures (or communities) at work. Contemporary organizations are rarely characterized by unified communities with shared values and practices. Instead, they often contain multiple, sometimes conflicting communities—departments, professional groups, generational cohorts, cultural backgrounds—each with their own implicit understandings of appropriate behavior and different standards for what constitutes appropriate responses to special requests. In other words, they have their different reasons for which rules should be followed strictly and which ones can be managed flexibly. As was noted earlier, Hofstede's (2001) dimensions of culture highlight how divergent cultures combine into a multi-cultural workplace.

Alice and the Challenge of Community

In both *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*, Alice constantly encounters situations where different communities operate according to different rules and assumptions. One of the most curious creatures Alice encounters in Wonderland is the Cheshire Cat. When she first meets the Cat, they engage in a spirited dialogue. Of course, since this is Wonderland, that in itself isn't so

strange. What strikes Alice as particularly strange indeed is the fact that the Cat disappears and reappears. Alice requests: “I wish you wouldn’t keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy!” The Cat obliges, and vanishes slowly, starting from its tail, and ending with the grin, which remains visible for some time after the rest of the body had vanished. “Well! I’ve often seen a cat without a grin,” thought Alice; “but a grin without a cat! It’s the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!” (Carroll et al, 2000, p. 67) Fair enough. But this is not the end of the Cat.

Later, during the Queen’s peculiar game of croquet, Alice spots the Cat’s grin in the air. She astutely decides it’s no use to have a conversation with the Cat until it has ears to hear, so she waits until the Cat’s head has fully appeared. The Cat, in turn, apparently determines that its head is all that’s needed to engage in conversation, and thus remains a head levitating in the air. Eventually, the King comes by and inquires of this strange floating head. He suggests the Cat may kiss his hand, which the Cat respectfully refuses to do. Dismayed, the King wishes for the Cat to be removed, and calls for the Queen to intervene. As expected, the Queen offers her typical solution to any problem: Off with his head!

The King calls the executioner to fulfill the Queen’s order, and a debate ensues. The executioner argues that "you couldn't cut off a head unless there was a body to cut it off from." The King argues that "anything that had a head could be beheaded." The Queen argues that "if something wasn't done about it in less than no time, she'd have everybody executed, all round" (Carroll et al, 2000, p. 88). Since it seems the Cat is Alice’s friend, they appeal to Alice to settle the debate. Alice promptly suggests they find the Duchess as it seems the cat belongs to her, and Alice would like to avoid weighing in on this debate.[23]

[23] Surely, you didn’t think I was going to tell you what happens to the cat’s head, did you?!

Figure 13[24]

Cheshire Cat[25]

[24] This wonderful illustration appears in between Alice's adventures in the Bachelier illustrated version. *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass* appear together in the same book, which is fairly common for these two works. What is less common is that, instead of appearing one after another, both adventures start on either end of the book, but in reverse vertical orientation. That is, one must turn the book upside down to read the other adventure, and their tails (as the King would say: "It's a pun!") meet in the middle. As such, the Cheshire Cat appears both normal and upside down no matter which adventure one reads. This is yet another metaphor illustrating (sorry, another pun) the inscrutable nature of reason and understanding. In order to "know" which cat illustration is normal, one needs to know which adventure one has just read. Or is it the reverse, and the "correct" cat orientation belongs to the adventure one is about to read?

[25] From *Alice in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* by L. Carroll, 2005, pp. 102-103. Copyright 2005 by Anne Bachelier. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

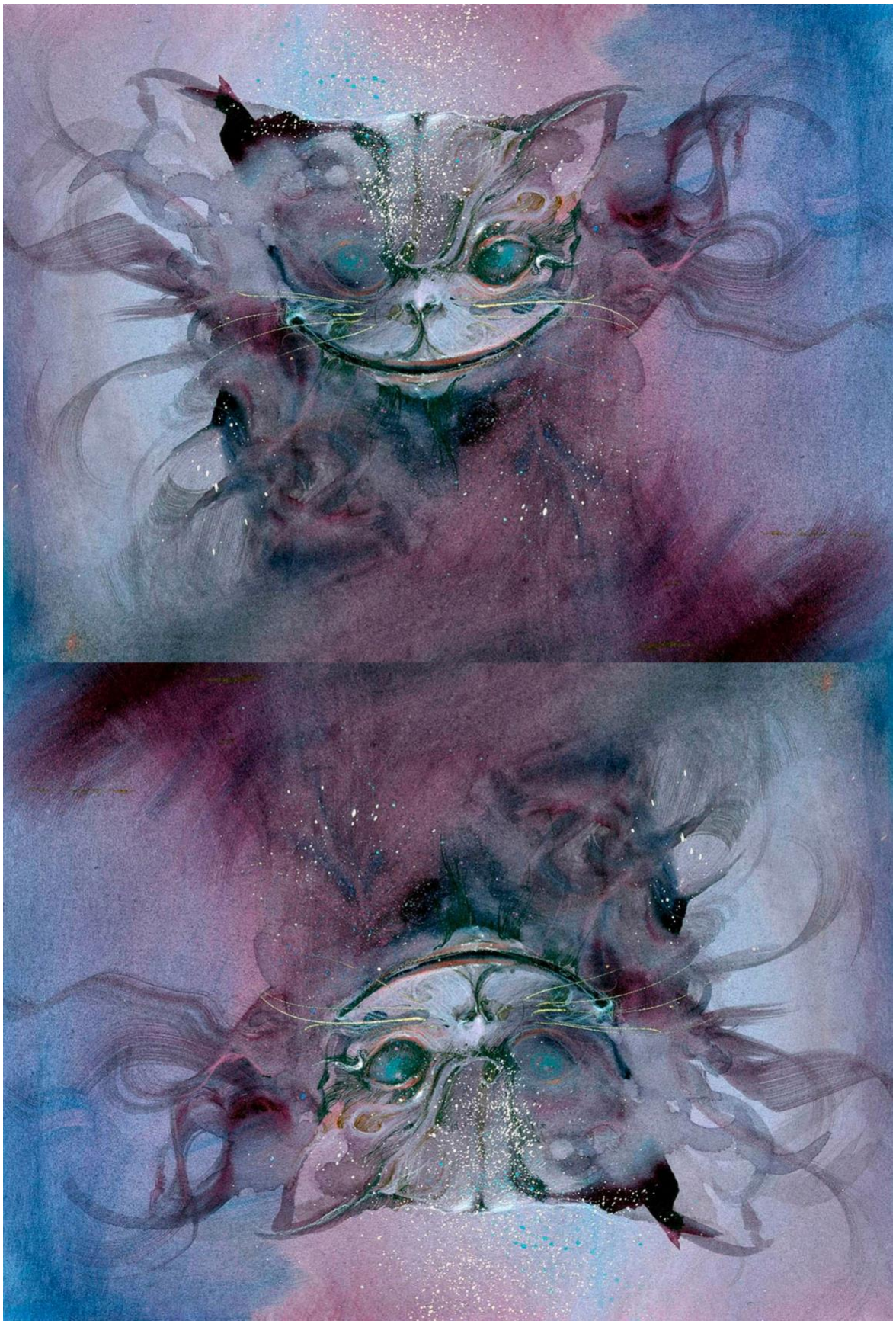
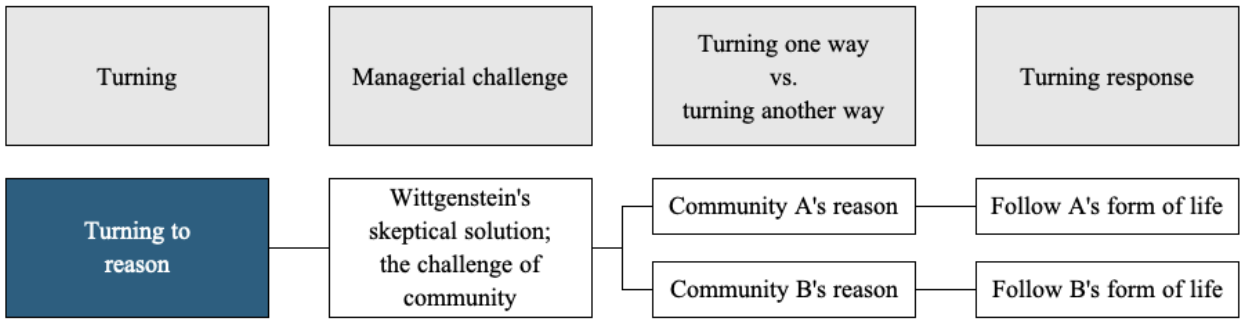


Figure 14

Turning to Reason



Here, we see the challenge of the community solution offered by Kripke via Wittgenstein. Even though Kripke highlights an elegant solution to Wittgenstein's rule following paradox and private language argument—the community's "form of life"—we find the solution to have practical challenges with solving the issue of how to handle a special request to bend or break the rules within the real world. The elegance of the philosophical solution confronts the messiness of lived organizational reality, where communities are fragmented, where forms of life conflict, and where individual managers must somehow make decisions without clear guidance from coherent community standards.

Kripke doesn't—and I'm not sure how he could—resolve the challenge of how a manager could identify which community (and therefore which reason) to select for the given circumstance. This limitation points toward a fundamental gap between philosophical solutions and practical wisdom—the recognition that abstract principles, no matter how sophisticated, cannot substitute for the kind of situated judgment that Aristotle (350BCE/1999) called phronesis or practical wisdom. Accordingly, Kripke does not address how the manager should resolve differences among community interpretations of the rules.

Turning to Relationship

Having explored the limitations of appeals to requests, rules, rulers, and reason, we now turn to what is perhaps is the most fundamental dimension of the phenomenon: the relationships within which special requests occur and through which they might be understood.

Buber's Two Modes of Being

Philosopher and theologian Martin Buber (1923/1958) sheds light on another path it seems managers experience in dealing with this phenomenon. Instead of turning to the request, the rules, the rulers, and even reason, he offers a more direct, more immediate, more fundamental mode of engagement: instead of turning to things, we can turn to one another. Buber contrasts two fundamentally distinct modes of being: *I-It* and *I-Thou*.

***I-It* Mode of Experience.** The *I-It* mode represents what Buber called the world of experience—the orientation toward others as objects to be known, categorized, and managed. This mirrors to an extent Alfred Schutz's (1932/1967) concept of typification—the process by which we organize our social world through typical meanings and categories. Whereas Schutz focuses on a sociological lens, Buber's philosophy extends beyond the world of people to objects, nature, and even ideas. Buber characterizes this mode as a mis-meeting between two beings.

***I-Thou* Mode of Encounter.** The *I-Thou* mode, by contrast, represents what Buber called the world of relation or encounter—the orientation toward others as irreducibly unique subjects worthy of recognition and response. This mode requires what Buber calls "genuine attention"—a quality of presence that recognizes the other as a subject rather than an object of management; *I-Thou* addresses another not as an object but as a presence. This mode cannot be programmed or

systematized because it emerges through the unique encounter between specific beings in specific moments. Buber characterizes this mode as an authentic meeting between two beings.

In one of Buber's (1923/1958) most famous examples, he illustrates the fundamental difference between experiencing a tree as an *It* versus experiencing it as a *Thou*.

> I consider a tree…
>
> I can look on it as a picture…
>
> I can perceive it as movement…
>
> I can classify it in a species…
>
> I can subdue its actual presence and form…
>
> I can dissipate it and perpetuate it…
>
> In all this the tree remains my object…
>
> It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer *It* [emphasis original]. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness.
>
> To effect this [*I-Thou* mode of encounter] it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree. There is nothing from which I would have to turn my eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event.
>
> Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colours [sic] and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and with the stars, are all present in a single whole.

> The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood; but it is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it — only in a different way. (§9a-k[26])

Buber's critical insight is that, in the *I-Thou* encounter, we don't abandon our knowledge of the tree. Instead, we embrace all aspects of the tree. He thus shows how we can encounter the same object (e.g., a tree) in two radically different modes:

1. **The *I-It* mode**: Where we can analyze the tree scientifically (classify its species, study its structure), perceive it aesthetically (as a picture with colors and light), understand it functionally (its biological processes), or reduce it to abstract concepts (laws and numbers).
2. **The *I-Thou* mode**: Where we enter into genuine relationship with the tree, encountering it in its full presence without reducing it to our categories or purposes.

It's of critical importance to note that the *I-Thou* mode does *not* refer to a setting aside of all knowledge of some-thing or some-one. In contrast to Husserl's conception of pure bracketing, where one sets aside all preconceptions of a phenomenon in order to see the phenomenon as purely as possible, Buber insists it's rather the opposite approach. Instead of setting aside what one already knows or understands of the *Thou*, one embraces everything all at once. It is about encountering the *Thou* as fully as possible. The *I-It* mode sees the tree transactionally; Husserl's bracketing attempts to see the tree without any preconceptions of what a tree is; Buber's *I-Thou* mode engages with the tree as a whole being, incorporating all existing knowledge with immediate presence to encounter the tree in all its fullness.

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[26] Parenthetical references to Buber's *I* and *Thou* use a section-paragraph symbol. In this case, the reference is to paragraphs 1-11 of section 9.

Buber's Exalted Melancholy

Buber sees these two modes of being as separate; one is either oriented in the *I-It* mode or the *I-Thou* mode. While we oscillate between the two modes of being, we only exist in one mode at a time. Alas, Buber (1923/1958) laments over the ephemeral nature of the *I-Thou* encounter: "But this is the exalted melancholy of our fate, that every *Thou* in our world must become an *It*" (§21a). We can never remain in the *I-Thou* mode. As the saying goes, "all good things must come to an end." Going back to the tree example, Buber (1923/1958) states:

> But whenever the sentence "I see the tree" is so uttered that it no longer tells of a relation between the man—*I*—and the tree—*Thou*—, but establishes the perception of the tree as object by the human consciousness, the barrier between subject and object has been set up. The primary word *I-It*, the word of separation, has been spoken. (§23e)

Recall Henry's concept of the equally ephemeral nature of phenomenality. A phenomenon first appears to one through a phenomenality. Then it is conceptualized through a separate pre-predicative process (the phenomenalization of the phenomenality). The predicative memory of this appearance-conceptualization becomes understood as one's lived experience of the phenomenon. Finally, we are fundamentally constrained to use thought-language to understand the experience of the phenomenon—both for ourselves and to communicate with others. But, as Buber explains, the process of engaging with thought-language always results in the transformation of a *Thou* to an *It*. Robbins et al (2019) describe this process using the phenomenological language of noema-noesis:

> [A]nything that is given to consciousness is going to involve (a) that which is being disclosed to consciousness (e.g. the perceptual field), and also (b) the activity of consciousness by which the former is disclosed. That which is being disclosed to

> consciousness, (a), is the noema, and the acts of consciousness by which the former is disclosed, (b), is the noesis. The noesis is only disclosed indirectly via a special attitude toward the noema (the phenomenological reduction, or in other words, the bracketing of the natural attitude)…The problem of language is tricky, but for now, suffice it to say that within the context of the phenomenological reduction, language is part of the noetic acts of consciousness by which the noema is able to appear as it does, and so is not a mediator as much as a medium by which consciousness does what it does in the process of disclosing a world. (p. 155)

In short, the manner in which some-thing (e.g., a phenomenon) appears to some-one (the phenomenality of the phenomenon) is the noematic (noema) *content* of consciousness; the way in which some-one understands such thing (including via the use of thought-language) is the noetic (noesis) *act* of consciousness. Applied to Buber's two modes of being, one can engage with another being as *Thou*, by standing in relation with the noematic *content* of consciousness. But, through the inevitable noetic *act* of consciousness which life demands, one inevitably comes to see the other being as an *It*. Buber's exalted melancholy can thus be understood through the process of the phenomenalization (the noetic act) of phenomenalities (the noematic content). Or perhaps this is easier to grasp in reverse: the phenomenological process of understanding how something "is able to appear as it does" (as a *Thou*) through the "medium by which consciousness does what it does in the process of disclosing a world" (i.e., the inevitable *It*-ing of language) can be understood through Buber's exalted melancholy.

Alice's Exalted Melancholy

Perhaps the most poignant illustration of this exalted melancholy from Alice's dream adventures appears in *Looking-Glass* when Alice befriends a young Fawn in the Wood of No

Names—a mysterious place where no creature remembers what it—or anything else—is called. In this nameless space, Alice and the Fawn are unable to recognize not only themselves, but one another. Carroll et al (2000) describes what happens in the wood: "So they walked on together through the wood, Alice with her arms clasped lovingly round the soft neck of the Fawn" (p. 177). Unable to objectify one another, Alice and the Fawn engage in authentic encounter. Yet the moment they leave the wood and their capability of recognition returns, their mutual meeting comes to a startling end. Carroll et al (2000) describes the contrast between how Alice and the Fawn engaged with one another in the wood and what happened immediately upon exiting the wood:

> [H]ere the Fawn gave a sudden bound into the air, and shook itself free from Alice's arm. "I'm a Fawn!" It cried out in a voice of delight. "And, dear me! you're a human child!" A sudden look of alarm came into its beautiful brown eyes, and in another moment it had darted away at full speed.
>
> Alice stood looking after it, almost ready to cry with vexation at having lost her dear little fellow-traveler so suddenly. (pp. 177-178)

The exalted melancholy Alice and the Fawn experience leaves Alice mournful at the loss of mutual connection. The removal of names and categories *inside* the wood had enabled genuine encounter; their return *outside* the wood makes such encounter no longer possible.

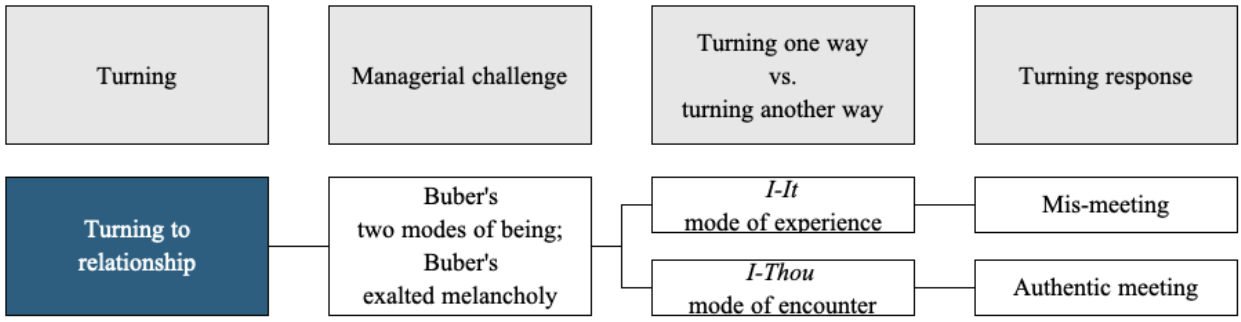
The original Alice story includes a lovely illustration of Alice and the Fawn lovingly embracing by the great artist John Tenniel, yet I've chosen to not include the illustration. For, while the illustration ostensibly shows Alice and the Fawn engaged in a true *I-Thou* encounter, such an encounter could never be truly captured in such a way. This is my favorite "scene" from both Alice's adventures, but apparently it isn't so for Anne Bachelier, as she didn't illustrate it in

her version. Or…perhaps Anne is phenomenologically-oriented, and realized that this evanescent encounter between Alice and the Fawn could not be captured, even in art. In a similar vein, for the rest of this discussion section, I have chosen to avoid including any further illustrations of Alice's experiences and encounters. This is an intentional reflection of the shift from Buber's *I-It* mode of experience toward the *I-Thou* mode of encounter. Whereas I believe the previous illustrations helped to make the *I-It* turnings more vivid and concrete, I believe using illustrations for the *I-Thou* turnings might distract from their ephemeral nature.

Special Requests and the Exalted Melancholy

Figure 15

Turning to Relationship



Throughout this analysis, I've tried to highlight the challenges that come when managers engage with our phenomenon via an *I-It* mode of being. When managers turn to the request, they face Wittgenstein's normal-abnormal distinction; when they turn to rules, they face Wittgenstein's rule following paradox; when they turn to the rulers, they face Wittgenstein's (okay, Taleb's) ruler problem; and when they turn to reason, they face Kripkenstein's skeptical solution which doesn't point toward which community one should turn.

I believe Buber might go even further here, though. Any turn toward *It*—regardless of its internal coherence or paradox—is fundamentally antithetical for an *I-Thou* mode of being. That is, even if one could overcome Wittgenstein and Kripke's challenges, one is still left having

turned away from encounter and toward experience. At a surface level, my argument so far has been: these turnings don't work because of their internal contradictions. At a deeper level, my argument is thus: the very act of turning toward *any It* is what prevents authentic encounter. For instance, while Wittgenstein and Kripke might argue rules don't work because of the rule following paradox, Buber might argue they don't work because rules are fundamentally *It*-oriented. The paradox is almost beside the point.[27]

If we really wish to understand what this phenomenon is like for managers, I argue the best and most direct way to do so it to look at it via the *I-Thou* mode of encounter. But, of course, this is impossible to do, since the *Thou* (as Buber explains it) operates beyond thought and language. This is partly why I chose to not use the managers' own words in this discussion section but rather utilize Alice's anecdotes; we cannot point at managers' *I-Thou* encounters, but we can point toward Alice's encounters as she has someone narrating them for us. Carroll tells us that Alice and the Fawn lovingly embrace; if we were there in the nameless wood to observe them, we wouldn't be able to tell they did so as we wouldn't be able to name either of them or what they're doing. Unfortunately, we have no such narrator of our nameless *I-Thou* encounters with our research phenomenon—or with any phenomenon.

When employees request special treatment, managers face a fundamental choice about how to orient themselves toward both the request and the requestor. This choice, while often hidden in the moment of decision, actually determines the entire character of the encounter and its possibilities for authentic relationship. Managers can choose to turn toward the request, rules,

[27] The irony of my using Wittgensteinian and Kripkensteinian *It*s to highlight the opacity of managers' turning to the *It*s of the requests, the rules, the rulers, and reason, is not lost on me. I only hope that this highlights what I think Buber might claim as the futility of the *I-It* mode in bringing us closer to authentic meeting.

the rulers, or the reasons. But each choice seems to fail to provide satisfactory guidance for managers experiencing this phenomenon. Instead, managers can choose to turn toward the requestor. Instead of asking, "What is this request?" managers can simply be with the person making the request. Instead of asking, "Why is this person making this request?" managers can simply enter into encounter with the requestor.

I say simply in the sense that it is just the manager and the employee—no more, no less. I do not say simply in the sense that this mode of being is easy. It is in fact quite difficult. As Buber (1923/1958) explains, virtually everything about modern society is structured around the *I-It* orientation: "But is the communal life of modern man not then of necessity sunk in the world of *It*?…Would his world not fall in on him if, instead of adding up *He* and *He* and *He* to make an *It*, he tried to calculate the sum of *Thou* and *Thou* and *Thou*—which never yields anything but *Thou* again?" (§34a-b). Modern society is about making decisions, and decisions require differentiation. We need to know whether something or someone is this or that in order to choose one way or another way of proceeding along our varied life adventures. Modern organizational life demands categorization, assessment, and decision-making—all of which require treating persons as *It* objects of managerial attention rather than as *Thou* subjects worthy of encounter. Choosing to engage in *I-Thou* relationships goes against the grain of organizational efficiency and the demands of institutional accountability.

Making matters worse, not only is this approach difficult, but it is also evanescent. Despite a manager's best intentions, eventually reality strikes. The stimulus requires a response. The manager must do the managerial duty and make a decision. A choice. The request and requestor must be evaluated vis-a-vis the rules, the rulers, the community's reasons, or the

relationship between the manager and employee. Any *I-Thou* encounter must materialize into an *I-It* decision. The exalted melancholy cannot be sidestepped.

Turning to Resonance

Another turn related to this phenomenon involves turning again to relationship, but with a twist. Whereas Buber's two modes of being are fundamentally oriented around how an *individual I* engages toward an *Other*, be it an *It* or a *Thou*, this turn flips the script and asks how a *collective I* is engaged toward an *Other*. Whereas our previous analysis explored how managers turn toward the request, the rules, the rulers, the reasons, and relationships, the following analysis explores how communities turn toward managers.

Kripke's Two Modes of Trust

Kripke (1982) offers what amounts to an aside in discussing a possible liberal interpretation of Wittgenstein's private language argument. In a footnote, he reflects on how communities might handle rule-following in mature linguistic practices:

> Thus for each rule there must be an 'external check' on whether I am following it in a given instance...But this means the community must have a way of telling ('criterion') whether it is being followed in a given instance, which it uses to judge the speaker's mastery of the rule. This criterion cannot be simply the speaker's own sincere inclination to follow the rule a certain way—otherwise, the conditional has no content. This condition seems to be satisfied even in those cases where, *after* [emphasis original] the community is satisfied that the speaker has mastered the language, it lets the speaker's sincere utterance be a (or *the* [emphasis original]) criterion for their correctness...In contrast, the liberal version allows that once a speaker, judged by criteria for mastery of various rules, is accepted into the community, there should be some rules where there is

no way for others to check his mastery, but where that mastery is simply presumed on the basis of his membership in the community. This is simply a primitive feature of the language game. Why should Wittgenstein not allow language games like this? (pp. 103-104)

Kripke is making a distinction between two possible interpretations of Wittgenstein's position on rule-following:

1. **The stricter interpretation:** Every rule requires an "external check" by the community to verify whether someone is following it correctly. The community must have some criterion to judge the speaker's mastery of the rule, and this criterion cannot simply be the speaker's own sincere inclination to follow the rule.
2. **The liberal interpretation:** Once someone demonstrates mastery of enough rules to be accepted into the linguistic community, there can be some rules where others have no way to check mastery directly. In these cases, the person's mastery is simply presumed based on their established membership in the community.

Kripke seems to favor the stricter reading but acknowledges the possibility of the liberal reading. His note highlights an important tension in Wittgenstein's account of rule-following: how much ongoing community verification is necessary for meaningful language use? What makes this footnote particularly interesting is that it acknowledges a potential flexibility in the community verification requirement. Even in the stricter view, there are cases where, *after* initial verification of mastery, the community might accept a speaker's sincere utterance as authoritative regarding correctness. This suggests that Kripke recognizes a potential middle ground—community verification remains fundamental to establishing meaning, but the form this verification takes can vary and might sometimes be quite indirect. This nuance is important

because it helps address objections that Wittgenstein's (or Kripkenstein's) view would make certain kinds of language use impossible.

I find it noteworthy that Kripke offers this reflection in a note versus in the main text partly because, as he says in the note, he doesn't quite understand the distinction himself. In the same vein, I'm not sure I fully understand either Wittgenstein's or Kripke's argument.[28] But I think it's a very important distinction indeed! I've taken to call this liberal interpretation *relational wisdom*—a spin on Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom applied in the context of Buber's relational philosophy. Relational wisdom, as I see it, is not private rule following *per se*, but a private interpretation of the rules according to a community's "form of life." It does not negate Wittgenstein's argument against private language, but instead offers an alternative to the stricter interpretation of communal rule following outlined in *Philosophical Investigations* per Kripke's interpretation. Where practical wisdom calls one to do the right thing the right way, relational wisdom questions if one has the right to practice practical wisdom. Practical wisdom encourages us to develop the *capacity* to make wise decisions; relational wisdom highlights the challenge many managers face in determining if they have *permission* to do so.

This creates what I'm calling an "authorization gap"—the space between having developed the capacity to make wise decisions and knowing whether one has permission to exercise that capacity. It's not enough for managers to be wise; they must also navigate the fundamental uncertainty about whether their organizational community trusts them to use that wisdom. Like Alice facing the mushroom, managers often cannot know which form of trust—

[28] This uncertainty (Kripke's and my own) underscores an important feature of phenomenological inquiry. Just because one does not understand something does not mean the thing is not important. Indeed, perhaps the most important "things" phenomenologists turn to and return to are those very things which seem to continually and fascinatingly elude our understanding.

strict or liberal—their community extends to them at any given moment. And perhaps that's the point. Perhaps the authorization gap itself is a phenomenon, not a problem to be solved but a condition to be navigated.

Alice and the Two Modes of Trust

Fifty years before Buber wrote *I and Thou* and almost 100 years before Wittgenstein penned *Philosophical Investigations*, I believe Carroll somehow alluded to this relational wisdom found within *I-Thou* presence. In *Looking-Glass*, Alice finds herself suddenly thrust onto a train with some very peculiar passengers. When the guard asks Alice for her ticket, the passengers speak to Alice in unison "like the chorus of a song" (Carroll et al, 2000, p. 169). Every time Alice responds to the group, they respond in chorus. Frustrated, Alice decides to remain silent, thinking to herself, "Then there's no use in speaking." This is where things get weird—even by Carrollian standards! Carroll et al (2000) states: "The voices didn't join in, *this* time, as she hadn't spoken, but, to her great surprise, they all *thought* in chorus (I hope you understand what *thinking in chorus* means—for I must confess that *I* don't)" (p. 170).

Thinking in chorus is, of course, impossible. Well, to be sure, it might be possible, if not probable, for people to think the same things at the same time. For example, people at a concert may be thinking virtually similar thoughts as they sing along to their favorite songs. Or people at a book reading might be thinking similar thoughts as they read along together to an author's passage. What *is* impossible is for anyone to *know* if people are *thinking in chorus*. This is exactly what Wittgenstein alluded to in making his argument against the identifiability of any private language. In effect, Wittgenstein argued that we cannot identify the existence of *thinking in chorus* because we cannot even identify the existence of thinking independently. As I mentioned, Kripke aligns with Wittgenstein's approach here; this is Kripke's stricter

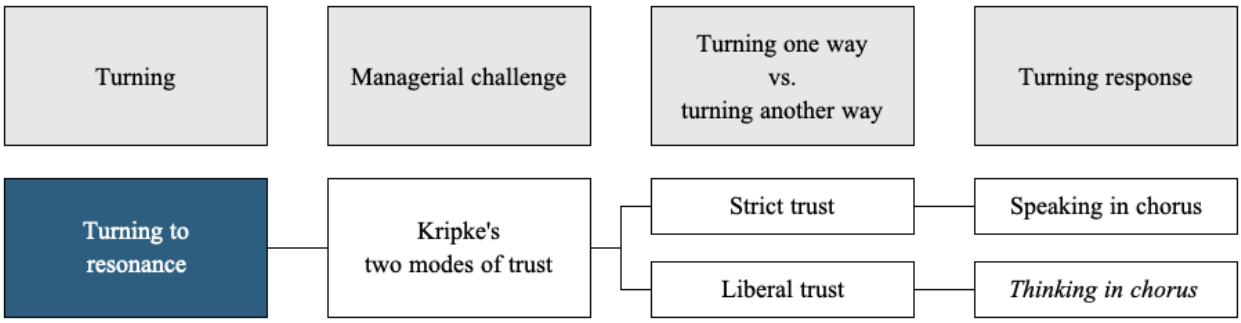
interpretation of Wittgenstein's rules and private language argument (i.e., strict trust). But Kripke also opens the door to the possibility of Wittgenstein allowing for a more liberal interpretation, where perhaps *thinking in chorus* might be possible (i.e., liberal trust).

Echoing Kripke's remark about his uncertainty regarding Wittgenstein's philosophy, Carroll also confesses he himself doesn't know what *thinking in chorus* means—even though he ascribes such activity as occurring between the train passengers! I believe Carroll identified a phenomenon that—like most phenomena—eludes description but nevertheless carries significant existential weight. A community can speak in chorus rather easily. Each person can observe the others and modulate their own speaking to accord with the others. But *thinking in chorus* is a whole different matter. How could one engage in such a thing? Well, like Carroll, I have no idea! But maybe, just maybe, Kripke sees something *thinking-in-chorus*-adjacent that occurs within an authentic *I-Thou* encounter between a community and an individual.

Special Requests and the Two Modes of Trust

Figure 16

Turning to Resonance



A consistent theme, or a structure of consciousness, that our participant managers seem to have shared is that experienced managers who have demonstrated competence over time may be granted a form of discretionary authority—not because they have access to some special knowledge, but because their track record has earned them membership in the community of

trusted decision-makers. That is, at some point, managers transition from one who diligently "follows the rules" to one who exercises both practical and relational wisdom; it's the difference between "people like us do things like this" and "people like us do things that can't be predicted…and that may not conform to the normal things we do." It's not that the latter manager doesn't follow the rules, but rather that they combine their judgment with the community's; they turn to the rules (or the request, or the rulers, or the community's reasons) when it's appropriate but turn inward and toward their perceived resonance with the community's trust in them when they deem it more appropriate to do so.

Alas, there is no way to "know" when one has crossed this liminal threshold between speaking in chorus and *thinking in chorus*. Just as one cannot "know" when a request crosses over from normal to abnormal; just as one cannot "know" how a rule should be interpreted; just as one cannot "know" whether a ruler can be trusted as reliable; just as one cannot "know" which community's reason holds sway; and just as one cannot "know" whether one is engaging in a mode of *I-It* experience or *I-Thou* encounter with another.

Table 5

Speaking in Chorus vs. Thinking in Chorus[29]

Concept	**Speaking in Chorus**	***Thinking in Chorus***
Buber's Two Modes of Being	*I-It* mode of experience	*I-Thou* mode of encounter
Buber's Exalted Melancholy	*Thou* → ***It***	***Thou*** → *It*
	Focus is on the *It*	Focus is on the *Thou*

[29] I'm aware of the irony of using a table to describe things which defy description, much less categorization and comparison. Nevertheless, as Wittgenstein, Kripke, Buber, and Carroll have offered language to allude to these concepts which elude language, so, too, do I find no other way to explore these concepts. Recall van Manen (2016): "the great paradox of language [is] that it always abstracts from the concreteness of the world which it was responsible for creating in the first place" (p. 128). Let us worry about addressing the abstractness of these concepts and their possible interconnection with one another later; for now, I think there's value enough in creating the connections in the first place.

Kripke's Two Modes of Trust	Strict Trust Observable verification against community's criteria of correctness	Liberal Trust No verification against community's criteria of correctness
People like us (do things like this)	People like us do things like *It* The focus is on *what* people do	People like us do things like…? The focus is on *which* people do
Wittgenstein's beetle-in-a-box	I need to open my box and show my beetle	I can keep my box closed and its contents hidden
Frankl's Space	My decision-making must be revealed, i.e., the space must be made clear	My decision-making can be concealed, i.e., the space can remain mysterious

Under Kripke's stricter interpretation of Wittgenstein's perspective on rules and private language, managers are boxed in to the *I-It* mode of being, limited to turning to various *It*s (e.g., requests, rules, rulers, reasons) in what our participant managers have shared often result in dead ends. In this stricter interpretation, managers must show what's in their space of decision-making between request and response. They must open their box and show their beetle (i.e., their decision making; their judgment; their community-verifiable wisdom). Only then will the community decide if the beetle conforms with its intersubjectively shared understanding and practices regarding such similar beetles. If the manager's beetle is considered normal enough, then the manager remains in good graces; if the beetle is too abnormal, then the manager is at risk of being ostracized from the community. And I've already highlighted the opacity regarding how one determines where something falls along the normal-abnormal certainty gradient.

Kripke's liberal interpretation, in contrast, frees managers to engage in the *I-Thou* mode of encounter. Instead of having to justify their response to the request, they can keep the space in-between the request and the response shrouded in mystery, i.e., the power of the space. Instead of having to open their box and show their beetle (recall Wittenstein noted that there may in fact be no beetle or nothing at all in the box), they can keep their box closed. Managers embrace the

liberal trust the community has placed in them to handle these requests according to their earned relational wisdom. If the manager's response furthers the community's form of life, then the manager engenders deeper trust and is afforded an even greater zone of managerial discretion (i.e., a bigger box). Even a manager's response that challenges the community's form of life is sometimes embraced as a way of introducing a change to the community culture. This is, after all, how cultures change: someone pushes against the culture until what was considered abnormal becomes normal. At some point, though, a manager's response may deviate so sharply with the community's form of life that the community reduces the amount of trust afforded to the manager (i.e., a smaller box). While cultures change, too large of a culture shock is usually rejected—at least initially. Ultimately, the manager may face Kripke's strict trust and be forced to open the box and show their beetle. Of course, what makes this so difficult to navigate is that, going back to the challenge of community from the turning to reason section, it's not just one community with which managers must engage, but rather various communities involving constantly changing members and constantly changing perspectives.

I believe the fundamental essence of our phenomenon lies not in how managers handle the request itself, i.e., the Objective 7Q. It's lies not in how managers internalize the request and reflect on its ramifications on themselves, their workplaces, and their identity in those workplaces, i.e., the Subjective 7Q. It lies not in how managers turn to the request, the rules, the rulers, or reasons. In fact, I don't believe it lies primary in the manager. Instead, I believe the fundamental essence of this phenomenon is: how much trust does the community place in the manager to manage this space between request and response? How much trust does the community place in the manager's beetle? Does the manager need to open their box and show their beetle, or can they keep their box closed and their beetle hidden? Ultimately, this

phenomenon seems to come down to—like so many things do—trust. Does the manager enjoy strict or liberal trust? Like Alice facing the round mushroom, managers facing their own communities are often left wondering: now which is which (i.e., is this strict trust or liberal trust)? And as Alice likely would have realized had she walked round the mushroom, which "side" was which would have changed as she changed position relative to the mushroom. Similarly, managers seem to realize that, as they wander round their workplaces, which form of trust, strict or liberal, they enjoy seems to change as they change. This change might come from the manager, such as taking over a new team or coming into a new workplace. Or the change might come from the community, such as a new leadership team taking over or a change in organizational culture.

Turning Round and Round

One final turn deserves exploration. We've explored how managers turn round and round, from rules to rulers, from individuals to communities. What I'd like to explore next is how managers are not the only ones turning.

Reversibility of Mutual Relations and the Normative Limitation of Mutuality

Merleau Ponty's Chiasm. Merleau-Ponty's (1964/1968) chiasm describes the fundamental reversibility of subject-object relations. As he explains, "the chiasm, reversibility, is the idea that every perception is doubled with a counter-perception" (p. 264). That is, "the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen" (p. 139). Merleau-Ponty argues that both perceiver and perceived are made of the same "flesh"—we're not separate subjects observing separate objects, but rather participants in a single, dynamic field of relationships. And the chiasm isn't static—it's a constant dynamic intertwining

where subject and object positions are continuously shifting and reversing, or "turning round and round" between different relational positions.

Buber's Normative Limitation of Mutuality. While Buber (1923/1958) claims authentic mutual meeting is possible and desirable in most relationships ("relation is mutual" (§91)), he does acknowledge a "normative limitation of mutuality" inherent in certain relationships:

> The question is, how is it with the *I-Thou* relationship between men? Is it always entirely reciprocal? Can it always be, may it always be? Is it not—like everything human—delivered up to limitation by our insufficiency, and also placed under limitation by the inner laws of our life together?...[T]here are some *I-Thou* relationships which in their nature may not unfold to full mutuality if they are to persist in that nature. (Postscript §5b, d)

Buber (1923/1958) uses relational examples of teacher-student, psychotherapist-patient, and pastor-parishioner—which he calls bipolar relations—to highlight how, "every *I-Thou* relationship, within which a relation which is specified as a purposive working of one part upon the other, persists in virtue of a mutuality which is forbidden to be full" (Postscript §5i). A full mutuality would swallow up the hierarchical nature upon which these relationships are based.

Alice's Turning Round and Round

Our final turn to Alice finds her in the looking-glass world, after her initial encounter with the White Queen takes a sudden and unexpected turn (unexpected at least to Alice; the Queen seems to quite expectedly take things in stride). You see, the Queen has turned into a sheep, and the countryside has turned into a "little dark shop." Alice decides to take a look

around the shop. But, like virtually everything in Alice's dreamworlds, this simple activity does not operate as it normally does in the real world. Carroll et al (2000) describe the scene:

> The shop seemed to be full of all manner of curious things—but the oddest part of it all was that, whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty, though the others round it were crowded as full as they could hold.
>
> "Things flow about so here!" she said at last in a plaintive tone, after she had spent a minute or so in vainly pursuing a large bright thing, that looked sometimes like a doll and sometimes like a work-box, and was always in the shelf next above the one she was looking at. "And this one is the most provoking of all—but I'll tell you what—' she added, as a sudden thought struck her, "I'll follow it up to the very top shelf of all. It'll puzzle it to go through the ceiling, I expect!"
>
> But even this plan failed: the "thing" went through the ceiling as quietly as possible, as if it were quite used to it. (pp. 201-202)

There is a Japanese saying: to see something is to not have seen something else. But in the looking-glass world, sometimes even the attempt to see something is fraught with curiosity! Alice's attempt to focus on a specific thing results in her constant turning round and round the shop as she vainly attempts to focus on things which always seem to elude her grasp. Of course, it almost goes without saying that including an illustration of this concept might be counterproductive. For how indeed would one illustrate things that cannot be seen?

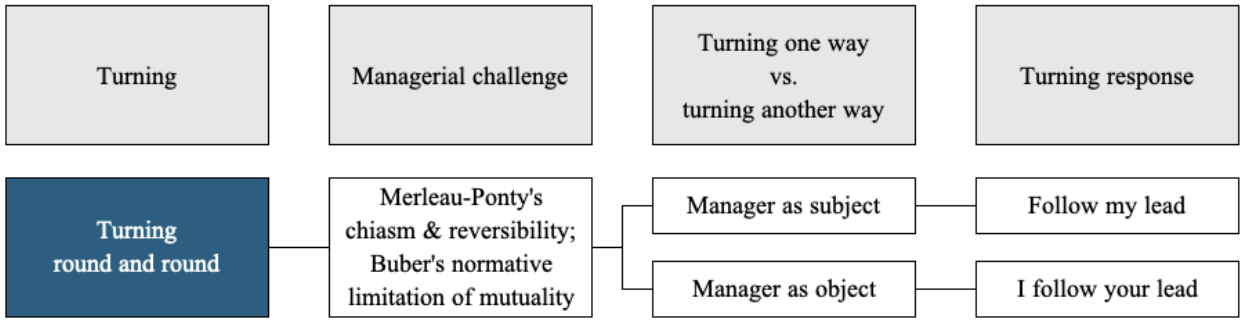
The point I want to make here is that it seems Alice isn't the only one or thing turning. As she turns, it turns out that the objects of her intention seem to turn into different things ("sometimes like a doll and sometimes like a work-box") as well as turn in various directions

("always in the shelf next above the one she was looking at"). Despite this being *her* dream, she appears to be not the only subject in this dream. People and things around her are not simply objects to her subject. Instead, they, too, seem to be subjects in their own right, subjecting Alice to their intentions. Alice is thus sometimes subject and sometimes object.

Special Requests and Turning Round and Round

Figure 17

Turning Round and Round



Perhaps the most pernicious aspect of managers' experience with our phenomenon is that theirs is but one experience of many simultaneous experiences related to the same phenomenon. As we explored the managers' perspectives, we also touched upon the experience from other perspectives. And though I recognize that our research question is oriented to the lived experience of managers to whom a special request is directed, the participant managers highlighted how entangled their experience was with others involved in the request; although they didn't use such language, they could be said to have touched upon Merleau-Ponty's dynamic chiasm of reversibility which explains how sometimes managers are subject *with* another object and sometimes they are object *to* another's subject. In Buberian language, we might say that, when experiencing this phenomenon, managers are often caught between being the *I* in the *I-It* and *I-Thou* word-pairs, and being the *It* or the *Thou* to another's *I*.

Several managers shared examples where they were not the ones to whom the request was directed, but rather the request went to someone further down the reporting hierarchy (e.g., a surrogate request). Almost every manager shared examples of when they were the ones requesting special treatment. And some managers shared examples where the special request took place outside of their reporting line, but they were tangentially affected. In other words, sometimes the manager took on the role of manager, sometimes they took on the role of employee (to another manager), and sometimes they took on the role of community member (to which another manager reported).

Complicating these relational dynamics is Buber's normative limitation of mutuality, which I argue applies to these manager-employee and community-manager bipolar relations. The purposive nature of these working relationships constrains full mutuality from actualizing within these inherently hierarchical relationships.

Table 6 illustrates the various relational dynamics managers seem to experience when an employee requests special treatment.

Table 6

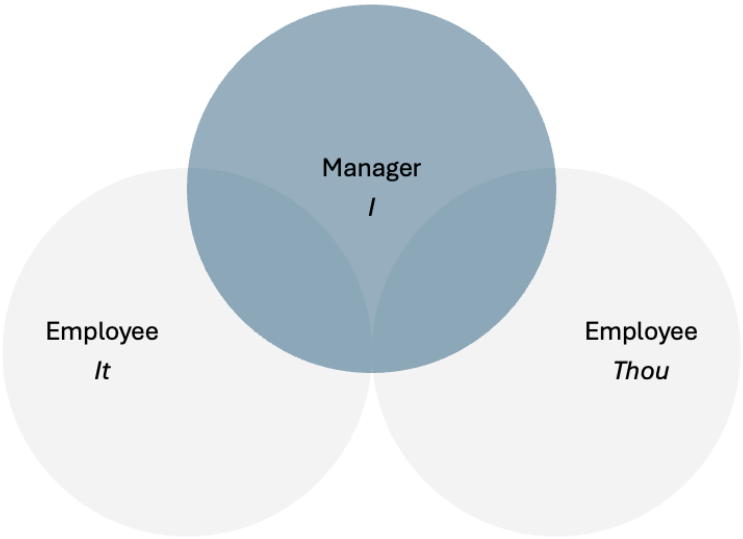
Manager as Subject, Object, and Subject-Object

	Manager as Subject	**Manager as Object**	**Subject-Object Relational Dynamics**
Community (Community)	*It* or *Thou*	*I*	*I* or *I*t or *Thou*
Manager (Leader)	*I*	*It* or *Thou*	*I* or *I*t or *Thou*
Employee (Member)	*It* or *Thou*	*I*	*I* or *I*t or *Thou*

Manager as Subject

Figure 18

Manager as I to Employee It or Thou



Manager (*I*) → Employee (*It*). This relationship reflects how the manager-employee relationship is most commonly operationalized in both i-deal and LMX literature. For i-deal researchers, managers should treat the i-deal request and requestor as objectively as possible, to maintain standards of justice. For LMX researchers, every manager-employee dyad progresses along a trust continuum: every relationship starts out at a transactional arms-length trust phase, with only some relationships progressing to a transformational side-by-side trust phase. I believe this relationship was explicated in the findings section, where managers' initial response to a special request seemed to orient around determining the details of the request and making the best managerial decision, i.e., the Objective 7Q.

Manager (*I*) → Employee (*Thou*). This relationship is barely reflected in current i-deal and LMX literature, as most of this literature is quantitative in nature. As it relates to i-deals, this is exactly the type of relationship researchers warn against; managers who encounter employees as *Thou* are prone to make decisions that could be characterized as favoritism. Instead, managers should be able to justify their decisions using objective criteria (see Rousseau's i-deal criteria on pp. 23-24). In fact, as Rousseau, who originally conceptualized the concept of i-deals, makes

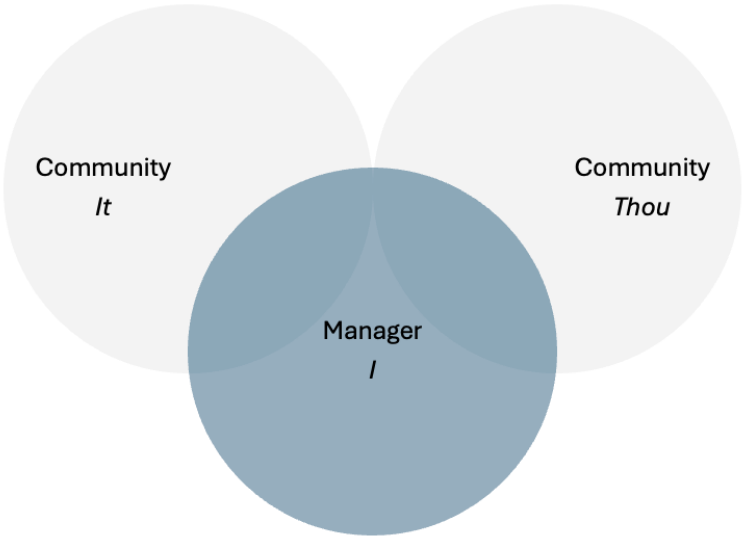
clear, when managers don't make decisions objectively, they transform a potential i-deal into a "shady" deal (see Table 2).

As it relates to LMX, this perhaps reflects a high-level manager-employee relationship, but one would never know—one *could* never know. In a sense, LMX could be read as reflecting the Buberian *It* and *Thou* distinction: managers engage "out" group employees via the *It* mode of being; managers engage "in" group employees via the *Thou* mode of being. One challenge is that LMX researchers have shifted away from the in-out group dichotomy in favor of a continuum of favored relationships, thus making it impossible to quantitively bifurcate between an out-group (*I-It*) relationship versus an in-group (*I-Thou*) relationship. Also, LMX researchers have consistently advocated for managers to eliminate any differentiated treatment toward their employees. Various LMM approaches have proffered ways for managers to create high-value (*I-Thou*) relationships with all employees. We've already covered these LMM approaches and their challenges in the literature review section. Buber's exalted melancholy only adds to the nonfeasibility of this approach, as it challenges any attempt that seeks to foster and maintain exclusively *I-Thou* relations.

During the phenomenological material gathering process, several managers expressed a desire to want to connect more deeply with the requesting employee. For instance, they said that when an employee came to them with a request for special treatment, they might ask for more details about why the request was important to the employee. In some sense, this could be seen as an example of a manager turning toward an *I-Thou* encounter with the employee. But, again, it's imperative to emphasize that true *I-Thou* relation defies description—it is incommensurable. So, I am only alluding to managers' examples that might point to an authentic encounter; I cannot say what an authentic Manager *I* - Employee *Thou* relationship is, much less describe it.

Figure 19

Manager as I to Community It or Thou



Manager (*I*) → Community (*It*). This relationship is not reflected formally in existing i-deal and LMX literature. While both i-deal and LMX researchers note various relationships managers consider when faced with a special request (e.g., Rousseau's "interested third parties" when it comes to i-deals; CWX, or co-worker exchange, related to the LMX relationship), neither concept includes the community in any existing means of measurement. I believe this relationship was explicated in the findings section, where, after managers' initial Objective 7Q approach was deemed insufficient, they often oriented around determining how the request highlighted existential questions about the meaning of rules, the community's approach to rules, and the manager's identity within the organization, i.e., the Subjective 7Q. I believe I also explored this relationship in this discussion section in those sections related to managers' turning to the space, to the request, to the rules, to the rulers, and to the community's reasons.

Manager (*I*) → Community (*Thou*). This relationship is also not addressed in existing i-deal and LMX literature, as it defies definition and categorization. As far as i-deals go, managers might have possibly alluded to this relationship through their attempts to align with the

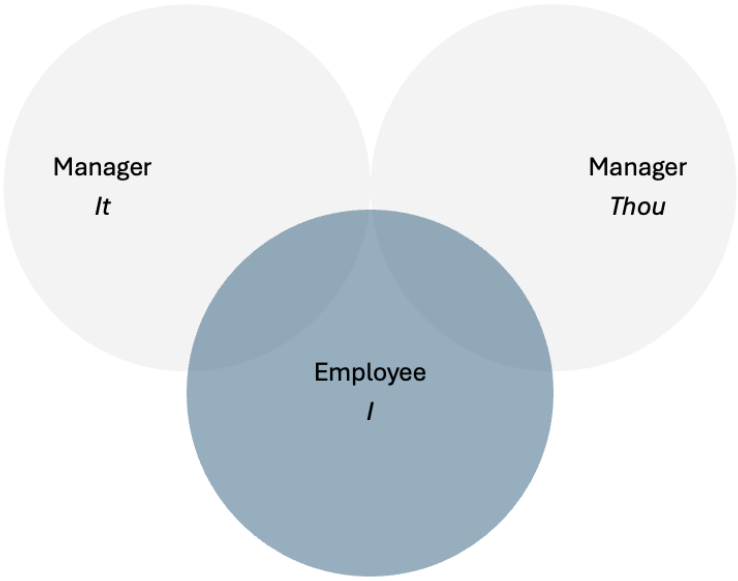
community culture or "form of life." Several managers mentioned how the official rules may have indicated one response, but the "real" rules indicated another, reflecting an understanding that the community as a whole resisted any form of narrow typification. Several managers noted how their communities or cultures have changed over time, highlighting the dynamic rather than static aspect of their relationship vis-à-vis the community.

In terms of LMX, while it might make sense intuitively that a manager of a manager-employee dyad is also the employee of a different manager-employee dyad (i.e., the manager's manager is the manager of the latter dyad), this dynamic operates outside of the LMX concept. Leader-Leader Exchange (LLX) addresses this relationship between the manager and the manager's manager; LLX has been shown to moderate the effects of LMX on various group outcomes (Herdman et al., 2014). I am unaware of any scale that includes these dual LLX and LMX dyads together. And even if we were to extend the manager-employee dyad to this higher level (the LLX dyad), it would still fail to fall within the existing LMX model. For in the LMX model, it's the leader/manager who controls the level of relationship between the dyadic partners (e.g., LMM is always conceptualized as something the leader/manager does, not something the employee does). Therefore, in LLX language, it would be the managers' manager (who ostensibly might represent the community here, but that oversimplifies the complexity of the challenge of community as noted previously) who determines the relational quality. In other words, even if the manager and community were considered in the LMX model, the relationship would be reversed for this relationship type.

Manager as Object

Figure 20

Manager as It or Thou to Employee I



Employee (*I*) → Manager (*It*). After the manager *I* – employee *It* relationship, this relationship enjoys the next level of prominence in the i-deal and LMX literature. And this is partly what causes confusion when looking at the convergence of i-deal and LMX concepts. As mentioned previously, on the one hand, i-deals are usually measured from the manager's perspective. On the other hand, LMX is usually measured from the employee's perspective.[30] In Buberian language, we might say that we're conflating the two modes of being: for i-deals, we're exploring the manager *I* – employee *It* mode, and for LMX we're exploring the reverse employee *I* – manager *It* mode.

From a phenomenological perspective, even though I didn't interview "employees," several of the participant managers shared experiences of when they themselves requested special treatment, i.e., when they themselves were the employee in the manager-employee dyad. In these experiences, the manager *I* distinguished between bosses who they saw as *It* versus those

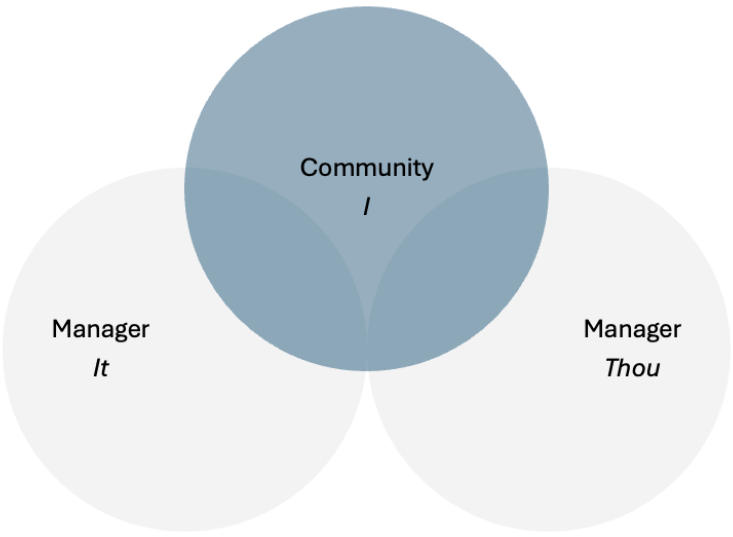
[30] For both i-deals and LMX, this is not inherent in how they are conceptualized; rather, this is what researchers have observed has occurred in their research design and measurement.

they saw as *Thou*. The former bosses were seen as policy-enforcing mechanisms, or bureaucratic obstacles in the way of their achieving their specialized work arrangement.

Employee (*I*) → Manager (*Thou*). While this relationship defies identification and therefore cannot be reflected in existing quantitative i-deal and LMX literature, it seemed to have bubbled up in the phenomenological material gathering. As just mentioned, some managers shared how, when they requested special treatment, they sometimes felt as if they had engaged with their manager via *I-Thou* mode of encounter. For some, this could stem from a long history of working together. For others, it seems to emerge from alignment in working styles. For still others, it came down to something fundamental such as friendship. Instead of viewing their bosses as a certain *It* (e.g., a strict versus a flexible manager), these managers saw their managers in their depths of complexity. They didn't simply see the boss as a beetle or a tree but instead engaged with their boss in mutual relation.

Figure 21

Manager as It or Thou to Community I



Community (*I*) → Manager (*It*). This relationship sees very sparse coverage in the i-deal and LMX literature. As far as i-deals go, this is a tricky one. As Rousseau highlights (see

Table 1), for a specialized working arrangement to be considered an i-deal, the only two beneficiaries are the employee and the organization. If the manager also benefits, this disqualifies the arrangement as an i-deal and instead categorizes it as a shady deal. Ostensibly, this requires the organization to have input into whether it indeed benefits from this proposed arrangement; it cannot be left alone for the manager to parse out the benefits here. But I'm not aware of anyone noting in the i-deal literature how exactly the organization (or the community in Kripke/Wittgensteinian language) comes to provide this input. In short, this relationship is alluded to in the literature, but it is not measured.

How, indeed, could one identify the relevant community to survey? This returns us to our challenge of community. Previously, I discussed the challenge of managers in identifying to which community do they turn to for guidance in managing these special requests. For both i-deal and LMX researchers, this challenge is perhaps even more challenging. Who makes up a community? Even if one could possibly differentiate between communities, how could one know which communities related to which managers? Of course, most organizations have formal reporting lines, but we're talking about all types of relationships, not just the official hierarchical ones.

Philosophically, I believe this relationship reflects Kripke's strict mode of trust, where the community relates to the manager in an *I-It* mode—the manager becomes an object to be verified, checked, and held accountable through external criteria. The community affords the manager strict trust, where their motto might be: trust but verify. That is, a manager might be trusted to manage a special request, but how they manage that request is subject to verification against the community's form on life. The community and manager must thus speak in chorus, using public language (i.e., language games reflecting the community's form of life) to align

shared beliefs and practices. In this type of relationship, the manager feels compelled to show their beetle in their box, i.e., they need to expose what's in the space between request and response.

Community (*I*) → Manager (*Thou*). For this final relationship, we again stumble upon the incommensurability of describing any form of authentic encounter. I have not found any examples where i-deal and LMX researchers have explored this type of mutual relating between community and manager. And for all the benefits of LMX theory, perhaps one of its limitations is that it focuses on singular manager-employee dyadic partners.

The challenge of community previously noted in the community *I* - manager *It* relationship would likely apply to this relationship as well, making it virtually impossible for any quantitative researchers to measure this type of relationship. In addition, beyond identifying any form of community which could be surveyed, how could one survey them? An authentic encounter cannot be reduced down to a set of items within a scale. Only qualitative research can explore this type of relationship. And while a qualitative study cannot definitively measure this relationship, it may be able to identify some form of meaning associated with it, such as the structures of consciousness that describe the essence of this phenomenon.

From a philosophical lens, I believe this type of relationship reflects Kripke's liberal mode of trust. The community relates to the manager in an *I-Thou* mode where the manager is not associated with any particular, static trait or characterization (i.e., typification). Instead, the community encounters the manager as a trusted member whose relational wisdom is recognized and respected. The community affords the manager liberal trust, and their motto might be: trust in the person. The manager is trusted to manage the special request in line with the manager's relational wisdom. This means the manager doesn't turn exclusively to the request, the rules, the

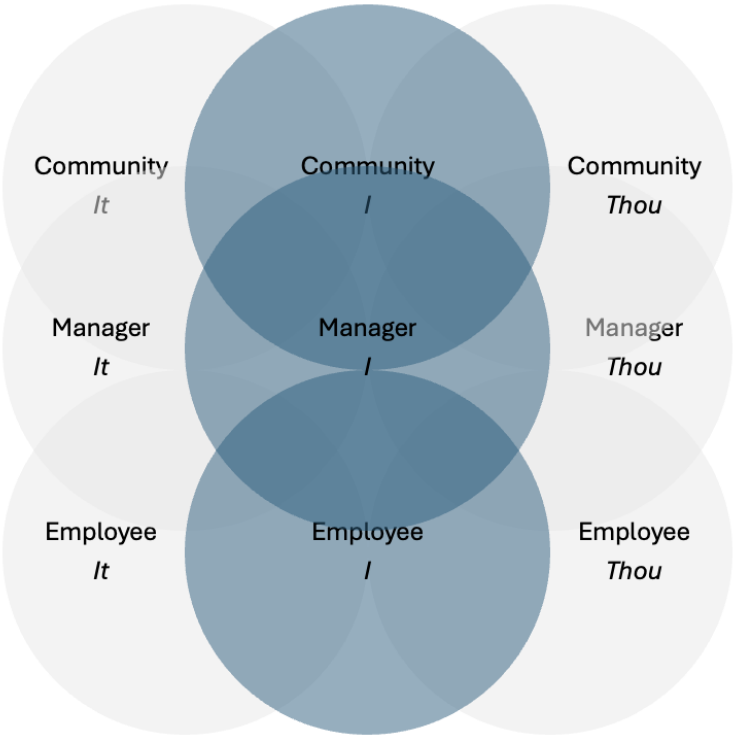
rulers, or the community's reasons. Importantly, the manager doesn't disregard any of these things, either. Like Buber's tree analogy, the manager instead turns to the totality of the *Thou*. For some managers, it may be something outside of what we've explored in this study; the scope of *I-Thou* is unlimited. In turn, just as the manager doesn't restrict their mode to a specific *It*, the community doesn't restrict their trust to a specific *It* displayed by the manager. As Kipke noted: "there should be some rules where there is no way for others to check his mastery, but where that mastery is simply presumed on the basis of his membership in the community" (p. 104).

I argue that, at least philosophically, it's possible for communities and managers to *think in chorus*, where both parties utilize something akin to a private language (even though Wittgenstein argues this is not a thing; however, Kripke allows for this liberal interpretation as a primitive feature of the language game) to continually modulate shared beliefs and practices, i.e., the community's shared "form of life". In this environment of liberal trust, the community does not require the manager to show what's in their box. Their beetle may remain hidden. Again, there may in fact be nothing at all in the box. Either way, the community does not need to see what's in the box. In this type of relationship, the manager can keep the space between request and response concealed. Over time, this trust is strengthened or weakened (and may eventually revert back to strict trust) by the community's continual assessment of the manager's decision making.

Subject-Object Relational Dynamics

Figure 22

Manager, Employee, and Community as Subject-Object



Only adding to this relational complexity is the fact that these dynamics do not occur in isolation. That is, it's not like the community only relates to the manager as an *It* and the manager only relates to the employee as a *Thou*. Or it's not like the manager only relates to the community as *Thou* and is related to by the employee only as an *It*. These complex relational fields are constantly shifting. And to top it all off, it's critical to emphasize how these relational dynamics are often hidden—even to those involved. They are indescribable and unknowable.

Recall how Matta and Van Dyne (2015) underscored the misalignment of LMX perception. And this is just the single manager-employee dyadic relationship. How much more difficult might it be to measure these numerous, complex, and dynamic *I-It* and *I-Thou* relationships—in real time, no less! Not only might it be impossible to measure, but one can only imagine how much misalignment there could be when asking parties to identify, describe, and measure these modes of being and their attendant modes of trust.

Finally, in line with Buber's exalted melancholy, every one of these possible *I-Thou* relationships inevitably becomes an *I-It* relationship. For example, the Manager *I* → Employee *Thou* relationship is more accurately depicted as Manager *I* → Employee *Thou* → Exalted melancholy → Manager *I* → Employee *It*. Yet this melancholy need not represent a permanent loss. While every *Thou* must become an *It*, every *It* retains the potential to become *Thou* once again. The manager's decision about the special request—however analytical it becomes—enters into the ongoing relational history between the manager and the employee. Consider the cyclical nature of this dynamic: the employee makes a special request (*I* approaching manager as potential *Thou*). The manager encounters the employee authentically, seeing beyond the request to the person making it (*I-Thou* moment). Organizational demands assert themselves—policies must be considered, precedents evaluated, fairness maintained—requiring the encounter to crystallize into decision-making (*Thou* becoming *It*). The manager communicates the decision and its rationale. But this communication itself creates the possibility for renewed encounter. The manager's response, the employee's reaction, the manager's ongoing attention to how the decision affects the relationship, and the gradual building of trust or erosion of trust, becomes the foundation for the next potential *I-Thou* moment. The two modes of being are in constant flux.

Summary

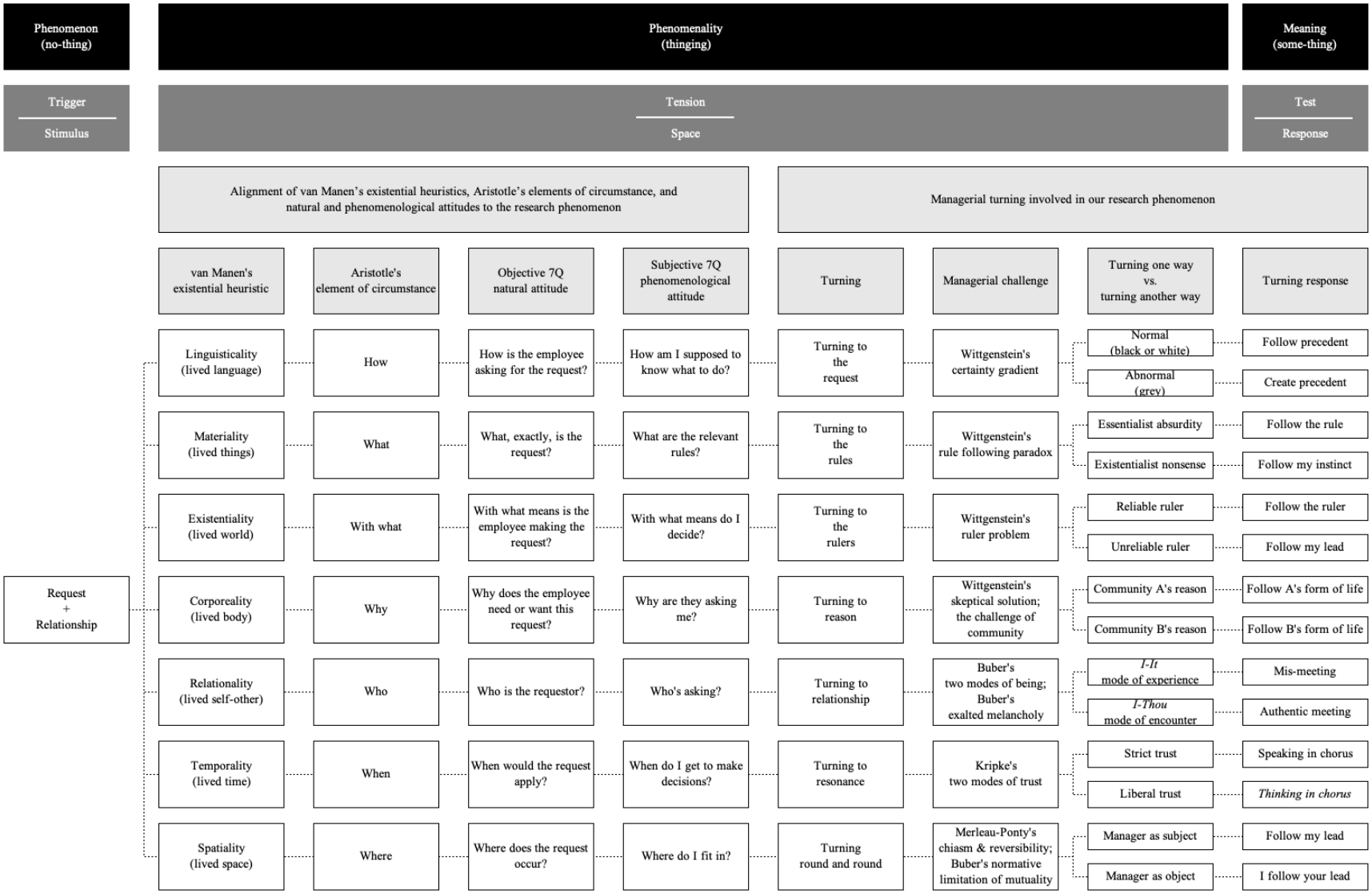
Figure 23[31] provides a conceptual diagram of *a* possible interpretation of managers' lived experience with the research phenomenon. It combines (a) the gathered phenomenological material which I organized into the Objective 7Q and Subjective 7Q in the findings section and

[31] In Figure 23, it's important to note that the "Turning one way vs. turning another way" column only serves to distinguish between turnings at the row level. Each row of turning operates independently of the other rows. For example, the essentialist absurdity of turning one way when turning to the rules is not correlated to speaking in chorus when turning to resonance.

(b) my phenomenological analysis which I organized as managerial turnings in the discussion section.

Figure 23

Conceptual Diagram of Managerial Turning Round and Round When Experiencing the Research Phenomenon



The managerial journey from stimulus to response is explicated through a thorough analysis of the space between stimulus and response. The special request triggers a plethora of reflective introspective turns managers seem to experience before coming to a response. Notice the response is embedded within the turning, i.e., the manager must usually respond before they can fully settle into turning either one way versus another way. Notably, the response is not depicted as a concrete reply to the request. While this is often part of the response, the larger dynamic uncovered through this phenomenological study is how the request has affected the manager. Thus, the greater emphasis of the response is that managers find themselves reflecting on their role in relationship with the people around them. What started out as an employee's "simple" request for special treatment turns out to be rather complex, leading the manager to re-orient themselves within their world.

This diagram should not be understood as depicting clear, discreet pathways managers take from stimulus to response (hence the use of dotted rather than solid lines connecting everything from Request + Relationship to Turning response). Each response does not represent a specific endpoint; rather, managers seem to experience multiple turnings when experiencing this phenomenon, leading to multiple responses reflecting multiple perspectives. And managers often turn one way for one request and another way for another request. This diagram offers a perspective of past managerial experience; it does not offer a prescription for future managerial behavior.

Turning to the request itself led managers to Wittgenstein's normal-abnormal dilemma: nothing in the request itself could determine whether it was normal or abnormal. In other words, was this really a request for special treatment or was it more of a request for something within the bounds of normalcy?

Managers oftentimes turned to the rules. A special request is, after all, a request to bend or break the rules, so a clear understanding of the rules should prove helpful, right? Well, as we saw with our managers' lived experiences, the rules themselves don't seem to provide the help we seek, reflecting Wittgenstein's rule following paradox, which posits that rules by themselves do not define their own meaning, i.e., rules are up for interpretation. Earlier, I mentioned how managers differentiate differences differently. This seems to be the case for how managers choose between not only which rules apply to certain circumstances, but in how such rules are to be interpreted.

What about turning to those who create and enforce the rules: the rulers? If rules are open to interpretation, it may help to glean insight from those with the most experience in dealing with the rules. But as we saw during our research process, different managers have different approaches to the rules. Whereas Wittgenstein's rule following paradox highlights how rules themselves are open to interpretation, Wittgenstein's ruler problem highlights how those who do the interpretation are often less than reliable. That is, not only can we not turn to the rules for guidance, but we also can't turn to those who interpret the rules, either.

What if we look beyond individual interpretation (the rules) and those individuals who do the interpretation (the rulers)? What if, instead, we turn to the community or communities in which these rules and rulers reside? What if we turn to the underlying communally-agreed upon reasons upon which the rules lie? Alas, we run into another Wittgensteinian challenge. After setting up his skeptical problem—that we cannot tell by looking at someone *in isolation* if they are following a rule, and more so, that there is no way to communicate this fact to anyone else, hence, no private language is possible—Wittgenstein (according to Kripke) introduces his skeptical solution: we can look at how someone acts *within a community* to determine if they are

following a rule according to the community's form of life, and more so, we can communicate this determination via the public language games embedded within the community. However, neither Wittgenstein nor Kripke offer guidance in terms of how one is to determine *which* community makes these determinations. That is, the skeptical solution offers *the* community as the solution, but it doesn't consider that people are embedded in multiple overlapping communities. Just as different managers differentiate differences differently, so too do different communities. So, managers are again left turning from one side to another, or between one community and another (perhaps wondering, like Alice when facing the mushroom, "and now which is which?") unsure of which direction leads to a proper and appropriate response to the employee's request.

We find that managers' turning to the request, to the rules, to the rulers, or to community reasons often proves unsatisfactory. Is there something similar to these approaches? Buber might argue that these turnings represent various attempts to understand the phenomenon through the *I-It* mode of experience. Instead of trying to dissect the phenomenon into manageable, discrete things, managers sometimes find more luck in approaching the requesting employee entirely, completely, through the *I-Thou* mode of encounter. Buber's two modes of being thus contrast a more managerial approach that mirrors modern society's push toward objectification (the *I-It* mode) with a more visceral approach that reflects primitive society's embrace of presence (the *I-Thou* mode). Alas, Buber himself acknowledged that the *I-Thou* mode is always inevitably fleeting; the exalted melancholy of our lives is that every *Thou* must eventually become an *It*. So even those managers who find mutual meeting with the requesting employee in that space between request and response must eventually materialize a response. It's not that Buber's turn to relationship isn't palatable, it's just not sustainable.

We find managers engaging in an almost ethereal turning to resonance. This turning defies description, though we may see allusions to it in various sources. Kripke alludes to two modes of trust: the first level of trust (what I'm calling strict trust) involves a community trusting an individual to adhere to the community's form of life; the second level of trust (what I'm calling liberal trust) involves a community trusting an individual to exercise practical and relational wisdom to make independent decisions that may not conform to the existing form of life. We might say that Buber's two modes of being also align with this concept: the *I-It* mode aligning with strict trust, in that the community trusts the manager to exercise discretion that leads to approved *It*s (e.g., "people like us do things (*Its*) like this"); and the *I-Thou* mode aligning with liberal trust, where the community trusts in the manager (e.g., "people (*Thou*) like us do things like this…but they have the freedom to do things as they wish"). And we might say that Carroll alluded to this type of turning in providing the vivid image of a group speaking in chorus as well as *thinking in chorus*: speaking in chorus aligning with strict trust, where the community and manager are able to adapt to one another based on shared, observable behaviors and language; *thinking in chorus* aligning with liberal trust, where the community and manager have no shared, observable behaviors and language to get in sync. Of course, how a group could achieve such synchronicity without any external reference is inconceivable, hence Carroll admitting that he doesn't really know what *thinking in chorus* means! And remember, Kripke admits he's not sure if there is such a thing as a strict versus liberal trust distinction (i.e., he's not sure what Wittgenstein's perspective was on the matter). So far be it from me to state without such similar reservations that these concepts are related. But they just might be! When listening to and pondering over the participating managers' descriptions of their lived experiences, I continually found myself turning toward this idea that one of the structures of consciousness

underlying this phenomenon is this sense of trying to distinguish between those times that managers felt they were speaking in chorus and those times they felt they were *thinking in chorus* in relation to their communities.

Finally, we might say that managers find themselves turning round and round as they attempt to make meaning of their experience with this phenomenon. As they turn to the request, to the rules, to the rulers, to reasons, to relationship, and to resonance, they come to realize that they are but a part of a larger relational field—they are not the only ones turning round and round. For example, while the manager may perceive that they are *thinking in chorus* with a community (engaged in liberal trust emanating from a genuine *I-Thou* encounter), the community may perceive they are merely speaking in chorus (engaged in strict trust emanating from an *I-It* experience). While the manager might understand the relationship between themself and the employee as one of an *I-It* nature, the employee may understand it to be one of an *I-Thou* nature. In reflecting upon their experiences as managers to whom special requests were directed, managers inevitably called upon their own experiences as special requestors. They also called upon experiences where they were neither requestor nor manager but were nevertheless involved in the process. These experiences helped the managers articulate this final aspect of turning we saw within the phenomenalization of this phenomenon.

Limitations

Limits of Experience

This study represents my first attempt at phenomenological research, which inevitably shapes both the quality of the inquiry and the depth of the analysis. "Knowing" what I know now, I'd probably take a different approach, e.g., I could have added additional focus groups; I might have asked participants to explore their lived experiences in forms other than language, such as

by sharing art that resonated with their experiences. But, of course, this is likely going to happen with any research study—especially one that's exploratory in nature. This is perhaps less of a limitation as it is a recognition of the iterative nature of this type of research; we learn as we go. If I were to continue with this study, I'm confident I'd approach it from a more mature and nuanced perspective. As Winston Churchill (1942) said: "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning" (November 10, 1942). This research represents perhaps the end of the beginning of my understanding of this phenomenon; I look forward to continuing along this adventure.

My goal throughout this process was not to be exclusively grafted with my participants' words (which I don't think is even possible). At the same time, my goal certainly wasn't to share my experience only (or there would have been no need for the study at all!). Instead, my goal was a blending of reflections, of experience—what van Manen (2016) describes as the creation of a "phenomenological text" that emerges from the dialogue between researcher and participants, between individual experience and intersubjective meaning. But of course, the exact location on the continuum of blending of these aims is not only based on my differentiation. It's dynamic; I can't really explain how and why and when I chose to focus on certain reflections and not others**.** It's hard to discriminate between times when it seems as if a participants' words become emergent or when I found something I was looking for. I recall William James's (1890) sentiment: "My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind" (p. 403). Like the participant managers, I find it difficult if not impossible to fully reflect on my own experience in conducting this research.

Limits of Phenomenological Methodology

As with any research approach, phenomenological inquiry brings both possibilities and constraints that must be acknowledged. The choice to focus on lived experience rather than measurable outcomes means that this study cannot provide definitive answers about which approaches to special requests are most effective in terms of organizational performance, employee satisfaction, or other quantifiable measures. Moreover, the phenomenological focus on meaning and interpretation means that findings cannot be directly generalized to other organizational contexts without careful attention to the specific circumstances and cultural factors that shape how special requests are experienced in different settings. As a reminder, my aim wasn't to discover how managers *should* manage these requests, or even how they *do* manage them; it was only to explore how they actually *experience* them. The phenomenological method is a complement rather than a replacement for other types of investigative query.

Limits of Phenomenological Philosophy

This is perhaps where we need to acknowledge the limits of phenomenological philosophy itself. The aim of phenomenology is to make sense of *experience*, or the *I-It* mode of being. Phenomenology seems to have limited applicability to the sense of *relating-encounter*, or the *I-Thou* mode of being. Indeed, van Manen (2016) goes so far as to state that phenomenology *is* language (p. 237). Yet Wittgenstein, Kripke, Buber, and Carroll seem to point to something beyond language, something that cannot be understood, cannot be experienced, can only be encountered.

Phenomenology seems to operate at the chasm between our search for meaning and the inevitable need to use language to try to understand such meaning. On the one hand, we constantly seek to make meaning of our lives. As Mezirow (1991) notes: "No need is more

fundamentally human than our need to understand the meaning of our experience" (p. 11). On the other hand, philosopher and spiritual teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti (1954) had this to say on pausing before we judge everything: "The ability to observe without evaluating is the highest form of intelligence" (p. 80). Whereas phenomenology seeks to address this fundamental human need to understand the meaning of our experience, Wittgenstein/Kripke's liberal trust, Buber's relational philosophy, and Carroll's *thinking in chorus* seem to seek to address a different need: a need to connect more than understand. It seems these concepts take over where phenomenology can no longer travel: beyond language, beyond meaning, to pure existence, pure connection, pure being. This limitation suggests that while phenomenological inquiry can illuminate the structures of consciousness regarding managerial experience with special requests, it cannot fully capture or convey the relational dimensions that may be most essential for authentic or existential leadership. The moments of genuine encounter between managers and employees may be precisely those that escape phenomenological analysis.

Reflections on Future Inquiry: Research and Practice

This phenomenological exploration sought to illuminate managers' lived experiences when employees request special treatment within differentiated relational contexts. As van Manen (2016) reminds us, phenomenology "aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (p. 9). But what does one do with such understanding once achieved (assuming, of course, that understanding *was* actually achieved)? What follows are my reflections on where this research might point—both for scholars who might want to investigate these phenomena further and for practitioners who are living through them right now.

As a reminder: phenomenology doesn't prescribe solutions. It illuminates experience, reveals structures of consciousness, opens questions, invites reflection. It doesn't tell people what

to do. So when I discuss practical implications in what follows, I'm offering my own reflections on what these phenomenological insights might invite us to consider, not claims about what organizations *should* do. The distinction matters, and I'll return to it at the end.

Concepts That Emerged Worth Wrestling With

Three specific concepts emerged from the phenomenological material that current literature doesn't quite seem to capture. I offer these not as answers but as provocations—things that surprised me, that the participant managers and I kept circling back to, that seem to matter even though (perhaps especially because) we're not entirely sure what to do with them.

Inherited I-Deals: When Arrangements Transfer and Nobody Knows Quite What to Do. Perhaps the most surprising pattern in the phenomenological material—certainly the one that kept showing up in ways I didn't expect—was what participants and I came to call inherited i-deals. These are specialized employment arrangements that transfer when either the employee or the manager changes positions. You become responsible for managing an i-deal you didn't negotiate. Or an employee arrives on your team with a deal struck with their previous manager. Or you inherit a whole team of people with various special arrangements already in place, and nobody's entirely clear anymore which ones are still operative or why they were granted in the first place.

Current i-deal literature conceptualizes these arrangements as dyadic negotiations between specific managers and employees, characterized by mutual alignment and bilateral agreement (Rousseau, 2005). The theory suggests these should benefit the employee and the organization, but not the manager—if they benefit the manager, they're "shady deals" reflecting favoritism. By this logic, inherited i-deals shouldn't matter much to managers since they're merely continuing objectively beneficial arrangements someone else negotiated.

But the phenomenological material suggests this isn't how managers actually experience inherited i-deals. They *do* matter. Relational dynamics shape how managers experience these inherited arrangements in ways that current theory hasn't addressed. Several participants described inheriting arrangements that made perfect sense in one relational context but felt awkward, unfair, or administratively bizarre in another. The i-deal itself hadn't changed, but the relational field within which it operated had shifted.

For researchers, inherited i-deals invite investigation of how these arrangements affect relationship development, perceived fairness, organizational commitment, and the temporal dimensions of differentiated treatment. Do inherited arrangements create unique challenges? How do managers make sense of managing differentiation they didn't create? What happens when deals must be renegotiated across transitions? Can an i-deal negotiated in one relational context maintain its meaning when transferred to another? (My instinct says no, but I'm genuinely curious what empirical research might reveal.)

For practitioners, this phenomenon raises questions about organizational transitions more broadly. The phenomenological material suggests that what gets transferred during succession isn't only tasks and responsibilities but also relational commitments embedded in prior arrangements. Organizations might consider: How are inherited arrangements currently handled? What happens when transitions occur with little transparency about existing deals? How might new managers be better supported in navigating arrangements they inherit? What gets lost when an i-deal loses its original relational context?

Community-Leader Exchange: The Challenge of Multiple Accountabilities. While relationship quality between managers and individual employees has received extensive attention through LMX theory, and the manager's relationship with their own supervisor has been

examined through LLX theory, the phenomenological material revealed something more complex: managers simultaneously navigate relationships with multiple organizational communities, such as boards, senior leadership teams, peer managers, HR departments—multiple constituencies, each potentially holding different expectations about how special requests should be handled.

This points toward what might be called Community-Leader Exchange (CLX)—the collective relationship quality between managers and the organizational communities to which they're accountable. While LMX and LLX focus on dyadic relationships, CLX would capture how managers experience evaluation and trust from multiple constituencies simultaneously. Perhaps managers develop what might be called a "looking-glass self" (Mead, 1934) at the community level—they don't know with certainty what form of trust the community extends, but they develop perceptions (accurate or not) that shape how they navigate special requests.

For researchers, this concept invites extension of existing relationship theories to account for collective dynamics. How does relationship quality with multiple communities shape managerial discretion? Do communities consciously differentiate between managers? What happens when different communities hold conflicting expectations? The concept could be developed theoretically and perhaps empirically, though—and this is a significant caveat—measuring collective relationship quality raises all the same challenges that plague LMX research, multiplied by the difficulty of even identifying which communities matter for which managers (the challenge of community addressed in the turning to reason section).

For practitioners, the emergence of something like CLX in the phenomenological material might invite reflection on questions like: Which communities hold me accountable, and for what? How do I build and maintain trust across multiple constituencies? What happens when

expectations conflict? How visible are these multiple accountabilities, and what would it mean to make them more navigable?

Relational Wisdom: The Authorization Gap Nobody Talks About. Throughout the phenomenological material, a distinction emerged between what leadership literature calls practical wisdom—knowing what to do and how to do it—and something else entirely. Something that has to do with authorization rather than capacity. Aristotle's *phronesis*, popularized in organizational contexts by Schwartz and Sharpe (2010) as practical wisdom, focuses on developing the *ability* to make good decisions. Build your judgment, cultivate your character, study exemplars, practice making wise choices, and over time you'll get better at it. This is compelling. It's also, I believe, incomplete.

Participants in this study faced a more fundamental challenge: they often didn't know whether they had *permission* to exercise whatever practical wisdom they'd developed. They had the capacity; they weren't sure about the authorization. Drawing on Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein's rule-following paradox and private language argument, I've termed this relational wisdom—the capacity to navigate organizational life when one cannot know with certainty which form of trust the community extends. Does the community expect strict trust, requiring external verification of decisions against established criteria? Or does it extend liberal trust, presuming competence based on demonstrated membership? This creates what might be called an authorization gap—the space between having developed the capacity to make wise decisions and knowing whether one has permission to exercise that capacity.

Over time, managers seemed to develop a feeling for whether their communities trust their judgment or their rule-following. But this feeling was never certain. It *couldn't* be certain—not in principle. The form of trust could shift as either the manager or the community changed.

Several participants reflected on how their comfort with this irreducible uncertainty evolved over their careers. Some described early-career anxiety about whether they were allowed to use judgment. Others spoke of gradually learning to read community signals, though they acknowledged these readings remained fundamentally interpretive and fallible.

What struck me about this distinction—practical versus relational wisdom—is that current leadership development almost entirely ignores it. We teach managers decision-making frameworks, ethical reasoning, stakeholder analysis. We build their practical wisdom. But we don't teach them how to navigate the authorization gap—or that such a thing even exists. We don't acknowledge that sometimes the problem isn't that you don't know what the wise decision would be; it's that you don't know whether you're allowed to make it.

For researchers, this distinction invites investigation of how managers develop sensitivity to community trust, whether there are developmental stages in comfort with epistemic uncertainty, and how organizations enable or constrain managerial discretion. The connection to adult development theory seems particularly promising. Kegan's (1994) stages describe increasingly complex ways of making meaning, moving from concrete rule-following through abstract principle-application toward dialectical integration of multiple perspectives. Perhaps relational wisdom represents a developmental achievement—the ability to hold both practical wisdom (I know what seems right) and epistemic humility (I don't know if I'm authorized to act on it) simultaneously without collapsing into either analysis paralysis or recklessness.

For practitioners, the emergence of relational wisdom raises provocative questions: How do organizations currently communicate trust expectations to managers? What happens when managers feel they lack authorization even when they have capacity and vice versa? How might leadership development acknowledge this authorization gap rather than promise decision-making

certainty? What would it mean to cultivate comfort with irreducible uncertainty rather than attempting to eliminate ambiguity through clearer policies or better training?

Methodological Reflections

Sample: Beyond the Dyad. Future research could benefit from expanding the sample to include managers from different cultural backgrounds, organizational contexts, and levels of authority. For example, comparative studies examining how special requests are experienced in different national cultures could illuminate the role of cultural assumptions in shaping managerial decision-making.

I mentioned in the methodology section that one of the weaknesses of existing i-deal and LMX research is the focus on only one side of the manager-employee dyad—usually focusing on only the manager's perspective for i-deals and only the employee's perspective for LMX. While this study adds a significant layering of managerial perspective, future research could explore the dyadic nature of these encounters by interviewing both managers and employees involved in specific special request situations. Such research could illuminate how different perspectives of the same events contribute to the overall meaning of the phenomenon. Indeed, several managers and I engaged in dialogues where we wondered what the employee's perspective was vis-à-vis their (the managers') perspective. The only way to find this out is to include the employee's voice in the phenomenological inquiry.

Additionally, by exploring the manager-employee dyad, we might also gain insight into those situations where the manager is the one requesting the special request. As noted earlier in the turning round and round section, every manager of a manager-employee dyad is also an

employee of another, higher-level manager-employee (LLX) dyad.[32] This introduces complication into identifying where the edges of the sample lie, i.e., how many levels of dyads should be included? That is, how many levels are affected by a request for special treatment? As with many of the organizational dynamics we've explored, those edges are far from definitive and constantly in flux.

Beyond the dyadic level, future research may be enhanced by studying this phenomenon at the team and organizational level. As noted in the turning to reason section, the challenge of community involves community differentiation related to values around rules. Studying this community variance within organizations and even entire industries could help illuminate the challenge of community beyond the managerial level. Of course, my previous comments about the challenge of identifying these communities still holds here.

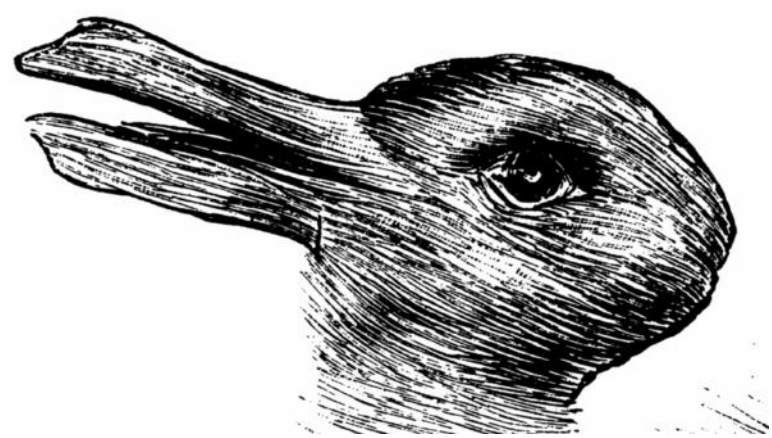
Turning Round and Round. Robbins et al (2019) provide the example of the well-known duck-rabbit ambiguous figure (as shown in Figure 24) to explain the noema-noesis relationship:

Figure 24

Duck-Rabbit Ambiguous Figure[33]

[32] Technically, the CEO/President of an organization does not have a higher-level manager to which they would belong in such a manager-employee dyad. But even the CEO/President reports to a board, so there is some hierarchical relationship to explore, just perhaps outside of the traditional LMX or LLX constructs. The board chair might represent the leader in the leader-member or leader-leader dyad and the full board might represent the community in the community-manager relationship.

[33] From "The Mind's Eye," by J. Jastrow, 1899, Popular Science Monthly, 54, p. 312. In the public domain.



> When you see the rabbit, then the rabbit is the noematic content of consciousness. But this content is also revealed against a background—a horizon that recedes into the background as the image emerges into the foreground of perception. Then, I see the duck. Now, the duck is the noematic content of consciousness. Now I can switch back and forth. Duck, rabbit, duck, rabbit, etc. The act of switching between duck and rabbit is an act of consciousness—it is noetic. But as an aspect of the noesis, it is not directly given in the duck-rabbit display, but revealed in the way the duck-rabbit figure shows itself, through the switching back and forth at will from duck to rabbit and back again.
>
> The noesis is not some object over and against the duck-rabbit ambiguous figure. It is the acts by which the duck-rabbit image can appear as it does to awareness in the very way that it appears. (p.162)

Going back to Wittgenstein's private language argument, according to Kripke, the crux of the argument is that we're social creatures. We ourselves can't tell which of Buber's two modes of being we're in at any given time. We can't tell which of Kripke's two modes of trust we're in. And we can't tell which relationship we're in—are we subject to another object, object to another's subject, or subject-object in a field of relations? We can only tell which mode of being

or trust we are in and which relationship type we're in from the context of our social relations. Like the rabbit-duck, we co-exist simultaneously as potentiality for both modes.

We can look into our box, but we can't make sense of what's in it when *considered in isolation* (with anything that might be called a private language). We can only make sense of what's in the box when considered in community (using public language). We don't know—we *can't* know—whether we're operating in an *I-It* or *I-Thou* mode of being. We don't know—we *can't* know—whether we're afforded strict or liberal trust. We don't know—we *can't* know—whether we're subject *to* another object or object *of* another subject. Our relationships are like beetles! Existing research approaches have tried to identify, describe, and categorize how employees' requests for special treatment take shape for managers within differentiated manager-employee relationships. In doing so, we might argue they are trying to measure how much of the illusion is duck versus how much is rabbit. In effect, it's like they ask—usually only one party to the dyad—what do you see: a duck or a rabbit? And they might ask: what kind of duck or rabbit? I believe further qualitative approaches could explore this illusion from a different perspective. Instead of asking *what* managers see, let's ask them *how* the act of switching between duck and rabbit appears to them in the very way that it appears. It's the difference between *what* one sees and *how* one sees. Taken together, these complementary approaches can help us understand this phenomenon more wholistically.

Conclusion

We began with JL's request for special treatment. While the story is told from JL's point of view, I became curious to understand what the experience was like for his manager. Instead of focusing on *why* the answer went from "no way" to "okay," I wanted to know *how* his manager came to change his mind (or if he didn't and was instead adhering to someone else's decision). I

wanted to know how the space between JL's request and the initial and second responses took shape for JL's manager. More generally, I wanted to know how managers experience this space between request and response.

I used Wittgenstein's beetle-in-a-box thought experiment to introduce the concepts of intersubjectivity and language games and to demonstrate how different groups of people come to understand differentiated treatment and differentiated relationships communally but not universally. I identified a gap in the literature at the convergence of i-deals and LMX: namely, that managers are admonished to treat different employees both similarly (through striving for equal LMX relationships) and differently (through effective use of i-deals) at the same time.

I introduced the phenomenological philosophy which undergirds van Manen's hybrid phenomenological methodology that I've chosen to explicate the essential structures of consciousness related to our research phenomenon. I provided details regarding the research steps I undertook to gather and analyze the rich phenomenological material provided by my co-participant managers.

In the findings section, I introduced the research participants and outlined how they seemed to undergo a journey from the natural attitude (reflected in the Objective 7Q) to the reflective or phenomenological attitude (reflected in the Subjective 7Q). Several illustrative examples were shared which highlighted how the manager's lived experiences aligned with van Manen's existential heuristics and Aristotle's elements of circumstance. An overall sense of ambiguity in light of uncertainty emerged.

Our research question asked how might employees' requests for differential treatment take shape for managers within differentiated manager-employee relationships. Of course, I believe the most Buberian way to answer this question is to say that it doesn't take on any

particular shape at all. Instead, it takes on different shapes at different times depending on many factors, including the manager's background of experience, the relational quality between the manager and employee, and the surrounding environment in which the phenomenon takes place. The research phenomenon doesn't have a shape because—like all other phenomena—it is, in fact, no-thing at all. However, if I were pushed to identify a shape, it would probably be a maze. It seems that for managers, the request thrusts them into a maze where there is possibly a way out, but it is not initially clear which way to turn.[34] Turning one way may lead to a dead end, but turning another way may also lead to a dead end. In the end, the best approach may simply be to move forward, making decisions along the way, and adjusting course as needed given the changing circumstances.

We have explored how, at each turn in this maze, managers are confronted with a challenge. Each of these unique challenges has been given descriptive form by various philosophers, showing how meaning emerges through practice rather than through abstract rules and how authentic relationship involves modes of being and modes of trust that transcend any form of categorical understanding. We saw these challenges exemplified in Alice's wonderful and wonderfully weird adventures through wonderland and the looking-glass world. We explored how these challenges manifested in the specific phenomenon of managers' lived experiences in handling these special requests. Like Alice, our participant managers find themselves in worlds governed by rules that don't always make sense, enforced by authorities who are sometimes inconsistent, and interpreted by communities that don't always agree. Yet also like Alice, they must find ways to act responsibly and authentically within these constraints.

[34] Let's assume this is the type of maze that doesn't have a singular correct path, but rather rewards the player for trying different paths, for exploring different ways of navigating the maze.

I hope to have demonstrated the power and practicality of the phenomenological approach—which is grounded in phenomenological philosophy—in evoking a rich, textured description of this unique and universal phenomenon. I hope to have also highlighted the limitations of phenomenology—and any form of research for that matter—in bringing into focus those things which seem to eternally escape our grasp. Like Alice in the little shop, sometimes the more we try to see something—to turn to "the thing themselves" as Husserl would have us do—, the less clear it gets. Our very act of turning seems to turn things round and round—if not in physical life, then at least in our heads! Some things exist beyond language, beyond research, beyond understanding. This does not make them unimportant. In fact, it reminds me of how magical our existence can be. Perhaps that is the true purpose and power of phenomenology: to remind us that the process of engaging with the world is just as, if not more valuable, than being able to grasp the world. Instead of trying to subdue the world under our control, we can learn to live in mutual relation with the world. Instead of engaging with the world and the people and things within it via the *I-It* mode, we can instead turn to the *I-Thou* mode. Instead of constantly striving to create something out of nothing, maybe we can be satisfied with creating some-thing out of no-thing.

I leave you with these powerful words from the great poet Rainer Maria Rilke's (2016), which I believe touch directly upon how I find myself at the end of this process:

> Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to *love the questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. (p.11)

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Appendix

Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Expedited Review – AP01

Date: August 12, 2024 **IRB#:** 17496

Principal Investigator: Gerry G Ibay
Approval Date: 08/12/2024
Status Report Due: 07/31/2025
Study Title: Treating Different People Differently: A Phenomenological Exploration of a Principal Leadership and Management Paradox
Expedited Category: 7
Collection/Use of PHI: No

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed and granted expedited approval of the above-referenced research study. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

Requirements under the Common Rule have changed. The above-referenced research meets one or more of the circumstances for which continuing review is not required. However, as Principal Investigator of this research, you will be required to submit an annual status report to the IRB.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Obtain informed consent and research privacy authorization using the currently approved, stamped forms and retain all original, signed forms, if applicable.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications.
- Promptly report to the IRB any harm experienced by a participant that is both unanticipated and related per IRB policy.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- **Submit an annual status report to the IRB to provide the study/recruitment status and report all harms and deviations that may have occurred.**
- **Submit a final closure report at the completion of the project.**

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Kendra L Williams-Diehm

Kendra Williams-Diehm, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Document

Dear [X]:

I'm conducting a research project investigating how employees' requests for special treatment might take shape for managers within differentiated manager-employee relationships and am asking for your participation. You were selected as a possible participant because I understand you have a minimum of three years of management experience, you have experience managing a team of at least three direct reports, and you have experience handling at least three requests for special treatment from employees.

What will I be asked to do? If you agree to be in this research, you'll have the option to complete several steps (you won't have to complete all the steps; you'll choose the steps in which you participate) related to your experience of the research phenomenon, including (1) writing a lived experience description, (2) participating in focus groups (there will be one focus group near the beginning of the study and another one near the end of the study), and (3) participating in one or two one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The focus groups and one-on-one interviews will be video and audio recorded, unless you request otherwise. These activities will take place either in-person or virtually according to our agreed preference.

How long will this take? Your participation will vary according to the steps you choose to complete. The written lived experience description should take approximately 30-60 minutes. The focus groups will take approximately 60 minutes (45 minutes of group dialogue followed by 15 minutes of reflective report-out summary facilitated by me). The one-on-one interviews will take approximately 60 minutes. If you choose to participate in all study steps, your total involvement should take approximately five hours (about one hour for the written lived experience description; two hours for two focus groups; two hours for two one-on-one interviews).

Your involvement in this project is completely voluntary and anonymous.

I hope you're able to participate, as your insights are extremely important to me. If you have any questions, please contact me at gerry.ibay@ou.edu or 917-870-2221.

Thank you,
Gerry Ibay

The University of Oklahoma is an equal opportunity institution.



IRB NUMBER: 17496
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 08/12/2024

Appendix C
Oral Consent Form

Oral Consent to Participate in Research
University of Oklahoma

Would you like to be involved in research at the University of Oklahoma?

I am Edwin (Gerry) Ibay from the Organizational and Community Leadership Doctoral Program, and I invite you to participate in my research entitled Treating Different People Differently: A Phenomenological Exploration of a Principal Leadership and Management Paradox. This research is being conducted in-person or virtually depending on participant and researcher preference. You were selected as a possible participant because you have a minimum of three years of management experience, you have experience managing a team of at least three direct reports, and you have experience handling at least three requests for special treatment from employees. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this research.

Please read this document and contact me to ask any questions you may have BEFORE agreeing to participate in my research.

What is the purpose of this research? This research aims to understand how employees' requests for special treatment might take shape for managers within differentiated manager-employee relationships.

How many participants will be in this research? About 10 to 15 people will take part in this research.

What will I be asked to do? If you agree to be in this research, you will have the option to complete several steps (you will not have to complete all the steps; you will choose the steps in which you participate) related to your experience of the research phenomenon, including (1) writing a lived experience description, (2) participating in focus groups (there will be one focus group near the beginning of the study and another one near the end of the study), and (3) participating in one or two one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The focus groups and one-on-one interviews will be video and audio recorded, unless you request otherwise.

How long will this take? Your participation will vary according to the steps you choose to complete. The written lived experience description should take approximately 30-60 minutes. The focus groups will take approximately 60 minutes (45 minutes of group dialogue followed by 15 minutes of reflective report-out summary facilitated by the researcher). The one-on-one interviews will take approximately 60 minutes. If you choose to participate in all study steps, your total involvement should take approximately five hours (about one hour for the written lived experience description; two hours for two focus groups; two hours for two one-on-one interviews).

What are the risks and benefits if I participate?

Focus group participation: Participation in a group discussion includes the risk that other focus group participants may share your statements with people who were not involved in the discussion. To minimize the risk of identifying you and your comments, we will remind everyone that what is said here is confidential and should not be shared with anyone else.

Audio or video recorded data collection: There is a risk of accidental data release if we collect your data using audio and video recordings. If this occurred, your identity and statements you made would become known to people who are not on the research team. To minimize this risk, the researchers will transfer data to, and store your data on, a secure platform approved by the University's Information Technology Office.

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Collection of demographic or geographic location data that could lead to deductive re-identification: You will be asked to provide demographic information that describes you. We may also gather information about your geographic location in this research. Different combinations of personal and geographic information may make it possible for your identity to be guessed by someone who was given, or gained access, to our research records. To minimize the risk of deductive re-identification, we will not combine identifying variables nor analyze and report results for small groups of people with specific demographic characteristics.

What are the benefits if I participate? There are no direct benefits to your participation.

Will I be compensated for participating? You will not be reimbursed for your time and participation in this research.

Who will see my information? There will be no information in research reports that will make it possible to identify you without your permission. Research records will be stored securely, and only approved researchers and the OU Institutional Review Board will have access to the records.

You have the right to access the research data that has been collected about you as a part of this research. However, you may not access this information until the entire research has finished and you consent to this temporary restriction.

Do I have to participate? No. If you do not participate, you will not be penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the research. If you decide to participate, you don't have to answer any questions and can stop participating at any time.

Will my identity be anonymous or confidential? Your name will not be retained or linked with your responses unless you agree to be identified. Please check all of the options that you agree to:

I agree to be quoted directly, without the use of my name. ___ Yes ___ No

What will happen to my data in the future? We will not share your data or use it in future research.

Audio Recording of Research Activities. To assist with accurate recording of your responses, interviews or focus groups may be recorded on an audio recording device. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording without penalty. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to audio recording. ___Yes ___ No

Video Recording of Research Activities. To assist with accurate recording of your responses interviews or focus groups may be recorded on a video recording device. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording without penalty. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to video recording. ___ Yes ___ No

Will I be contacted again? The researcher might contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research.

I give my permission for the researcher to contact me in the future. ___Yes ___ No

Who do I contact with questions, concerns, or complaints? If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research or have experienced a research-related injury, contact me at (917) 870-2221 or gerry.ibay@ou.edu (Advisor: Chad Johnson, PhD, (918) 770-8134, cvjohnson@ou.edu).

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You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than the researcher(s) or if you cannot reach the researcher(s).

I will be asking some questions to find out how you want me to report your ideas. You can refuse any that you do not like without any penalty.

Do you agree to being quoted directly, without the use of your name? ___ Yes ___ No

Do you consent to audio recording? ___ Yes___ No

Do you consent to video recording? ___ Yes___ No

May I contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research? ___Yes ___No

Finally, would you like a printed or electronic copy of the information we have just reviewed? _____ (note response)

Date of interview: _____

Name of Interviewee: _____

Mailing or Email address for electronic consent copy: _____

Name of Researcher and Date of the Consent Process: _____

Signature of the Researcher: _____

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Appendix D

Lived Experience Description (LED) Protocol

- Describe the experience as much as possible as you live(d) through it. Avoid causal explanations, justifications, generalizations, or interpretations.
- Describe the experience from the inside, as it were—almost like a state of mind: the feelings, the mood, the emotions, and so on.
- Focus on a particular example or incident of the object of experience: describe specific events, an adventure, a happening, a particular experience.
- Try to focus on an example of the experience that stands out for its vividness, or as it was the first or last time; describe exactly what happened, how it felt, at that particular moment.
- Attend to how the body feels, how things smell(ed), how they sound(ed), and so on.
- If possible, write the experience in the present tense rather than in the past tense. (It enhances the reality sense.)
- Avoid trying to beautify your account with fancy phrases or flowery terminology.

Source: van Manen, 2023, p. 399

Appendix E

Bad and Good Examples of Lived Experience Descriptions

A bad example of a lived experience description of keeping a secret:

I don't like keeping secrets because it is really a form of lying. Sometimes I notice that someone is keeping something secret from me and then I instantly begin to distrust this person. If people cannot be honest and open with me, then I would rather not associate with them. For example, I could never love someone who keeps secrets from me, and I would not really love someone if I would do the same. Most secrets that people keep have to do with things that are morally reprehensible. And so, when someone is telling me something that I am supposed to keep a secret, then I know that I am either going to hear some bad stuff or gossip about someone else, or, if the secret is about the person him or herself, then I will hear something sordid that I would rather not know.

A good example of a lived experience description of keeping a secret:

When I was about six years old, my father and I went to purchase a birthday present for my mother. As we were driving home, my father turned to me and said that I was to tell no one what we had done. "Why?" I asked, not understanding. "Because if we keep Mom's present a secret, we can surprise her when her birthday comes," he replied.

As we drove up to our house, my father turned to me once again, and said rather sternly, "Now remember not a word; we don't want to let Mom know our secret." Something passed between us. I felt very strange and I could not look my father in the eye. It was as if I had already done something wrong.

"We're home," I casually announced. Then my mother inquired as to what we had been up to and my father calmly replied that we had been looking for a birthday gift. "Dad!" I burst

out. My mother looked at me, and I froze. I looked toward my father for help. “We were looking for a birthday present,” my father said again, as he peered into a pot on the stove, “but we didn’t find anything interesting.” I turned away and hurried outside. My father had just told a lie!

At supper I ate quietly waiting for my Dad and me to be exposed. All I could see was my plate. My parents’ voices sounded distant and muffled, as if I were listening to them with my head underwater in the bathtub.

The night I lay in bed thinking: nothing happened; my Dad and I still had our secret. I felt fine, almost smug. Almost.

Source: van Manen, 2023, pp. 417-419

Appendix F

Focus Group/One-On-One Interview Protocol

I'll ask about phenomenalities only: I'll ask about special treatment, not about "i-deals"; I'll ask about differentiated relationships, not about "LMX"; I'll not ask about fairness and favoritism—related to i-deals or LMX; I'll see whether the participants mention it. Fairness or favoritism will only be explored as a possible emergent perspective.

Criteria-related background questions to confirm participant suitability:

- Question a. Do you have at least three years of experience managing other people?
- Question b. Do you have experience managing a team of at least three direct reports?
- Question c. Do you have experience handling at least three requests for special treatment from employees?

Phenomenality-related questions:

- Question 1. Describe your experience with employees' requests for special treatment.
- Question 2. Describe your relationship with each of your direct reports.
- Question 3. Has your relationship with an employee affected how you experienced their request for special treatment?
    - Question 3a. If so, give an example of a time where your relationship with an employee affected how you experienced their request for special treatment.
    - Question 3b. If not, describe how your relationship with the employee has remained separate from their request for special treatment.
- Question 4. Has an employee's request for special treatment affected your relationship with them?

- Question 4a. If so, give an example of a time where an employee's request for special treatment affected your relationship with them.
- Question 4b. If not, describe how their request for special treatment has remained separate from your relationship with them.

Appendix G

Anne Bachelier Copyright Approval

From: **Anne Bachelier** bachelier.anne@wanadoo.fr
Subject: Re: Permission Request for Use of Alice in Wonderland Illustrations in Academic Dissertation
Date: June 20, 2025 at 10:06 AM
To: Gerry Ibay gerry.ibay@gmail.com

AB

Bonjour
Please excuse the delay in responding to you.
Of course, I give you permission to use the illustrations made for Alice...I will only ask you to specify that I am the author of these illustrations and that this book was published by CFM Gallery -
You will have to use the images from the book…
I have not found the slides that were used to print this book. My friend and gallery owner, Neil Zukerman died in 2022 and we cannot find the files that were used for this book
(I use Google Translate... my written English isn't very good!)
Keep me informed and don't hesitate to contact me if necessary…
Très amicalement,
ANNE BACHELIER