

The cost of managerial caring: Exploring identity work in the hybrid work context

Abstract

The Covid crisis and the resulting enforced teleworking have significantly shaken up the manager's role, leading to increased identity work. This article draws on a longitudinal study of managers conducted over the course of a full year during the Covid crisis, from May 2020 to June 2021, using interviews and self-administered diaries to reveal a distinct sequence of identity work. This sequence combines a reappropriation of the humane dimension inherent to the manager's role (*expectations and practices of managerial caring*) and a distancing from the team and the managerial role through disembodied management (*cost of caring*). We discuss these results by identifying a *paradox of managerial caring* which, translated in terms of identity, may help understanding the contemporary withdrawal tendencies among managers.

Key words

Hybrid work, manager, identity work, managerial caring

Introduction

The Covid crisis has forced many people to telework. Research on the subject has predominantly focused on aspects related to well-being, satisfaction, collaboration, and performance (see e.g. Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Felstead, 2022; McPhail et al., 2023; Straus et al., 2022; Waizenegger et al., 2020). The implicit challenge has been to identify the conditions under which hybrid work—that is the combination of multiple workspaces, including home-based teleworking (Halford, 2005)—can be optimal for both individuals and organisations (see e.g. Gohoungodji, 2023). However, other issues came to the fore and superseded these assessments when organisations were faced with employee dismissals and disengagement. Research then emphasised the importance of the work group and the imperative to (re)invest in work teams (Rodrigues et al., 2022; Waizenegger, 2022). The primary lever identified was management. Managers have been called upon to adopt an adapted leadership style (characterised as altruistic or servant leadership), aiming at fostering team dynamics without directing or micromanaging work processes. Consequently, managers are sent for training, and become responsible for both the company's social cohesion and its results.

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The profession of manager has found itself neglected, disregarded, and profoundly transformed (Azambuja & Islam, 2024).

In this article, we delve into this transformation and the lived experiences of managers, examining them through the lens of identity work. Identity work refers to the dynamic construction of one's identity through social interactions, the expressed and internalised expectations, and the perceived identity threats (e.g., Brown & Coupland, 2015). Scholars have shown that identity work is closely linked to situations of uncertainty: it is when individuals encounter novel circumstances that their established identity references become disrupted, necessitating identity work, which can more easily be grasped by researchers (Collinson, 2003; Svenningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Enforced teleworking, which prevailed in 2020-2021, compelled work teams to operate remotely, therefore providing a particularly interesting context for studying managers' identity work and the making-off managerial identity in a context of distantiation (Sewell & Taskin, 2015). Key to capturing this identity work effectively is to follow the (confined) managers as closely as possible. Therefore, we tracked six managers from different Belgian organisations as part of a longitudinal study, spanning from May 2020 to June 2021. The study entailed a combination of 18 semi-structured remote interviews and 91 self-administered diary entries.

Our contribution is threefold. First, our study illustrates the dynamic of identity work, characterised by contradictions and asynchronous events. Second, we aim to expand upon the concept of managerial caring, introduced by Kroth and Keeler (2009), which remains largely unexplored within the existing management literature. We show how managerial caring is interpreted and invested—i.e., through which concerns and practices—by managers themselves. Third and foremost, this article extends contemporary identity work studies by identifying paradoxical proxies of caring, in management. While managerial caring typically involves social and interpersonal proximity, we demonstrate that it can lead to an increased distance of managers from their subordinates—as well as from their organisation, particularly when this managerial caring is unidirectional. The quest for self-care becomes an integral facet of effective management rooted in a perspective of care.

The article is structured as follows. In the first section, we introduce our theoretical framework—combining identity work and managerial caring—to support our research questions. The research method is then detailed, followed by the presentation of results

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structured around an analytical grid of first- and second-order themes. Our discussion section provides support for the contributions of our study, particularly in terms of the personal and professional costs associated with managerial caring, from the manager's standpoint.

Managing, from objective tasks to subjective work

Traditional literature characterises the role of a manager based on two main dimensions: *activities* and *human relationships*. The former was outlined by Fayol (1916), who identified five: planning, organising, commanding, coordinating and controlling (Fayol, 1916; Taylor, 1911). This characterisation has significantly influenced subsequent studies on the role of a manager and resulting expectations. Human relations, encompasses such factors as employee recognition and social support (Blake & Mouton, 1964a; Likert, 1961). The combination of these two areas has spawned the popular field of leadership studies. Leadership models, while not encompassing managerial activities in and of themselves, refer to the way in which they are carried out by the manager, i.e., the influence they exert on employees (Knights & Willmott, 2012). For instance, Kilroy and Dundon (2015) identify three managerial styles influencing employee outcomes: policy enactor, organisational leader or employee coach. Addressing the profession of a manager as a whole and its evolution in the face of organisational and societal changes therefore requires consideration of the role beyond managerial activities.

Existing research acknowledges that the role of a manager is evolving, primarily due to external constraints (Foster et al., 2019; Morris et al., 2019; Townsend & Dundon, 2015), and indicates that it is still undergoing change. For example, in their study of the evolution of the managerial role in response to increasing technological and organisational demands, Hassard and Morris (2022) note the growing importance of the availability and flexibility of managers. However, these studies mainly focus on managers' employment and working conditions. There is still a sparsity of research into the actual work of managers and their interaction with their teams. It is for this reason that Foster et al. (2019) explore the question of "managerial work" and its evolution in greater depth and, more specifically, the identity work of managers through the use of anchored methodologies.

Managers' identity work when experiencing distantiatio

Identity work refers to the process through which individuals form their own identity, by integrating or resisting the resources (e.g., discourses, practices, etc.) available in the context

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in which they operate (Andersson, 2005; Brown, 2020; Watson, 2008). Identity work therefore implies a dynamic conception of identity, composed of multiple aspects that may evolve in a more or less synchronous and contradictory manner (Brown, 2017). A manager's identity is then continually constructed and reconstructed through interactions with those around them, expectations that are expressed (more or less explicitly) towards them, and perceived identity threats (Brown & Coupland, 2015; Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Kreiner et al., 2006).

It has been established that identity work is strongly linked to uncertainty, which leads individuals to reassess their identity in relation to external expectations in order to ensure a degree of consistency and regain a sense of self-esteem (Knights & Clarke, 2014; Watson, 2008). Identity work, besides being dynamic and ongoing in nature, is also subject to periods of increased intensity (Collinson, 2003). The coronavirus crisis likely qualifies as a critical period in the identity work of managers.

Alongside the spatial (Izak et al., 2022; Risi et al., 2020) and familial aspects (Allen et al., 2021; Clark et al., 2021; Hjálmsdóttir et al., 2021) which affect each employee's identity during this period of enforced teleworking, the challenges in terms of team work are often summed up in their technological scope, rather than in their impact on identity which seems to have particularly affected managers (see e.g. George et al., 2020; Hassard & Morris, 2024; Leonardi, 2021). Therefore, research has focused on the means put in place for optimal communications as well as on remote work and its consequence (Arunprasad et al., 2022; Bartsch et al., 2021; George et al., 2020b). Examples of this include long hours (Parry et al., 2021), digital exhaustion (Leonardi, 2021b) or Zoom fatigue (Waizenegger et al., 2020). To the best of our knowledge, the evolution of the managers' role and team leadership remains underexplored in the literature. Among the few articles published on the subject, Delfino & van der Kolk (2021) observe that forced remote work has affected team management resulting in a more personalised form of management, mainly through the setting and assessment of individual goals. However, the way in which this additional investment has affected the managers themselves is rarely considered.

Yet, in addition to more personalised monitoring of employees' work, the crisis is pushing managers towards a different, more humane style of management—i.e. one that involves dealing with often delicate personal situations and shifts the focus to the individual within the work and managerial relationships (Chambel et al., 2022). For example, Franken et al. (2021)

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identify a list of gains that were acquired during the Covid crisis in terms of team relationships such as the deployment of additional efforts to support teams and the observed benefits of both virtual and physical “team catch-ups” (Franken et al., 2021: 1138). Hafermalz & Riemer (2020: 1633) underline the importance of remote “personal connection” as a key skill for managers to acquire in situations such as those experienced during the pandemic. Delfino and van der Kolk (2021) observe a strengthening of interactions between managers and members of their teams, both formally and informally, thereby reducing the perceived hierarchy. However, in their research on junior employees, these workers report feeling under increased control, suggesting they may perceive these communications from managers as controlling or restrictive (Delfino & van der Kolk, 2021). This is in line with previous work which cautions against the false cloak of benevolent well-being management, which may be described as caring, but can be experienced as an extension of managerial control over areas which were previously beyond its reach (see Linhart, 2015, e.g.). As far as managers’ experiences are concerned, studies also show that their workload has increased, which is linked to both their efforts to maintain team cohesion (Parry et al., 2021) and the attention paid to each employee individually, as well as to their involvement at an organisational level (Franken et al., 2021).

These elements show the existence of a managerial work at play (Hales, 2001). Questioning such work through the lens of what and why managers actually do, Hales (1999, p. 347) found that managerial “actions are constituted, defined and legitimised, by the resources and rules of the systems in which they are located, as actions which affirm the identity, responsibility and accountability of ‘managers’”. As a result, identity work appears to play a crucial role in managerial work. This study proposes therefore that these managerial work changes that occurred during the pandemic (see e.g. in Gohoungodji et al., 2023; Parry et al., 2022) are likely to generate increased identity work for managers, as they strive to align their identity with what is expected of them in this particular context—that is, to be humane, close, understanding and available to their team members (see instance in Parry et al., 2022). Other studies (Zambrell, 2016, e.g.) have shown that all of the tools and practices put in place by managers in the development of their role can be considered as contributing to their identity work, leading them to reconsider their way of interpreting and embodying their role. This openness to a change of stance amidst the coronavirus crisis can therefore be interpreted, we believe, as a readiness to question the traditional management practices which form their managerial identity, and to challenge this identity.

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This identity work is not independent of external attempts at control, particularly within organisations (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The interactionist vision of the “self” therefore involves situational and relational aspects, with which the manager attempts to construct and reconstruct her identity. Control within the organisation occurs, for example, through the numerous meetings and “crisis” strategies put in place in the context of the coronavirus, which notably reinforces the professional identity associated with the managerial role. However, in the case of the coronavirus crisis, there was not only an emergence of work-related expectations within organisations, but also social expectations—for example, around the development of an *ethic of care* (Branicki, 2020), which influences the individuals’ identity work.

Care as an emerging part of managerial identity

The notion of care was introduced in management through research conducted in the nurse, then the education sectors to characterise nurse and teacher’s work (see, e.g., Bankert & Kozel, 2005; Bosworth, 1995) with the aim to change practice, including management (Boykin & Schoenhofer, 2001). Two perspectives are of interest: first, the introduction of the ethics of care in management; second, the subsequent consideration of managerial caring.

In essence, drawing from the definition outlined in the introduction of “*Business Ethics and Care in Organizations*” by Fotaki et al. (2019), which characterises care as a “relational practice that aims at addressing concerns for another person’s needs”, one can conceptualise managerial caring as the managerial practice directed towards addressing the needs of coworkers. In management terms, this would therefore imply a manager being present with and for their teams (Ciulla, 2009). In line with Blake and Mouton’s (1964b) work on the role of a manager as a series of activities at a crossroads between operational management and managing people, the involvement of care in management would outline a form of management that is as much focussed on the person as on the results (Delassus & Silva, 2016).

Antoni and her colleagues (2020) already showed the care allocation dilemma that arises in work situations, between caring for coworkers and caring for work—i.e. for the achievement of work objectives. The authors demonstrate the role of boundary work as a condition for the possibility of caring for each other in the workplace. However, their work does not especially focus on managers who may feel more concerned by these expectations of care, especially in crisis situations. While research in management and organisation sciences focuses mainly on crisis management at an organisational level (Branicki, 2020, e.g.), middle managers and their

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relationship with team members remain little explored—with the notable exception of a study by Kong & Belkin (2022) which highlights the positive effect of managers' commitment to an ethic of care (particularly through the expression of gratitude) on employee participation.

Kroth and Keele (2009) invite to consider caring as a managerial strategy that combines education, nursing and management perspectives, thus associating managerial caring to specific manager's behaviours. While managerial caring has been associated to new forms of control (Kusk Fogsgaard & Westergaard Elmholdt, 2018), to well-being as an element of a caring workplace (Aldabbas & Bettayeb, 2024), to HRM practices seeking employee engagement (Saks, 2022), as well as to leadership (Tomkins & Simpson, 2015), the concept remains outside the study of identity work, while its potential to (re)shape professional identity seems obvious. For instance, in the study of managerial work in the context of copresence, Taskin et al. (2023) report the lived experience of managers who spent time rehumanising their management. So, if managerial caring was a means of overcoming crises such as those arising from Covid-19, what would it imply for the role of a manager? Does this increased proximity between managers and their team members, characterising managerial caring, attest to a new and emerging stance? What place would this objective of managerial caring have in the identity work of managers?

The argument

The literature on the managers' role and its evolution focuses mainly on the manager and their personal experience (e.g. digitalisation of tasks, boundary work, etc.) (Foster et al., 2019; Hassard & Morris, 2022; Morris et al., 2019; Taskin et al., 2023), but somewhat obscures the daily activities and routines of managing people which constitute the managers' identity. In response to Alvesson and Svenningsson's (2003) call to understand what managerial work involves on a daily basis in relation to their team, we chose to study the role of the manager in its humane and collective dimension, adopting the lens of identity work. The Covid crisis and resulting hybrid work practice has shaken managers' sense of identity as new expectations have been expressed, particularly in terms of proximity and focus on relationships with others. We believe this is linked to what we refer to as managerial caring, increasing the care allocation dilemma in organisations (Antoni et al., 2020), especially for managers.

Yet, the distantiation induced by hybrid work makes it difficult to identify these expectations and test their conformity to one's identity. How does this process of identity work occur, when

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managers are called upon and wish to be closer to their colleagues and yet have never been more distant? What impact does this situation of distantiation—which is responsible for personal, organisational and societal expectations (see Taskin & Edwards, 2007)—have on this identity work (given that the isolation at work during the pandemic and the resulting mental health concerns have become a public health issue)? These are the questions which guided this research. We believe that this particular situation of social distancing and willingness to adopt care-orientated management can reveal constitutive elements of increased identity work which may contribute to the lasting transformation of one's professional identity. This has nevertheless methodological implications: Hoff (2021) calls for the use of descriptive qualitative methods to gain insights into the personal experience of professionals and how they developed values such as compassion and courage—or, on the contrary, situations of burnout or cynicism in their role.

Methods

This research is part of a larger research project regarding changes in work and in the experience of work in the context of intensive teleworking induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. This specific paper depicts an in-depth study of the experience of six managers from different organisations within four sectors (public agencies, engineering, transportation, and higher education) in Belgium. Data collection took place over a period of 14 months, from May 2020 to June 2021. The main data collection method consisted of the participants completing a diary of accounts (see for instance Radcliffe, 2013; Symon, 2004) linked to the situation being studied. Participants were asked to share their managerial experiences in a written or spoken diary. This method is particularly suitable “for an understanding of participants as they lived experiences and offered a deeper insight into the perspective of the participant” (Day & Thatcher, 2009: 258). We combined the self-administered diaries with semi-structured interviews carried out on three separate occasions (at the beginning, middle, and end) of the study. This combination made it possible to obtain high-quality data (Plowman, 2010; Radcliffe, 2013, e.g.) The uncertainty which emerged in the context of the crisis led to some adjustments in relation to the frequency and content of the diaries and interviews; for example, when the research began in May 2020, we did not expect further waves of the pandemic to arise. Consequently, the research end date (December 2020) was pushed back, and an intermediate interview was introduced.

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Participants

A convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants from the authors' professional and personal contacts, proceeding by "way of locating any convenient cases who meet the required criteria and then selecting those who respond on a first-come-first-served basis until the sample size quotient is full" (Robinson, 2014, p. 32). The initial selection criteria included anyone working as an employee in the public or private sector and faced with teleworking during the covid-19 crisis. A maximum of 2 participants from the same organisation was accepted. Two main reasons justified the use of a convenience sampling in this research. First, the urgent need to start data collection given the speed of change brought about by the first lockdown. Second, our data collection method, including self-administrated diaries, requiring a certain level of trust with our respondents. The convenience sampling method indeed allowed us to quickly enlist readily available participants, ensuring we captured critical initial data. Additionally, selecting participants from our immediate network or those with pre-existing relationships facilitated trust, enabling open and honest sharing of intimate experiences. Moreover, this approach ensured the research team feeling safe to send friendly reminders for the demanding work of self-administrated diaries, thereby guaranteeing high-quality, consistent data throughout the study.

Our sample initially counted 15 participants among which 6 managers we focus on in this article. Our dataset consists of 18 transcriptions of semi-structured interviews with an average duration of 70 minutes and 91 diary entries (12 to 22 diary entries by research participant) completed by the six managers (see Table 1). Material was collected in French; translations of the selected quotes are ours.

Insert Table 1 about here

Data collection

The primary data collection method involved self-administered diaries, allowing for the collection of narratives related to the studied situation and access to participants' intimate justifications. Participants used different techniques to write their diaries—either by writing their accounts and sending them electronically or by creating audio diaries according to their preference, ensuring they were comfortable with the medium used. To introduce the use and

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structure of the diary to the study participants, an initial in-depth semi-structured interview was conducted at the beginning of the empirical research, in May and June 2020. This interview included several questions about the dimensions examined in the overall research framework—space, team and management, and work-life balance. This initial interview thus helped trace the socio-material phenomena studied (work organisation, experience of the relationship to work, to the team and to management, work-life balance) from the first weeks of the lockdown. At the end of the interview, participants were then asked to commit to completing the diary approximately every two weeks. Friendly reminders would be regularly sent out by the research team to insure the completion of the diary.

In November 2020, a follow-up interview was conducted, during which the researchers highlighted certain elements mentioned in the diaries and discussed them with participants to check their interpretation of these elements and the perceived evolution in time. This follow-up interview was also an opportunity to ask participants to extend their participation in the research - as the evolution of measures around the covid-19 crisis had brought new aspects to investigate - and to continue completing the diary. From that moment, participants were also allowed a longer period (around 4 weeks) between diary entries to keep it sustainable over time. It should be noted that the managers teleworked under the same conditions as their team members, with one exception. Finally, the research team decided to end up the data collection in June 2021, when they noted a certain saturation in the data collected, and fatigue among participants in filling out the diary. A closing interview was conducted during summer 2021 to review the past year and uncover the meaning and significance of what had been recorded. So, interviews served to deepen and clarify the information previously recorded in the diaries, as well as to encourage the interviewees to take a step back from their experience, with a view to the long term.

Data analysis

The data analysis focused on all the material collected, considered as a single set. It was carried out through a second-order thematic analysis (Van Maanen, 1979) in an interpretive phenomenological approach (Miles et al., 2014; Paillé & Mucchielli, 2021) involving back-and-forth discussions between the participants, in order to highlight the themes linked to the managers' work identity. Table 2 illustrates the themes and sub-themes identified by the thematic analysis including a verbatim example for each one.

Insert Table 2 about here

The verbatim statements associated with each of these themes and sub-themes were broken down into three time periods, corresponding to the three phases of the research pre-defined by the research team, based on the situation of the pandemic in Belgium. These time periods are (1) from May to June 2020, characterised by a first full lockdown with school closures, (2) from July to September 2020, characterised by the possibility of a gradual return to the office (often on a voluntary basis), and (3) from October to June 2021, with a new lockdown followed by a gradual return to work, and the implementation of new working routines. Collating the data in three stages allows us to account for the longitudinal aspect of the research and to highlight the evolution of managers' experiences over time. Beyond the period of intensive hybrid working linked to the Covid crisis, the extension of the study until the return to work allows us to analyse the stabilisation of managerial identity in the *new* hybrid context.

The iteration between data and literature, combined with ongoing discussions among the authors, fostered the emergence of the theme of managerial caring and the intriguing inherent paradox for managers. Managerial caring indeed appeared to be at the core of both expectations regarding managers and the evolution of their role and identity. We thus focused our analysis on the way our participants worked to create and maintain their identity in this context characterised by high expectations of managerial caring, and the observation of a certain fatigue of care by managers themselves, leading them, over time, to set aside this managerial caring for a more enduring identity. We wrote a storyline for each participant, including individuals' actions and interpretation of the situation over time to arrive to an aggregated analytical framework. Figure 1 represents the analytical framework which organises the results and foreshadows the theorisation specific to identity work in a context where the managerial profession is evolving towards the incorporation of managerial caring and simultaneously generating certain costs which in turn sustain this work identity.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Results

The process of identity work undertaken by managers takes place following three different successive stages, as expectations regarding their role evolve and get internalised. The presentation of the results is structured following these three stages. The first stage observed involves the internalisation of the expectations relating to a management style that emphasises proximity to the individual and focuses on relational and emotional aspects—the expectation of caring. The second stage consists of implementing sustainable care practices. These two stages are common among all the managers who were monitored and occurred in the first few months of our observations. The third relates to the effects of this care-orientated management, ranging from instant gratification to exhaustion, and at times even withdrawal and disengagement—the costs of caring. This stage occurred early in the study but became more noticeable from November 2020, corresponding to a new lockdown in Belgium.

Expectations of managerial caring

First, let us recall that the context of the study is forced teleworking which began in March 2020 and disrupted the traditional organisation of the workplace by creating distance between the members of the organisation as well as a sense of invisibility amongst people and their work. This distance brought advantages but also challenges in the fulfilment of managerial roles. Our respondents mention having the impression to miss some information. While this can give a feeling of discomfort to some managers, others appreciate being less overwhelmed by information coming from everywhere, but rather focusing on the strictly necessary information. The biggest regret is the more intimate bond with colleagues and team members, beyond professional matters. This specific aspect will be discussed later on. A respondent e.g. mentions her confusing experience of having forgotten taking news from a team member during a while, being used to regularly meet her spontaneously at the office.

In terms of relationships, the distance indeed tends to reduce social interaction, but it also hinders the activities associated with managerial work, particularly control, leading to a *loss of control*. Yet, knowing what everyone does, and under what conditions, is an activity central to the role of the manager and makes part of their professional identity. The transition from one form of control to another is one of the first elements of ongoing identity work experienced by our respondents, in the context of distantiation.

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I trust everyone, except for one person about whom I have doubts. So, for the others, from time to time I actually do a check, and that's something I was already doing except that before, there were so many meetings, so many demands on my time, that I didn't always have time to do these checks. Now, I can concentrate and take five minutes to check this... It makes me feel even more confident. From time to time, I still have to say, "well, there is something missing, something wrong," that's it. And there is one person where I ask myself, "Does she really work the hours?" I have my doubts. (Liz, interview, T1)

In the teams, certain people are becoming increasingly distant, and "control" seems to be less and less easy. (Deb, diary T1)

In this context of distantiation, managers seem to internalise the need to focus their management on relationships, which we describe as expectations of caring. These take the form of an extension of support and availability to team members in the context of activities specific to the manager's profession, such as the coordination of work - but also through personal attention, such as encouragement or personal messages.

I feel even more strongly that I am here to support them in their work. My role as head of the team is to pass on information from the bottom to the top and vice versa, and to help the team coordinate their duties: "There is this to do, there is that to do, and so on...". And I feel I'm getting more of that. (Liz, interview 1)

This overemphasis on relationships is also evident as time passes with the occasional return to face-to-face meetings. In some cases, physical distance has brought a level of proximity between the manager and the team, which also makes face-to-face meetings more humane and intense as caring appears integrated into the managerial identity.

And with teleworking, we really feel that when we do meet, our bonds are stronger. It's quite amusing how we know that we haven't seen people for a long time and that we might not see them again for a long time. I don't know, I feel a little more concerned about my relationships with team members (Cindy, diary, T1)

Taking care of team members is becoming an integral part of managers' identity work. It also translates into a strong personal involvement in the running of the team in order to maintain the connections between its members. This involvement is marked not only by additional coordination efforts, but also by entering and staying in contact with each person, and by

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actively listening to their professional and private circumstances. The managers' desire for greater personal proximity with their team members is part of an ethic of care and contributes to increased identity work.

I pick up my mobile phone, I call them and often I spend maybe an hour and a half to two hours on the phone with them at a time every week. Or, in fact, I call them and I start by asking how they are doing, what is going on - in short, if everyone is well. (Cindy, interview, T1)

So, I called them a lot. So, I tried to have a call with everyone at least every 2-3 days with a special connection. (Helena, interview, T1)

The expectation of managerial caring is therefore internalised by managers. This comes from their own desire, but it must also be understood in terms of the societal context of spring 2020. Citizen initiatives expressing gratitude towards caregivers in hospitals and “essential” workers, and helping neighbours, influenced the culture so that many felt the need and desire to be part of the same care dynamic.

Practices of caring

Beyond the managerial caring expectations that formed the core of managers' identity work in the first few weeks of forced teleworking, we observed a series of practices supporting this identity work. Firstly, many practices of managerial caring revolved around coordinating a team with a focus on fostering more humane connections. This consisted of formalising informal moments and was based on the use of certain tools that promote inclusivity and enhance work efficiency. Additionally, there was an element of “letting go” which is a practice of managerial caring in and of itself. In terms of fostering humane coordination, it appears that efforts were made to strike the right balance between the informative scope of these exchanges and more personal aspects, given that workers needed to be able to talk about their experience of remote working.

So, in the end, what happened is that I identified a specific time - between 2 p.m. and 3 p.m., so not during a mealtime - that I dubbed “chat time.” But this moment is locked in. So, we're going to call each other on that day at 2 p.m., and we're all going to force ourselves to have a chat at 2 p.m. It's not the same. Normally, if a colleague had lost her cat, I would have had a different kind of conversation with her than just asking her how

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she's doing through email. It's all these little moments that enrich a team and boosts morale, so that people are then motivated to work on files, etc. So, we create them, but for me, it's still not the same as being there in person. And today, we are creating these moments, but they are neither one thing nor the other. So, it's still not the same. (Deb, interview, T1)

These initiatives have stayed in place over time, adapting, strengthening, or sometimes veering away from their original intentions. At the start of remote working, managers perceived the need to take the personal and professional circumstances of each individual team member into account during the challenging times, and developed initiatives to maintain connections with them.

For my team, what I do first is always try to maintain contact. We have a team in Teams, and every morning I post on the general page - for example, on May 20th, saying "hello girls – I'm tagging the team – I hope you slept well, and that you are doing well." I share the latest news that I have received [...] and then I explain a bit about what I'm going to do that day. I say "Today, my priority is focusing on the reopening of Tech spaces. What about you, on your end?" This allows for conversations to develop in the comments section. That's the first thing I do regularly to maintain contact. Additionally, I contact each of them individually via chats. (Cindy, interview, T1)

Ultimately, it is the managers themselves who exhibit the need to maintain these connections. Indeed, workers are beginning to appreciate hybrid working for its advantages – particularly in terms of balancing their personal and professional lives – and to favour this often more individualised way of working over work that requires interactions with the team or the entire organisation. As a result, the (new) managerial practices aim to enforce a link to the collective, rather than focussing on care objectives. This is translated by managers in different activities, such as suggesting to go for a walk at lunchtime, creating opportunities for common breaks when being physically present at the office or integrating informal chats at the beginning of team meetings.

I've established a team meeting, and I've been doing this since October or November, I don't remember exactly when. I've insisted on maintaining this team meeting every Monday morning at all costs, because it seems important to me to touch base. And I noticed that my team members welcome this opportunity for discussion. We often start

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with a brief informal chat and the meeting – well, we schedule it for 10 a.m., but it often goes on until 12:30 p.m. It's an exchange of informal and formal discussion. (Cindy, interview, T3)

Over time, the formalisation of the informal interactions has become an integral and structural element of the team's work-life dynamics and of managerial responsibilities. Managers attach great importance to the frequency of interactions, once again demonstrating that maintaining these personal connections is integral to their identity work, which appears to have stabilised since this practice has become part of their routine. This includes hearing or meeting team members individually on a regular basis besides team meetings. This trend remains in all stages of the covid-19 crisis and the subsequent lockdowns and periods of easing the lockdowns, as showed by the quotes bellowed, retrieved from the three periods in which our data is structured.

In fact, we have continued with the Monday afternoon meetings, and we are using them to review all the files. But I make sure that I hear from each team leader at least once or twice a week, by telephone for very specific files. When I look back over the week, I have heard from everyone. (Andrew, interview, T1)

My interactions with my team members have remained consistent with those set out at the start of lockdown: a team meeting every 15 days (as was the case before 15 March) with meeting minutes prepared by my assistant and distributed to the team leaders, and individual contacts with each team leader at least once a week. (Andrew, diary, T2)

I follow up more regularly and systematically. Before, it was more on demand. During the first lockdown, it was also like that, because when we are all in the office together, that's how it works. (Deb, interview, T3)

Specific communication and workflow tools support these practices of managerial caring by enabling quick contact through more structured and efficient exchanges. They may also increase efficiency by reducing commute time and other less productive activities. With the use of these tools, caring takes on a different dimension. For the manager, it is also about ensuring that everyone can work in good conditions and effectively. The tools allow coordination, an activity which remains central in managerial work and is integral to a manager's professional identity. It's not surprising to find this reappropriation of effective coordination at the core of this identity work.

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Because when working remotely, I organise myself well in terms of interaction with the team. I call everyone every two days for one reason or another. [...] Another is more about control, to say, “Don’t forget, okay?” in the case of someone who works less. And so, in this case it’s to say don’t forget that you must be at your desk at around 9 a.m. So, I will arrange a little Teams (meeting) around 9:20 a.m. (Helena, interview, T3)

What’s great is that the meetings don’t last as long. If you’re in a meeting with someone, you can say, let’s ask that person. It’s great. Because with Skype - now Teams - you call the person, they join the meeting for three minutes, you ask your question. If we were physically in the building, this person might be out with the client, or three floors down in a meeting room. So, I find that our communication is much more valuable and relevant, and I find that we paradoxically exchange information in a better way. (Andrew, interview, T1)

Over time, the tools are also being more extensively used in the context of caring. While managers were more personally involved initially, tools are now used to alleviate some of the mental burden on employees. This also serves to increase their efficiency, an objective of the managers that they make no attempt to hide. This shift back to efficiency, combined with more humane managerial work practices, also characterises the identity work that has been observed over time. Managing primarily involves coordinating activities and ensuring specific results, while embracing a more human approach that is more tenable for managers on the longer term.

The aspect of facilitating the work of my team through processes has been more present for several months. This is partly to make their work easier, to reduce their stress, so that they are more efficient and feel better, to make their job more comfortable - but also to free up more time for customer relations because I notice that sometimes we receive emails in our group inbox and don’t respond to them because it’s just the internal client sending information that must be processed. (Liz, interview, T3)

Finally, the last practice of managerial caring that we observed was that of “letting go.” Managerial identity has been constructed around activities and roles associated with control. Remote working has led managers to experience difficulty in carrying out these activities in the same way as before. Control, as we have seen, has entered into the more social aspects of work: it occurs in both the personal and team interactions that the manager organises. However,

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in some cases, distantiation also initiates identity work specific to this issue, prompting managers to develop new roles or practices for themselves and place more trust in the team.

In the sense that the girls know, we talked about it during their evaluation, that I am the way I am. I like to know a bit about how things are going. (...) I might have let go a little on certain things. Let's say that having team meetings every week helps a lot, because I take advantage of it when I have a question. At least, I have a to-do list where I jot down the questions I need to ask during the meeting. (...) Simultaneously, what I do a lot is create pairs. That is, I ask several people to work together on a project. That way, I know they'll double-check with each other." (Cindy, interview, T3)

The identity work of managers, therefore, pursues an ideal of care which translates into greater social proximity which in turn materialises through a range of management practices. However, this identity work is not without consequences for the manager.

The cost of caring

The managers' identity work continuously takes place in their interactions with the people around them (colleagues, team members, other managers, family members, friends, and media for example), the expectations placed on them, and the identity threats they perceive. The numerous social interactions we highlighted above contribute to establishing "care" as a new component of managerial work. It is an expectation placed upon managers by themselves as well as their team members. It also calls into question certain ways of doing and perceiving managerial work – particularly in terms of control and proximity – thereby constituting an identity threat. Nevertheless, this identity work comes at a high cost to the manager. The adoption of managerial caring is exhausting; it isolates the manager who gives time and self to others while feeling neglected personally; and it may even scare some managers out of the profession, as it no longer aligns with their identity. This "cost of caring" has become an integral part of the identity work that we have observed.

After a period of over-investment in managerial caring, there is a noticeable distancing by managers from their teams. Fatigue sets in as it becomes increasingly difficult to motivate the team. The cost of caring is all the higher as team members no longer seem to appreciate it. Since the manager no longer perceives the expectation of such investment in relationships,

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managerial caring seems obsolete, thereby justifying a return to core managerial activities such as planning, coordinating, and evaluating.

In terms of team members, I have the impression that people are getting tired of “virtual coffee.” Even if we joke that “sociability is a right, not a duty,” people no longer attend the meeting, or they work during that time. (Paula, diary, T1)

...feeling that the investment in management will need to be even greater to maintain connections. ...feeling of having to put a lot of energy into relationships, reinventing them. (Helena, diary, T2)

And in relation to work, it’s the same thing, We’re in the daily business, we keep things running, the teams keep things running, but we’re not at all focussed on innovation. You see, that would take too much energy. On the one hand, I don’t think people have the energy for that. Not at the moment. So, our goal is to keep things running, to keep doing what we have to.” (Deb, interview, T3)

Excessive managerial caring at the expense of self-care has managers feeling fatigued and exhausted as they begin to refocus on themselves and the tasks they must accomplish.

May was like the previous months and went by very quickly, with very busy days, over-connectivity and endless team messages and calls. I personally came out really exhausted and screen-saturated; my feelings seem to be shared by many of my colleagues. (...) We get straight to the point, we’re more direct and we move forward, with our noses to the grindstone... from my dining room table in my case. (Deb, diary, T3)

Frankly, there was one person on the team around whom everything revolved. I never had much interaction with her and so I took advantage of not having any. What I’m saying isn’t nice, but honestly... (Helena, interview, T3)

The first easing of lockdown measures took place during the summer of 2020 and provided an opportunity for managers to reflect on the period that had just ended. All of our participants made the same observation: They gave their full attention to their team members (showing interest in their experience of the crisis, their working conditions and work-life balance, giving them the opportunity to develop skills regarding self-management, teamwork, etc.) but felt they received nothing in return. Yet, their own experiences and working conditions had been challenging. Hyper-availability and constant questioning come at a cost - i.e., the exhaustion

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mentioned earlier. Many managers felt the identity work undertaken during the first months of forced teleworking was taken for granted, without recognition of the ordeal it caused them. The participants expressed this feeling with some emotional distance, for the purpose of reporting an experience rather than complaining. This is in line with the traditional professional ethos.

At the same time there was another experience that took place during this lockdown: that of the managers' themselves. Team management was much more difficult remotely, much more energy-consuming, lacking in fluidity and in informal interactions that facilitate communications and the progress of projects. (Deb, diary, T2)

I brought croissants upon my return and the following week I organised drinks, so I think I gave it my all. In two weeks' time it's my birthday, so I'll have to bring croissants again. I hope that someone else will bring croissants here. (Paula, diary, T3)

This feeling of abandonment is expressed with even more modesty towards the company's senior management that is not blamed. There is an implicit understanding that the situation must be difficult for everybody and the issues are particularly burdensome to manage. However, a lack of recognition is being expressed. We care, but who cares about managers?

This week was marked by a major bout of the work blues. I think that there are many reasons for this: a deep-rooted lack of recognition, a bit of fatigue, but above all loneliness. (...) No news of salary increases before the mid-year review at the end of July, a big blow to morale. I truly have a sense of not being recognised and feeling like I'm being walked all over and that I cannot say anything. (Paula, diary, T2)

On the other hand, I really have very little contact with my direct boss who has been promoted from director to managing director and who has a heavy workload. So, I no longer have support there, but if I really needed to talk to her, I think she would make herself available. (Liz, diary, T3)

These feelings (i.e., fatigue, isolation and distress) in turn fuel identity work and the search for a balance between investment in others and self-respect. In fact, during the course of our study the three most junior managers we followed distanced themselves from their managerial roles, returning to more operational positions. This withdrawal can be explained by an increased focus on identity work during the period of intensive hybrid working, as these managers had not yet had the time to build the necessary foundations to consolidate their identity as managers

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and deal with the tensions inherent to such identity work (see Tansly and Tietze, 2013). Consequently, the cost of caring becomes heavier for these new managers. Combined with their perceived lack of support and recognition, this leads to significant disillusionment within this demographic.

Yes, the doubts are inherent to my personality and the fact that I have five years of experience as a team leader and still have to build something. (Liz, interview, T1)

Among other more senior managers, interpersonal distance seems to increase in inverse proportion to the empathy that co-presence enables. For instance, a manager confided to us that she is finding it increasingly challenging to support a team member's issues. She is so tired of it that she is considering ceasing her efforts in the hope that the person takes sick leave and can then be replaced.

I admit that the distance and undoubtedly the fatigue would help me to give up, to let her follow through with her threats [when the team member says] "I'm going to take six months off sick" and then be able to replace her. Confidential! So, is it a form of dehumanisation, or of pragmatism aided by the distance offered by teleworking? Teleworking helps with a "business is business" approach. I am thinking this more and more. (Helena, diary, T 2)

It is a form of disengagement then, a more functional relationship with work. (...) Precisely because you have this distance, you can be more straightforward, without necessarily giving the impression of having a good relationship. (Helena, diary, T3)

Finally, could the cost of caring sound the death knell for managerial caring? By caring excessively for others, have managers become more hardened? Still, a phase of distancing oneself from others and from managerial work consistently appears in the process of the identity work that we have followed.

Discussion

Following six managers over a span of fourteen months, amidst the backdrop of the Covid crisis, enabled us to observe and detail their identity work within their managerial role. Previous studies on hybrid work have highlighted some of the findings presented here – e.g. the need to “let go” and to trust team members or be available to them (see e.g. Allen et al., 2015; Felstead et al., 2003) – which support the emergence of managerial caring. Our research

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uncovers a nuanced narrative and shows that this is a complex process with various considerations that must be nurtured. Behind the many clichés associated with these new ways of managing such as management through trust, the manager-coach, or the servant leader, lies a long, asynchronous and contradictory process of identity work. This process places significant demands on managers and fundamentally reshapes their role identity, extending beyond the confines of the crisis period we examined.

The first contribution of this article is to illustrate this dynamic of identity work as a multifaceted process, rather than a straightforward chronological sequence, as illustrated in Figure 1. Indeed, some of the managers we followed experienced the costs of managerial caring earlier than others. The sequence unfolds as follows: initially, the observation of an increased emphasis on managerial caring, managers perceiving *expectations of managerial caring*, which are then put into practice. Since identity work is subjective, these expectations result from a role identity exhibited by the manager who believes that being a “good” manager in the context of the Covid crisis and intense hybrid working implies a greater investment in relational dimensions and proximity to team members. However, it also results from expectations expressed by employees and society as a whole. Acts of kindness and solidarity have received extensive coverage in the media (see for instance Solnit, 2020) and could be interpreted as societal expectations (see Hales, 1999), further reinforcing the perception that the manager of the moment is the one who cares for others’ needs. Consequently, managers expressed this ideal and translate it into immediate gestures and practices, adapting to the online format, and in a short-term perspective due to the uncertain duration of the crisis. Managers began to embody the role of care-orientated manager.

Identity work operates within an interactionist framework, and our research uncovers a subsequent development over time. That is, the managers in our study perceived that their team members need for managerial caring decreased over time, as the proximity was perceived as forced or artificial. At the same time, managers themselves felt a sense of distance. Several factors contributed to this, including a lack of reciprocity in caring (“I bring croissants, but who will bring some for me?”), or even “People no longer come to the meeting or they work during it”), inadequate or absence of recognition (as pointed by Parry et al., 2021; Barrero et al., 2023), and the resultant feelings of abandonment, isolation and fatigue. Consequently, many managers began to withdraw from managerial caring and its associated practices. In some cases, we

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observe a rationalisation of care, as previously observed by Antoni and her colleagues (2020) among coworkers. However, contrary to what the authors observe, we do not only observe a rationalisation regarding the possibility to care, but rather regarding the practices of care.

This disembodiment is an integral component of the dynamic of identity work. Just as managerial caring was implemented through the establishment of strong social proximity, the distancing from such proximity results from increased identity work, which we further illustrate in Figure 2. The care-oriented managers understand that they themselves also expect to be cared for – a concept we have termed *self-care*. This realisation is vital for the sustainability of their commitment to managerial caring. The managerial identity has evolved, and managers grasp the cost involved – they must care for themselves to continue caring for others effectively. Some are willing to consent to this, others are not. In the course of our study, three managers decided to step back and two of them chose to no longer exercise managerial responsibilities. This can be interpreted as an alternative means of self-care. This underscores a critical contribution of our longitudinal research, demonstrating the effects of this identity work: the formation of a new professional identity that managers may either embrace or reject.

Insert Table 2 about here

The second major contribution of this article consists of characterising managerial caring as part of managers' identity work. While the literature evokes attitudes such as “caring for others” and the importance of interpersonal relationships (Fotaki et al., 2019), being present for others (Ciulla, 2009), showing empathy (Gilligan, 1993) and connecting with employees (Kroth & Keeler, 2009) to characterise this managerial caring, our research offers a comprehensive illustration of this managerial caring. We identify various initiatives that reveal managers’ intentions to care in the organisational context.

For instance, we notice personal involvement in maintaining social ties; coordination methods that combine operational and relational elements; and the use of certain communicative and collaborative work tools to foster inclusion; but also forms of letting go - particularly of some managerial control.

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However, the longitudinal aspect of our research also reveals that these numerous practices of managerial caring, when met with limited response and recognition, exhaust managers and require them to take care of themselves. This contributes to the work on the ethics of care in the workplace, advocating for relational management practices but also revealing the backside of caring, when not reciprocated. The study of the managerial population is especially novel, as it is often considered as the ones owing care (especially in recent leadership studies, see e.g. Greenleaf's servant leadership, Burns' transformational leadership or Brown and colleagues' ethical leadership) but without ever looking at their own care. From a gender perspective, while traditional management theories often align with masculine-associated traits (Acker, 1990; Martin, 2003), the perspective of managerial caring turns the dynamic on its head.

It requires to rethink not only the training and socialisation of managers to integrate managerial caring, but also the way organisations must reciprocate it to make it humane and sustainable (Taskin, 2022). The inclusion of a majority of women in our sample allows us to challenge this masculinist vision of management and better understand the consequences of managerial caring. Doing so, our work does not only encourage organisations to embrace care-oriented management practices as a means to foster a more inclusive and supportive work environment, but also underscores the need for gender-sensitive policies and practices that recognise and address the unique challenges faced by managers.

The third and final contribution of our study consists of revealing the paradoxical proximity which is central to managerial caring. Investing in close relationships eventually results in managers distancing themselves over time, as the situation becomes more familiar. This perceived distancing of the manager by team members leads managers to prioritise their own well-being (self-caring). This highlights the need to strike a balance between caring for others and caring for oneself in order to make managerial caring sustainable over time. This underscores a primary paradox: to be able to give to the collective (feeling of altruism), one must also take care of oneself (feeling of selfishness). This teaches us that solidarity and individualism are two sides of the same coin, and not a zero-sum game, in the context of managerial caring.

Practising self-care can lead to a balanced approach to managerial caring or, in some cases, to abandoning the managerial role – in our study, managers that were exhausted and overwhelmed by the demands of managerial caring changed jobs. The organisation's ability to support

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managers' well-being depends on the maturity of its management practices, reflecting how much the company values its managerial roles. However, our analysis reveals another critical aspect, deeply tied to identity, that is also at play: the absence of reciprocity in caring responsibilities. This lack of reciprocity forces managers to confront their perceived identity or their unchanging role as a leader.

It is indeed disheartening for managers to realise that the efforts which they invested into caring for others are neither valued and reciprocated by employees to the extent expected—referred to by Frémeaux et al., (2022) as the “crisis of giving”—nor acknowledged, supported and recognised by their own management. This leads them to feel abandoned by both their team members and their management, raising important questions about the nature of a manager's role and the expectations associated with it. Is the condition of a manager to remain alone, isolated, and immutable despite the efforts they invest in managerial caring? Some factors suggest this: even when discouraged by their team members' lack of dedication, managers maintained their coordination practices and adhered to relatively traditional methods of overseeing activities and personnel. Gilligan (1993) and Kong and Belkin (2022) underlined the importance of the authenticity of intentions and actions in initiatives of care. Have these managers, therefore, confined themselves to the traditional role assigned to the manager? It's possible. Additionally, the second paradox revealed by our study is undoubtedly to consider this stance of coordination as an enduring aspect of management, even within the context of managerial caring. Contrary to claims made in some leadership studies, managerial caring does not occur spontaneously in organisations and apply across the board. It is a path chosen by managers—a path that can be influenced by various sources we revealed here.

Conclusion

While existing literature has primarily focused on the caregiving role of frontline workers such as medical personnel during the crisis (see e.g. Petrie et al., 2022; Tham et al., 2023), scant attention has been paid to managers in other industries (or to managers in general for that matter). This research addresses this void by showing how the Covid-19 crisis has shaped a manager's identity as a caregiver – a positive identity promoted by a persistent managerial imaginary that position the manager as an altruistic or servant leader. Especially amidst the Covid crisis, when caring for others attained an elevated societal value, we all applauded the healthcare workers and took care of our most vulnerable loved ones. We show how intensive

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hybrid working during the Covid crisis and the subsequent implementation of hybrid work triggered increased identity work among managers. Our study emphasises that managerial caring is not a universal, spontaneous phenomenon in organisations; rather, it is a path chosen by managers and influenced by various sources. Our research adds depth to the understanding of the complexities and challenges faced by managers in adopting care-oriented management and underscores the critical need to balance caring for others with self-care to sustain this approach effectively. We indeed show that after wholeheartedly embracing this caregiver identity, some managers may later reject it particularly due to the absence of recognition they receive, and the considerable effort required to uphold this ethical stance.

The implications of this research challenge the prevailing trends in management literature, which has presented as inevitable in recent years the evolution of management roles towards those of support: the manager-coach or even the manager-leader, sometimes even suggesting that coaching and leadership could entirely supplant the term (and the role) of manager. This push towards hyper-individualisation in the managerial relationship tends to overshadow the traditional role of manager, which is a source of identity tensions among managers. Our research shows that the pursuit of this ideal involves major identity work that comes at a cost. This work cannot be carried out unconditionally; it requires the recognition of the role of management and managers in the exercise of their role. Yet, the contemporary over-humanisation of management alters—or even weakens—the identity of the managerial role. As we have demonstrated in an admittedly specific context—that of the Covid-19 crisis—managers are leaving managerial roles which they perceive as no longer aligned with the core principles of management. This demonstrates the porosity between “a role undergoing transformation” and “a role disappearing.”

In addition, the decision to combine periodic semi-structured interviews with regularly self-administered diaries definitely contributed to produce these results and this new understanding and original knowledge on management caring. This combination, which allowed us to go into greater depth and take a step back at the same time, has enabled us to reconstruct the dynamic nature of this care relationship.

Finally, our research has some limitations. First, we followed managers exclusively, without considering the perspective of their team members. Consequently, we focused solely on the managers' perceptions, which we believe is justified by the chosen prism for conducting this

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study: identity work. Second, while our overall sample was quite balanced with regard to gender, the sample of 6 managers used in this research shows an over-representation of women. This over-representation has a certain advantage for studying managerial caring, challenging the traditional masculinist vision of management. However, future research is needed to study the experiences of male managers and confirm that the sequence identified in this research are also found there. Finally, it remains challenging to disentangle the various factors contributing to the observed dynamics during the Covid crisis. Some of the identity work we observed may have been influenced by factors beyond our reach.

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Appendix

Table 1 – Participants to the study and data collection

	Age	Sex	Interviews			Diaries
Liz	30s	F	Starting	29/05/20	61'	2020 : 5/6, 12/6, 19/6, 3/7, 10/7, 3/8, 10/8, 28/8, 2/9, 2/10, 16/10, 23/12 2021 : 20/1, 9/2, 23/2, 10/3, 14/6
			Mid-term	23/11/20	59'	
			Closing	16/06/21	85'	
Deb	40s	F	Starting	2/06/2020	100'	2020 : 29/5, 5/6, 12/6, 19/6, 22/6, 29/6, 6/7, 10/8, 17/8, 31/8, 7/9, 14/9, 21/9, 28/9, 20/12. 2021 : 18/2, 25/2, 12/3, 12/4, 30/4, 2/6
			Mid-term	Nov 2020	96'	
			Closing	June 2021	87'	
Cindy	30s	F	Starting	23/05/20	108'	2020 : 29/5, 05/6, 13/6, 21/6, 30/6, 11/7, 14/8, 30/8, 28/9, 26/12 2021 : 21/1, 17/2, 24/3, 21/4, 12/5, 4/6
			Mid-term	30/12/20	80'	
			Closing	24/06/21	126'	
Helena	50s	F	Starting	02/06/20	52'	2020 : 8/6, 15/6, 22/6, 29/6, 16/8, 6/9, 31/12 2021 : 3/1, 28/2, 22/3, 8/4, 9/5
			Mid-term	20/11/20	56'	
			Closing	22/06/21	39'	
Andre w	40s	M	Starting	27/05/20	71'	2020 : 5/6, 12/6, 19/6, 28/6, 12/8, 3/9, 21/9, 16/12 2021 : 21/1, 8/3, 31/3, 3/5, 3/6
			Mid-term	12/11/20	53'	
			Closing	14/06/21	69'	
Paula	30s	F	Starting	22/05/20	47'	2020 : 29/5, 11/6, 19/6, 26/6, 31/07, 31/08, 18/9, 16/10, 23/12 2021 : 18/1, 2/2, 19/2, 12/3
			Mid-term	12/11/20	63'	
			Closing	28/06/21	50'	

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Table 2 – Second order categories

Theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative quote
Expectation of caring	Extending support and availability to others	<i>I feel even more strongly that I'm there to support them in their work. My role as manager is to pass on the information, the bottom up and top down, and to help them coordinate "there is this to do, there is that to do, what have you..." And I have the impression that I feel more like that. (Liz, T1 1)</i>
	Personal involvement in leading the team to maintain links between members	<i>I launched the Teams cafés at the beginning, so that's a personal initiative, yes. (Liz, T1)</i>
	Personal proximity to colleagues	<i>Because when I'm teleworking, I organise myself well in terms of interaction with the team, I call each of them every two days. I try to keep in touch for different reasons. (Helena, T3)</i>
Evidence of the internalisation of the need to focus management on relationships	Coordination of the team	<i>I have scheduled a team meeting since October or November, I don't know exactly when, but I have a team meeting every Monday morning and I insist on keeping it at all costs because I think it's important to take stock of the situation. And I have noticed that my colleagues are keen to have this time to talk things over. We often start with a little informal chat and the discussion, well, we set it for 10 o'clock and it easily lasts until 12.30 every time and it's a bit of a mix of informal and formal moments. So, we talk about work and then we talk about informal things. (Cindy, T3)</i>
	Using tools for inclusion and efficiency	<i>We had an internal discussion last week and we unanimously agreed on the desire to continue certain types of meetings by Teams, even when a return to normal is envisaged. We are thinking in particular of meetings where several people from different departments, companies or practices need to be able to exchange ideas. These types of meetings should continue to be held by videoconference, as it saves time by avoiding the need to travel, and the timings of the meetings are better respected. (Andrew, T3)</i>
	Formalising the informal	<i>So, in the end, what happened was that I identified a moment, between 2pm and 3pm, which wasn't during lunchtime, which I called the "chat time" moment. But this moment is frozen in time. (Deb, T1).</i>
	Letting go	<i>I have to agree to let go and say to myself that, for the time being, these are the rules of the game. I make sure I follow up every fortnight on the issues I want her to progress on. Sometimes I may bounce back with an email if I'm worried that I won't hear back in that time. Maybe she's got time on her hands (...) Maybe she's</i>

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		<i>worked too many impossible hours. We don't know, and the distance makes it hard to see and feel. (Deb, T1)</i>
Cost of caring <i>Evidence of the effects of integrating an ethic of care into a manager's professional identity</i>	Distress / isolation	<i>On the other hand, I have far too little contact with my direct boss, who has moved from director to managing director [of the department] and is experiencing a work overload. So now I don't have any support, but if I really needed to talk to her, I think she'd make herself available. (Liz, T3)</i>
	Fatigue, weariness	<i>That's the way it is, and at the moment, from my home, with all these people at home, I have very few levers for action. So that's the fatalistic side (...). (Deb, T3)</i>
	Escape (psychological resignation)	<i>I'm going to use the word "distance." And that can be linked to something more professional, to being less caught up in interpersonal relationships,... and distance from work too. I don't know if it is the age or what, but I don't want to do that anymore, at least not like that for years. (Helena, T3)</i>

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Figure 1 – Analytical framework

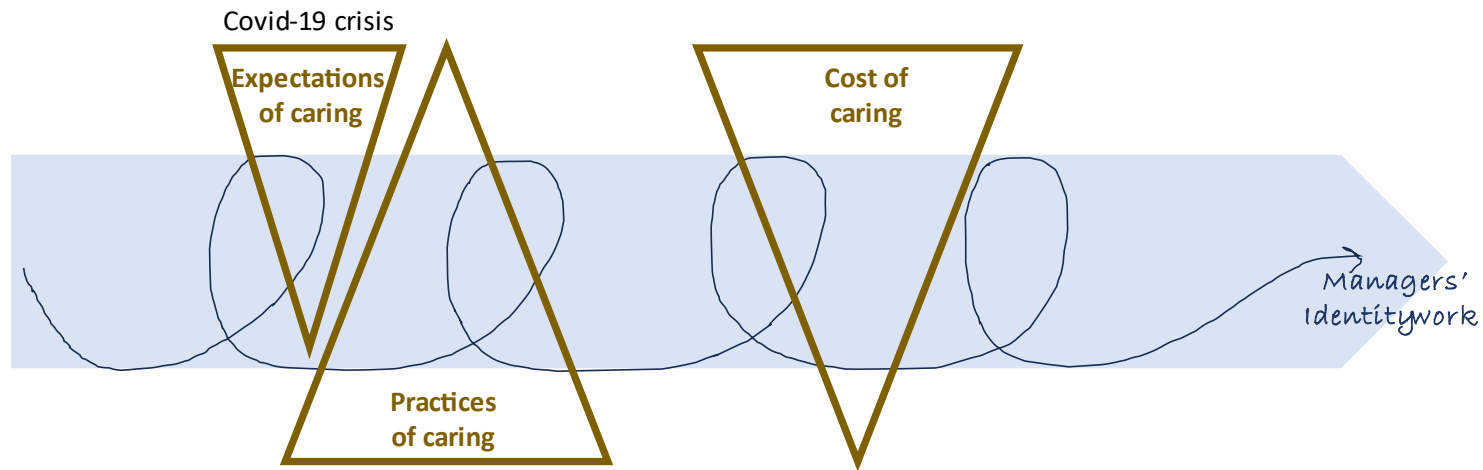


Figure 2 – The paradox of managerial caring

