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Billot, J., King, V.

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Understanding academic identity through metaphor

Jennie Billot¹ and Virginia King²

Dr Jennie Billot, University Postgraduate Centre, Auckland University of Technology, Private Bag 92006. Auckland New Zealand.

Email jbillot@aut.ac.nz

Dr Virginia Clare King, Centre for Learning Enhancement, Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry CV1 5FB United Kingdom

Email v.c.king@coventry.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

Metaphors used by higher education teachers in their narratives of academic life provide insight into aspects of academic identity concerned with 'followership' and 'being led'. These narratives reveal interpretations of colleague/leader motivations through to dissonance between expectations and experience. Applying Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' of field, habitus and capital as an analytical framework for revealing participants' conceptualizations of academia through their use of metaphor, enriches our analysis of how workplace values are perceived to resonate with academic reality. We draw on an underpinning study which identified that while newer academics benefitted from exposure to academic identity theory within a postgraduate teaching accreditation course, they gained greater insight from directed reading and guided reflection. Using these findings and linking them to the study that examined academic experiences of leadership, we posit that the wider organisational aspects of identity which may trouble newer academics could be addressed through guided theoretical and conceptual critique.

Keywords: Bourdieu; followership; identity; leadership; PgCert

Introduction

In *Homo Academicus* (1988), Pierre Bourdieu presents a vision of French university life as one of factions, fights and furious defence of the status quo. These characteristics suggest a potentially challenging environment for most academics, but especially for newer staff members. Internationally, research has identified a disjuncture between academics' expectations and experience (Adcroft and Taylor 2013; Austin 2010; Billot 2010; Gourlay 2011, McMurray and Scott 2013; Smith 2010) which can potentially create tension between institutional priorities and staff engagement. How academics perceive and react to their environment has an impact on their academic identity (Clegg, 2008). When Clandinin, Downey and Huber (2009) examined teacher identity within the "shifting landscapes" of their social environment, along with the shifting "plotlines" of their working context (142), they identified that it is not new identities that are needed in changing times, but rather the ability to reshape identity to align with one's working domain.

In this article, we focus on academic identity as portrayed through metaphor. We examine the reactions of higher education academics focusing on a particular component of academic life - how academic teachers perceive and make sense of their interactions with leaders in teaching and learning situations. We draw on a study of leadership (see Billot et al. 2013), which examined perceptions of efficacy within leader-teacher relations. Narratives provide the individual stories of those interactions. While the narratives give a bigger picture of the selected experiences, they also offer a lens for examining academic identity. We chose to explore, in particular, the metaphors employed by the research participants that reveal ways in which academic identity is conceptualized in relation to positive and negative interactions with formal leaders.

We build on a previous study which addressed the understandings of academic identity by students (King 2013; King et al. 2014) and demonstrated the benefits to individuals of understanding academic identity theory and its implications for self-

knowledge. We contend that it is equally important for new academics to gain an understanding of academic life through theoretical and conceptual critique.

We therefore approach the topic of academic identity through the use of metaphor. Our contribution to theory in this area is through a fresh interpretation on the issue, by drawing on metaphors to unearth its complexities. Metaphors have always offered a literary avenue for explaining simple, intricate and even thorny matters, but more recently have been used by researchers for creative sense making (Holmes, et al. 2012, 200).

In this article we refer to the relevant literature and identify the theoretical framework for use in our metaphor analysis. A brief explanation of the New Zealand (NZ) research study positions the data from which we draw our metaphors. By identifying that metaphors can be a vehicle for explanation, we discuss how metaphor analysis can be a powerful tool for understanding people's experiences and self-identity. We conclude the paper with a series of recommendations for teaching and supporting new staff to deal more effectively with academic life.

Researching Academic Identity

Much has been written on identity in the academic domain over recent years, often because of the need for academics to respond to a changing environment and revised professional roles (Billot 2010). Making sense of the workplace is everyday practice for academics, since they are located within an organisation that engenders its own public identity. Hence the juxtapositioning of the two (the individual and organisation) matters; do the identities sit comfortably with a common purpose, as in a 'sea of tranquillity' or is their relationship an area of discomfort, or even resistance, in 'white capped waters'?

Research into how academics perceive their identity has been undertaken by Churchman (2006), Clegg (2008), Day, Kington, Stobart and Sammons (2006), and Henkel (2000), all of whom refer to the pressures between the individual and their context. Stronach, Corbin, McNamara, Stark and Warne (2002) identify such frictions as partly arising from the meeting of academic beliefs and practices and the evaluation of academic performance. Further, Graham (2012) draws our attention to the wealth of research that has been undertaken into the changing nature of academic work and identities, particularly as roles alter to reflect the changing university sector. McMurray and Scott (2013) commented upon how, within a university environment, "an individualistic culture can be expected to play a major role" (961) and that it falls to management to create an appropriate organisational culture that is sensitised to employee needs. Essentially, management transmits and facilitates a particular organisational climate and is therefore responsible for ensuring alignment of the climate with an individual's value systems (Forte 2004). So how do organisational managers achieve this alignment and how do academics react to their actions?

A strong relationship has been identified between an institution's effectiveness and the well-being and professional satisfaction experienced by academic staff (Langford, 2010). Taking the converse perspective, how academics view their working environment will influence the health and sustainability of their organisation's culture (McMurray and Scott, 2013). Smith (2010) has identified the tension between the identities that academics prefer, compared to those thrust upon them (see also Jawitz 2009). Since an academic's perception of their professional standing involves an awareness of their contextual positioning, identity remains a core component.

Churchman and King (2009) have warned that divergence between an institution's identity construction and the reality of the identities of academic staff may create a subversive climate where resistant behaviour grows, undermining institutional cohesion. This article adds to the extant literature on academic identity through exposing the relational dynamics between academics. We claim that with an increased awareness of the employment terrain, (in this case, that of the academy), there is potential for enhanced institutional harmony.

The literature on management activity necessarily identifies leadership as a crucial component in this domain. Leaders act as the interface between management and organisational strategies and directives (Billot and Codling 2011). Since academic life is complex and evolving there are inevitably implications for organisational leadership since leaders act to translate institutional objectives through staff performance.

Negotiating this complex terrain requires a focused lens for analysis. Bourdieu (1988) provides us with a framework for examining identity using metaphors. He conceptualises such processes as part of the struggle for legitimacy in the metaphorical 'field' of higher education through the acquisition, award and recognition of prestigious 'capital'. What is needed, therefore, is insight into "the structuring features of the field and its capitals" (Clegg 2012, 676), that is, the controlling factors which novices may fail to recognise or may accept as normal because they become habituated to them. Bourdieu employs the metaphor 'habitus' (1990, 52) to conceptualise people's deportment in their field. Reay (2004, 432) suggests that habitus "is probably Bourdieu's most contested concept", perhaps because it is often misconstrued. In essence, habitus develops out of academic practice and the social interactions which define attitudes to the local norms which constitute the 'rules of the game'. By 'playing the game' according to an understanding and acceptance of these rules, the boundaries of a field are tacitly acknowledged. However, an essential characteristic of a field is that it evolves in response to the actions of participants, by permitting or prohibiting new rules. Power struggles may seek to normalise formerly private interests, or conversely to render an individual "unreasonable in seeking to impose his private reason" (Bourdieu 1977, 40). Accepting that academics "tend to be individualistic" (McMurray and Scott 2013, 970) which involves negotiating context, institutional parameters and academic practices, Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital and habitus thus provide a useful analytic framework for our research into academic identity.

As suggested above, perceptions of identity will depend on and alter with context (Clegg 2008). Nevertheless, academics are more practised now in shifting their professional identities, especially since they continue to be "scrutinised through a multiplicity of lenses" (Churchman and King 2009, 513). If this is the case, then there will be multiple identity stories that alter according to the audience, although we contend that this should not prevent reflection on those stories. In this complex domain, conflicting identities may be seen as a 'thorny' issue for institutions. Beech et al. (2011) use another metaphor, the 'swampy lowland', to describe the messy nature of this issue. However, alternative options do exist. Smith (2010) posited that current destabilisation in the higher education sector does provide scope for creativity in identity construction. Whether this opportunity is nurtured is another issue, but it does offer institutions a path of greater compromise.

Already in this section, we have used metaphors to aid explanations. Interestingly, Churchman and King (2009) noted that institutional strategies often attempt to "mobilise staff and reinforce the interests of the organisation over those of other individuals and groups" (508) by using metaphors. They suggest that although

universities may use this method to develop a “shared corporate story” (508), the rhetoric is often misaligned with staff interpretations of their workplace. Undeniably, academics will provide individualised and alternative narratives which may create areas of potential conflict. If this potential exists then an analysis of what academic staff are saying becomes even more salient in this environment.

We align with Gabriel, Geiger and Letiche (2011) who identify that stories and metaphors are “important vehicles for organisational learning and socialising, as well as for exercising influence” (367). The stories and interpretations offered in this article, while not directly commenting on power, indirectly identify that academic identity hinges not only on people in place, but also on people and people. The expression of these relationships can be uncovered in multiple ways, including through narratives, reflections and visual imagery. Metaphors used by institutions for creating a public image can be destabilised by their interpretation by academics. Thus our article moves to expose any disjuncture between the institutional vernacular and that of the academic.

Metaphor as an Analytical Tool

We approached our research acknowledging that metaphors can extend the original meaning of words in order “to suggest a resemblance or make a connection between ... things” (Knowles and Moon 2006, 3). Usually a metaphor is used to communicate an idea or a feeling about something; however, it is sometimes used when something is difficult to express. In effect, metaphors explain, clarify, describe, express, evaluate and entertain. Low, Todd, Deignan, and Cameron (2010) take this definition further, to assert that metaphor is ubiquitous and crucial in expressing abstract thought. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) were the first to contend that metaphor pervades language, thought and action and that use of metaphor may be difficult to discern because it is so familiar and entrenched. They assert that metaphors can reveal conceptual frameworks (both conscious and unconscious) with metaphor-based conceptualizations governing both thought and action. From this viewpoint, similes represent explicit metaphorical conceptualizations (Knowles and Moon 2006).

Low, et al. (2010, viii) recognise the growing inter-disciplinary appeal of understanding “the implications and applications of metaphor” in social interaction. This ‘real-world’ research acknowledges that social dynamics will affect the metaphors selected, interpreted and developed. Thus the context in which an interaction arises becomes as important as the language employed. When analysing metaphors it is important to examine three elements in concert, the metaphor word or phrase, its meaning in terms of what it refers to metaphorically and the connection (or similarity) between the first two elements (Knowles and Moon 2006). In this way, our understanding of metaphor usage moves beyond identification of dichotomies (good/bad) and towards unearthing complexities. While we identify here the strengths of metaphors, we explore the limitations of utilizing metaphors as an analytic tool in our Discussion section.

The Research Context

This paper draws on two research projects undertaken individually by the authors. While the specific data referred to in this article concerns the experiences of leadership in teaching and learning, we identified a strong theoretical connection with the other study which addressed the understandings of academic identity by students. The latter study focused on participants in the UK from a postgraduate certificate (PgCert) which accredited their teaching, in which they assessed theoretical material on identity and

created a metaphor-based island map to visualize their academic identity (see King et al. 2014 for full study details). The findings indicated a disjuncture between past and current understandings of academic life, one that also emerged from the leadership study.

The NZ case study was part of a larger international study conducted across seven locations involving 38 academics' experiences of 'being led' within the sphere of teaching and learning in higher education. Narratives were collected from the participants since they not only "provide information" but they also assist to "crystallize or define an issue, view, stance or perspective" (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011, 553), when analysed recursively.

We focus here solely on the NZ data in the analysis of metaphors. The results of the wider study (Billot et al. 2013) affirm the premise that just as teachers are defined by their students' learning, leaders are defined by their followers' engagement. These findings, while related to a focus on follower/leader relations, provide a threshold understanding for identifying aspects of identity within that context. Our next section offers interpretations of a sample of metaphor-usage (quoted text is ascribed to Participants as P1, P2 etc; pertinent metaphors are italicized).

Analysis

While language is a conduit for communication, it is situational, so the way in which messages are communicated needs to be both textually and contextually analysed. Since spoken metaphors reflect the concepts that underpin everyday activities (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), their usage gave insight to specific academic experiences, in terms of their context (a NZ university) and relationships (the interaction with a colleague who holds a leadership role). The data also revealed participant identity within that particular experience, in a specific (teaching and learning) sub-context. In addition, the texts offered insights into underpinning values held by the participants. We acknowledged that the metaphors would not reveal all components of a situational experience, since they focus on one aspect of a concept. At the same time, it was identified that alongside 'conscious' metaphors, 'unconscious' metaphors were also evident (if subsumed) in the text. By studying the metaphors within these narratives as "tropes of organisational communication" (Gabriel, et al. 2011) it becomes possible to use them as "important vehicles for organisational learning and socialisation as well as for exercising influence" (367).

Applying Bourdieu's "thinking tools" of *field*, *habitus* and *capital* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 160) to the NZ data unearthed some interesting interpretations. For our analysis, both researchers analysed the narratives individually and then collaboratively (with recursive cross checking processes), in order to provide a mechanism for metaphor checking. Then the metaphors were analysed in relation to Bourdieu's 'thinking tools'. The strength of this approach was the theoretical framework it gave the analysis, as well as a mode for linking academic stories of relational dynamics back to the academic context.

The narratives fell into positive and negative encounters. In the positive cases, the interactions were affirming, both of the participant's relationship and their contextual expectations. In these narratives there were few examples of the working context (field) being experienced as a Bourdieusian 'site of struggle'. To the contrary, the academic context and leader's behaviour were seen as supportive, particularly for one participant, who compared it with previous experiences where "*work [was] often*

subject to Foucauldian micro-management” (P3). The same staff member commented on the leader being a “*peacemaker*” who poured “*oil on troubled waters*”.

Further positive examples included experiences of a leader who led “from within/behind” creating “*positive ripples [which] continue*” (P8). For this academic the context was positive at this time (and before subsequent institutional changes) where “*as caterpillars we had fun, trust and danced with each other*”.

By contrast, the negative experiences contained references to management as being “*a twilight zone*” where “*decisions were overturned*” (P6) with people being “*put on the spot*” and feeling like “*a deer in the spotlights, startled and overexposed*” (P7). An academic new to NZ felt they had arrived into a “*madhouse*” where “*expectations were both ancient and persistent*” led by a leader whose look of “*glacial disdain*” and associated behaviour led the staff looking like “*frightened chastened children*” (P1).

Within the same data, there were differing experiences of ‘habitus’ or ‘game-playing’. Unsurprisingly, the participants who recounted positive experiences, seemed more at ease within their roles where “*management was open and transparent*” (P5) and the leader understood that “*we are willing to be early adopters [of technology] and leap off the cliff to try new things*”. Interestingly, this same academic unconsciously identified certain personal ‘game playing’ when using “*honey not vinegar*” in their interactions and putting their “*best foot forward*”. In the same narrative, certain behaviours of other academics as “*road blockers*” indicated negotiation of their leader’s style, through “*testing him, trying him out and playing games with him*” or “*knock heads with him*”. Others called him “*a bully and have never revisited their opinion*”. In response, the leader, while hoping “*to make a good impression on us*”, “*does not shy away from sorting [out] the challenging people*” although now “*holds his cards closer to his chest*”.

Noticeable strategies were enacted by staff in another encounter, where the leader was perceived as incompetent by his team, leaving them to undertake his tasks. Their reactions involved exposing his inefficiency through inaction in remedying his errors, resulting in “*a fiasco*” (P4). While the participant was “*not proud of their behaviour*”, she rationalised it by stating that a system should not allow “*somebody who is no longer competent ... [to] sit on their backside*”. A further revelation was that the academic “*felt quite divorced from what happened*” and “*even rather satisfied*” when the leader was asked to “*formally account for events*”.

Other subversive actions arose when one academic (P2) had a discussion with their leader who was criticising their actions. “*I decided the best way to deal with it was to listen and not defend myself, but to agree to concessions wanted* (such as longer reports). Indeed *I did decide to ‘ambush’ her* with very long detailed reports” with the result that she later asked for shorter ones. Her perspective on the relationship was that she thought the leader displayed “*bullying tactics*” and “*I felt disregarded ... she wanted me in the position to support her ways and beliefs*”.

The data revealed some insights as to what Bourdieu terms ‘capital’ (what is valued), through direct and indirect comments, such as those regarding time as a valuable commodity. “*He made the time for me*” (P3) and “*all my time and work had been for nothing*” (P6) exemplify the notion that time is valuable and, we would argue, suffuses the academic identities in each of our constructs.

Many references were made about support provided or withheld. Appreciation was given to the “*supportive, caring and nurturing support*” of a leader (P3); the

strength of “*constructive frank dialogue*” (P5); “*leadership as trust, leadership as all seeing and inclusive [is] a gift*” (P8), as against a leader “*painting a poor picture of the people who follow him*” (P7). For another it was important to have “*a person’s inefficiency revealed*” (P4).

Insight into what is valued in the academic workplace can be discerned from the narrative provided by the academic newer to NZ (P1) who experienced an overbearing leader during a meeting:

Even thinking back on the incident, I feel the uneasiness I assume most adults feel when we know we, or others we respect, have *behaved liked children*. There is a *kind of sickening shame* that accompanies a felt realisation that *a room full of competent adults has atomised to a pack of cowed children waiting to be punished and hoping to be spared*. It was more than *a heavy hand my colleagues had experienced*, I came to discover. They felt fear - fear for their jobs. This was *a fear that has been long-standing and deliberately cultivated*.

The same staff member also reflected on how this atmosphere had affected her self-view (indicating her own values and expectations):

It is chastening for me to recall *how out of balance I myself was* in those years. I persisted in speaking out, I hope respectfully; *I refused to participate in purges* or seek favour dishonourably. But I was *not my former vibrant self*. Still, *the pull and tug of conformity*, the *lonely dread of being perceived as a “stirrer”*, the *very real fear of emotional and professional exile - I felt them all keenly*; I was miserable, and *I struggled*. I struggled to be the adult professional that I had assumed that I was. *That era was full of brutal, ugly, icily controlling and demeaning interactions*. It was *as if a spell had been cast and the sunlight receded*; it was *as if people’s intelligence and confidence had imploded, leaving withered, untrusting husks behind*. *If the strong had crushed, we the weak had played our parts in the drama* that let it happen.

The narratives provided these academics with an opportunity to express what they may not have done with colleagues and superiors. Contesting a working context which does not match expectations can result in multiple forms of resistance, varying from overt rebellion to subtle game playing or passive resistance. In *Homo Academicus* (1988, xxvi), Bourdieu confesses “the need to gain rational mastery” over his disappointments in coming to terms with his own mismatched expectations and experience (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Bourdieu thereby exemplifies the benefits of employing his ‘thinking tools’ of field, capital and habitus as an academic response through which to illuminate practice and identity.

Limitations of our study and of using metaphors

We note that other identity studies (for example, Beech et al. 2011; Green and Little 2013) and leadership studies have effectively used metaphors. Crossman and Crossman (2011) identified that authors frequently used metaphors to describe and explain follower behaviour. Our use of narratives to inform academic identity was based on the premise that narratives provide an opportunity for academics to voice their lived experience. Narrative inquiry, within the context of qualitative methodology, is particularly suitable for researching how people make sense of their lives by selecting and arranging information about noteworthy episodes (Cousin, 2009). We were

cognisant of Gabriel's (1999) caution on the use of narratives for understanding academics since, they can "poetically embellish facts for effect, allowing for a certain wish fulfilment" for "stories do not present facts-as-information, but facts-as-experience" (191). However, we were also aware that by writing narratives academics can "reiterate and transform culturally shared meanings, ideas, norms and values" (Churchman and King 2009 510).

Our contentions in this article draw on a single site with a small sample, although we remind the reader that this case study comprised a part of a much larger international study (Billot et al. 2013) which rigorously analysed all seven sites of datasets. While our approach of analysing the experiences of being a follower through metaphor would be considered novel in followership studies, as noted above, other metaphor-based studies have illustrated the strength of such an approach. Having structured our analytical approach using individual, and then collaborative, cross-checking, we maintained a continual reflective dialogue in order to critique the methods we used. Yet we do acknowledge that since metaphor is but one way to understand an experience, there will always be limitations to any metaphor analysis since metaphors are subject to our own interpretations.

While we have acknowledged that metaphor use was not consistent across participants, we were able to decipher through our collaborative analysis that the way in which metaphors were embedded within the narratives indicated the nature and significance of academic expectations in the workplace. There may be a number of reasons why metaphors were not used by participants or left unspoken, as Bourdieu points out, the metaphor of "silence" (1988, 69) expresses the notion of a university as a place where accepted norms may be challenged in private but silently accepted in public. This situation (if accepted) may cause reticence for academics, as followers, to provide open critique of their leaders.

This article does not claim to provide a full analysis of the metaphorical texts, nor assess through repetitions, the significance of their use. Instead our intention has been to open up a space for the application of a novel approach to link the use of language with indications of academic identity and perceptions of relational spaces.

Implications/Discussion

The theoretical frameworks of metaphor and Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' provided the means to examine notions of academic identity captured in our data. Our underpinning (UK) study found that guided reflection by newer academics on their own use of metaphor to conceptualise their identity proved self-revelatory (King et al 2014). This intervention could have been undertaken equally well within the mentoring mechanism of the PgCert course, through departmental mentoring or other post-induction support given the necessary facilitator knowledge and motivation. We therefore posit that the wider organisational aspects of identity which may trouble newer academics could be addressed in a similar manner, for example, one potential application of this combination could involve guided reflection on leadership theory within an induction programme for academic staff. One barrier to effective facilitation, however, may be the perception that theoretical models, such as those of Bourdieu, are critical of the academy. We would, however, argue for open critique.

Metaphor, we have suggested, provides individuals with a way of 'saying the unsayable' and potentially reveal unconscious thoughts. Both the narratives and the island maps (in the underpinning UK study) capture instances where participants have

used metaphor when they found something difficult to express. For example, our analyses consider several examples of participants' dissonant responses to the academic communities in which they find themselves embedded (Henkel 2000), where they use metaphor to express a perception of being disempowered or at odds with established norms of behaviour or academic values. Metaphors of divorce (P4), over-exposure (P7), are used by our participants to express discomfort with individuals or with the institution. To comment further on these disjunctures would require a deeper understanding of individuals' motivations and values than these studies were designed to capture.

Those narratives in our studies which presented negative perspectives on academic life, tended to expose rejection of individuals' attempts to innovate. More generally, Bourdieu's (1988) representation of the academic field as a space of conflict and of competition is well evidenced by our studies. The discomfort that some participants reveal could be explained through their under-developed understanding of the 'game' they have entered into, or their unpreparedness to accept the de facto rules of the game. This conjecture is supported by a recent study of UK academics (Bolden, Gosling and O'Brien 2014) which identified an awareness that "the 'rules of the game' [are] largely tacit and highly variable" (11). Significantly, Bourdieu views habitus as being derived from the "individual's earlier life experiences" (Reay 2004, 433), and hence their belief in what is or is not possible in their practice. This may help to explain the issues of conflicting expectations and experience we noted earlier in much research into academic identity and which were identified in our underpinning UK study.

Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' of habitus, field and capital have enriched this analysis of academic identity by providing a means of blending the social context with individual responses. It is, to an extent, reassuring that conflict and discomfort is an inherent feature of each academic field (Bourdieu 1988). Reay (2004, 437-438) suggests that "habitus operates at an unconscious level unless individuals confront events that cause self-questioning, whereupon habitus begins to operate at the level of consciousness and the person develops new facets of self". Thus, we conclude that academic identity and academic practice grow out of current experience. This is an important point for those working in environments where they find themselves at odds with the status quo.

Those supporting new academics have the means to illuminate the academic context. Gourlay (2011) recommended that academic departments and academic development programmes for new academics should acknowledge and address the "emotional, ideological and subjective struggles which may arise in transition" (593). The PgCert study (King et al. 2014) provided a model of guided reflection on relevant theory and for the trialling of metaphorical approaches which could be integrated into the analysis of the leadership data. We would go further by promoting the benefits of discussion and guided critique of relevant theory and concepts.

Conclusion

Our deliberations on the nature of academic identity lead us to recommend greater openness in preparing new academics to deal with academic life. A growing body of research into academic identity has identified a mismatch of expectations and experience as being key to dissatisfaction amongst academics. Support, trust, fairness and recognition have been identified as significant characteristics of a healthy organisational climate for academic engagement (McMurray and Scott 2013). These

acknowledge that identity “is built around social engagement” as well as “the way in which individuals exercise their agency in the workplace” (Jawitz 2009, 243).

While experienced academics continue to renegotiate their professional roles as individuals as they “move through different forms of participation”, “newcomers also have agency that can result in them choosing to engage with an identity trajectory that combines particular forms of participation” (Jawitz 2009, 243). Our underpinning study established the positive contribution to individual wellbeing of teaching relevant academic identity theory alongside a means of generating personal insight (King 2013; King et al. 2014). We therefore recommend that courses which prepare new academics for their role in higher education promote the understanding of academic identity by including it as one of their formal outcomes. Building on this, and on the frustrations which some of our interviewees expressed in reflecting on their experiences of being led, we recommend that a key aim of such a course should be the explication of academic life in terms of a game which can be comprehended through Bourdieu’s (1988) thinking tools.

Finally, we return to an earlier claim by Clandinin et al. (2009), that adjustments to an understanding of identity are made through dialogue with others and an “openness to stepping into liminal spaces – spaces of ambiguity and uncertainty” (153). We believe that by using metaphors as a medium for exploring identity and linking them to Bourdieu’s ‘thinking tools’, we have created an opportunity for scoping organisational channels for learning (Gabriel et al. 2011), particularly in assisting early career academics to meet this challenge.

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