Managers' practice and managers' learning as identity formation: Reassessing the MBA contribution

Russell Warhurst
University of Chester, UK

Abstract

The contribution of MBA study to managers' work has been increasingly questioned, in particular the relevance of the curriculum and the transfer of MBA knowledge and skills into practice. However, emerging processual understandings of practice emphasize management as a relational activity and manager development as a process of evolving a particular identity in relation to others. While these understandings enable a reassessment of the contributions of MBA study, they have so far offered unconsolidated theoretical tools and empirical evidence of manager-students' identity-work is limited. This article makes both theoretical and empirical contributions using a case study of MBA manager-students to critically examine the relationality of management, the significance of identity in the respondent managers' day-to-day practice, and the contribution of MBA study to identity-work. The findings contribute to resolving a key debate in the study of identity formation. The article concludes by developing implications for the redesign of MBA education to better enable manager-students' identity formation.

Keywords

Introduction

In recent years, in-service MBA study has become a primary form of development for managers in developed economies. In the UK, an MBA education is now available at 130 provider institutions and the UK accrediting body, the Association of MBAs (AMBA), estimates that 15,000 MBA degrees are awarded each year. However, the value of MBA study, construed in terms of the direct utility to the recipients' practice, has been questioned by numerous researchers. Wylie (2010: 62) for example, commented that 'finding scapegoats for the recession has been easy. With [*many*] discredited CEOs … sporting MBAs from top business schools on their CVs, critics have plenty of ammunition to condemn MBA programmes', and Mintzberg (2004) famously condemned

Corresponding author:
Russell Warhurst, University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester CH1 4BJ, UK
Email: r.warhurst@chester.ac.uk

full-time programmes to aspirant managers as 'teaching the wrong things, in the wrong ways to the wrong people, or, at least, at the wrong time in their careers' (pp. 854).

In the UK, 63 per cent of MBA students study part time alongside their work in management roles (AMBA). Such programmes can be designed to facilitate learning transfer from the MBA classroom to participant managers' workplaces and thereby overcome the criticism of the relevance of the degree. Part-time MBA programmes typically adopt pedagogies to ensure that the workplace challenges facing students are addressed and students' skills can be developed alongside their practice. Nonetheless, referring specifically to UK MBA provision, Grey's (2009: 134) conclusion that 'there is absolutely no evidence that taking a management course has any effect at all upon making people better managers' encapsulates the findings and assertions of a range of researchers (Antonacopoulou and Bento, 2006; Brocklehurst et al., 2007; Clarke, 2008; Kempster, 2009). Gold et al. (2007: 51) summarize the criticisms, noting that the MBA is 'too abstract, impractical and too orthodox' and Armstrong and Fukami (2009: 7) conclude bleakly on the 'impotence of management education'.

This article will not rehearse the criticisms of MBAs, but will focus on examining the contribution of certain facets of MBA learning to practice. Most evaluations tend to focus on the formal learning processes associated with MBA study, that is on the transfer of knowledge and skill to practice. As O'Toole (2009: 552) asserts, we need to 'measure what graduates have retained from their classroom-experience, and what they actually use in their careers'. By contrast, the aim of this article is to build upon emerging discussions that reconceptualize management practice and manager learning in processual terms and reassess the ways in which an MBA education might contribute to managers' practice and identity-work in less obvious but perhaps more important ways.

A range of researchers reconceptualize management practice in processual terms, that is, as embedded in social practice, relationships and as involving identity-work (Andersson, 2010; Owen-Pugh, 2008; Valentin, 2008). Accepting the social, relational and political nature of management suggests that 'management is not just something one does, but is, more crucially, who one is and how we relate to others' (Cunliffe, 2009: 11). From these new relational and identity-based conceptualizations of management practice, fresh insights are emerging into management learning and, specifically into the contribution of MBAs. Moreover, these conceptualizations both refine and extend understanding of the informal learning benefits associated with MBAs which have long been recognized. Two studies in particular make important advances in reassessing the MBA contribution. Firstly Sturdy et al. (2006) conceptualize manager learning as a process of 'becoming' and conclude that a 'crucial' outcome of MBA study is the identity-work supportive of becoming. Moreover, they explore the way in which discourse is central to the process of occupational identity formation. However, Sturdy et al. suggest that discourse acts primarily to 'regulate' identity and define the manager in terms of others' expectations—a somewhat pessimistic and deterministic claim that this article will challenge. A second important study in reconceptualizing an MBA contribution to practice is that of Hay and Hodgkinson (2008: 27) who question notions of a simple transfer between education and practice and call for 'a more nuanced understanding of the function of management education', suggesting that adopting a process-relational understanding of management activity enables a range of more subtle benefits that are not necessarily related to the formal curriculum to be seen. They conclude that the key contributions of MBA study are in developing self-confidence, self-esteem and personal credibility, achieved not so much through the formal curriculum but through 'the MBA managers jointly shaping the constructions of each other' (pp. 26). However, both this study and Sturdy et al.'s work are somewhat limited in terms of conceptual development and, as both sets of authors acknowledge, further empirical research is also required.

The first objective of this article is theoretical. While identity and occupational identity formation are extensively theorized, distinct traditions of inquiry are evident. Alvesson et al. (2008: 5) observe an 'increasing commotion over identity' in the field of organizational studies and warn of the lack of theoretical rigour in certain strands of theorising. Therefore this article critically reviews key strands of theorizing and undertakes theoretical synthesis. Thereby a working model for understanding practice as identity and, specifically, the processes of identity formation is developed. The second objective draws upon this theoretical base and is empirical. Detailed empirical evidence is presented of the social and relational nature of management practice in support of the theorization of identity in social terms. Evidence is then presented of the formation of manager identity and of the contributions of MBA study to this process. The article now turns to address the first, theoretical objective and will then proceed to address the empirical objective.

Management, identity and identity formation

Manager development has come to be understood in terms of the acquisition of competences underpinned by formal knowledge and rational modes of cognition. However, a considerable body of evidence now supports the construal of management practice in relational terms as a contextual process (see, for example, Antonacopoulou and Bento, 2006; Thorpe and Gold, 2010). Moreover, management is increasingly found to be a contested process requiring the negotiation of complex networks of organizational power. Managers therefore need to be considered as political operators (Watson, 2001). Such findings have prompted the reconceptualization of management in terms of identity (Watson and Harris, 1999). Lawler and Ford (2010: 517) similarly conclude that the activity of management requires knowing from within, a form of knowing captured with the aphorism, 'the doctor is the medicine'. Therefore, management is understood not so much as a state of being but as a process of continual becoming that requires managers giving constant attention to 'creating, maintaining and repairing their managerial identity' (Andersson, 2010: 168–9). This process can be understood as one of 'identity formation' whereby the individual comes to define her or himself as a manager. The idea of 'formation', traditionally used to describe the vocational training and development of priests into Christian ministry, implies a process extending over time and involving a transformation of the self. Formation is particularly apposite to manager development contrasting as it does with the narrow notions of knowledge acquisition or the development of competence. Identity formation can, as will be discussed, require considerable identity-work. This attention to identity and identity formation might be of particular importance to early career managers whose identities may be challenged and contested by established colleagues (Mischenko, 2005; Watson, 2007). There would thus seem to be strong grounds for concurring with Gagnon (2008: 376) who argues that the concept of identity 'has much to offer in understanding manager development'.

Watson (2007: 136) suggests that identity 'is simply the notion of who or what a particular person is in relation to others'. However, within this simple notion is concealed a key debate in which structuralist conceptualizations are set in opposition to humanist conceptualizations: a debate with particular relevance for understanding how identity and manager development might be interlinked. Reedy (2009: 84) contrasts humanist assumptions where 'an essentially autonomous, self fashioning individual …[is] able to select a customised identity' with a more critical structuralist position that can be characterized by identity being deterministically imposed from the outside by social forces, which are passively consumed by subjects as powerless dupes. Even from a post-structuralist stance, the self is still construed as largely culturally constructed (King and Horrocks, 2010). From this post-structuralist perspective, a Lacanian lens is increasingly used in showing how one specific aspect of the cultural and social milieu, the actions and reactions of others, shapes,

or even determines, individual identity: the individual 'needs the gaze of others in order to see himself' (Vidaillet and Vignon, 2010: 222–223).

From this post-structuralist perspective, discourse is given a central role in understanding identity formation and maintenance. Reflecting a linguistic turn in which a 'transition from perceiving language as the means of reflecting reality to the means of constructing reality' (Sambrook, 2008: 29), the individual is seen as constituted within discourse (Coupland, 2007) and identity accomplished through intra-personal and inter-personal discourses using the socially shared resource of language (Sturdy et al., 2006). However, Reedy (2009) notes how a discourse of management could be an insidiously alluring trap into which insecure managers are hoodwinked. The resulting false consciousness positions individuals as dupes of the powerful. Alternatively, management discourse might be seized upon by aspirant managers as offering a basis for power, with the result that those internalizing the discourse become villains and agents of domination. Critical researchers assert that dominant discourses serve to constrain identity development in pervasive and opaque ways, 'defining the knower and what s/he is expected to be' (Sturdy et al., 2006: 846), and du Gay et al. (1996: 266) assert that a discourse of excellence within management competence frameworks becomes a governmental technology used instrumentally to position managers as entrepreneurs of the self who should strive to be 'productive, self-regulating, responsible individuals'.

That individual identities might be structurally determined by the available discourses can be seen at one end of the structuralism-humanism continuum. However, a number of researchers see the distinction between the 'two poles' of humanism and structuralism as 'overdrawn' and in need of bridging (Parker, 2007). The most widely cited 'bridge' is Giddens' structuration theory which suggests that there is 'reciprocity between the individual and the social' (Billett, 2007: 61). In this manner Reedy (2009: 104) concludes that 'we form ourselves' through a '*dialectic* between social structure and individual agency'.

A useful way to conceptualize this dialectic, and a conceptualization which is of particular value in understanding manager learning, is in terms of a tension between structural forces for 'identity-regulation' and individuals' agentic 'identity-work'. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue that identities are achieved rather than given: an achievement involving a life project grounded in a struggle to realize coherence and distinctiveness (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Continuous identity-work effort is needed to form, repair and maintain a desired identity against external, but possibly internalized, forces of identity-regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Critical scholars depict these efforts as a lost cause, as Reedy (2009: 104) notes, while 'choice is a possibility … determinism is a probability. It is always easier to unthinkingly be moulded by collective norms'.

While critical scholars might position managers as passive and unquestioning puppets, Thomas and Linstead (2002) found that dominant management discourses are far from totalizing. Their middle manager respondents purposefully selected and used specific discourses as linguistic resources in creating, securing and legitimizing their managerial selves (pp. 78–79). Similarly, Handley et al. (2007) show that professionals do not merely passively accept discourses available within their communities but 'come to adapt, transform or even reject them' (p. 179). Even critical writers such as Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 621) concede that the 'organisational regulation of identity … is a precarious and often contested process involving active identity-work [such that] organisational members are not reducible to passive consumers of managerially designed and designated identities'. Watson (2007: 149) was thus able to conclude that 'relatively self-assertive people like managers' demonstrate strong control over self such that there is a need to emphasize the role of 'conscious agency and choice in the identity-work that people do'. Managers might, therefore, be more reflexive, agentic and purposeful than has been assumed and to exert considerable personal identity control.

Managers are more likely to engage in agentic identity-work than being subjects of identity-regulation for a number of reasons. Gaining a management position invariably involves a conscious choice and is typically a sought after position. As Grey (2009: 46) acknowledges, 'we live in a world where to be a manager is, in many people's eyes, to be recognised as a person of some consequence'. Management careers offer both a basis for material and social privilege (Sturdy et al., 2006) and possibilities for self actualization. Becoming and being a manager is, therefore, undoubtedly, to many, a worthwhile identity project (Reedy, 2008). And, while certain professions can become totalizing vocations, there is evidence from Watson's (2007) work that for many managers, the profession of management is merely one aspect of a more rounded human identity. Nonetheless, on balance, these more humanist findings need to be questioned in the light of post-structuralist understandings. Therefore, the realities of being a manager might best be considered in terms of the arduous task of identity-work against the pervasive and pernicious forces for identity-regulation.

When management is conceptualized in terms of this tension between identity-regulation and identity-work, participation on an MBA programme can be seen to contribute to manager development in new ways. Sturdy et al. (2006: 851) propose that the strongest outcome of the MBA is 'a change in the perception of self' and Hay and Hodgkinson (2008) suggest that MBA managers are involved in jointly shaping each others' identity construction. However, as Sturdy et al. (2006) conceded, the processes of identity formation associated with MBA study warrants further research and it is to this task that the article now turns. In what follows, the research methods used in this inquiry are examined and the resulting empirical findings are then reported and interpreted in the light of the above conceptual framework.

Investigatory methods

The diverse and fragmented theorization of identity has resulted in varied methodological approaches and methods of inquiry (Pullen et al., 2007: 6–8). However, the ontological and epistemological implications of the social-constructionist conceptualizations of identity discussed above suggested an interpretivist research approach and a case study research design. The richness of detail provided in case study research enables readers to consider of the veracity and applicability of the findings in alternative, analogous, cases. Nonetheless, to ensure the trustworthiness of their endeavours qualitative researchers are encouraged to demonstrate transparency by detailing 'the entire process of inquiry' (Butler-Kisber, 2010: 21) and such detailing follows.

Sixty-one part-time manager-students enrolled on a specific university's MBA provision formed the case study. Respondents were practising managers from a wide range of functional backgrounds and from diverse medium to large sized organizations in the private, public and not-for-profit sectors. The respondents were MBA students either on open access programmes run at two campuses or on a corporate programme designed for a city council. Across the case study, the average experience of managerial responsibilities was approximately five years. In the light of Collinson's (2003) observation that paid work is typically a crucial source of masculine identity, it is of significance that nearly half of the respondents were female. Gender differences, the extent of management experience and whether or not the respondents managed in a commercial or not-for-profit organization emerged as three differentiating variables as the data was analysed. While differentiation on these variables was not particularly strong, gender and experience differences are specifically discussed in the findings that follow.

The career characteristics of three illustrative respondents reflect the nature of the case study group as a whole. The first illustrative respondent graduated three years prior to her MBA studies and held a humanities first degree from a leading international university. Prior to her current role as team leader

of a small marketing communications group within a city council, she had worked in health care promotion. The second illustrative respondent, in his late forties, was a chartered engineer and director of operations of a medium sized housing association. Having worked for the housing association, and its predecessor organizations, since his days as an apprentice craftsman, this respondent had a thorough operational knowledge of the business. A third illustrative respondent, a bio-science graduate in his early thirties, now led a regional sales team for a multinational pharmaceuticals company.

The curriculum of the case study MBA programme aligned with the requirements of the UK accrediting body and therefore reflected UK provision in general. Core modules of study included strategic management, marketing, finance, operations and HRM. However, while O'Toole (2009) found top-tier schools emphasized quantitative analysis at the expense of the people-factor, the people factor now characterizes those UK programmes which are aimed at practising managers (Clarke, 2008). Moreover, the case study MBA was delivered within a teaching-led university with a strong tradition of pedagogic debate. This resulted in an MBA emphasizing personal growth and development, and in many curriculum areas manager-students were placed in learning-sets to enable action learning addressing shared managerial issues. Similarly, assessments typically required the definition and resolution of management challenges in the manager-students' own workplaces. Assessments also involved critically reflective writing to enable students to question and reformulate their personal management practice. These learning and assessment methods were incorporated to facilitate the transfer of formal learning into the students' workplaces and to develop students' relational abilities within the cohort and within organizations. A foundation module covered manager learning processes and methodologies to ensure that manager-students were equipped to effectively build their knowledge and capability from these diverse learning approaches.

The discursive understanding of identity outlined earlier suggested a narrative research method such as in-depth interviewing or journalling. However, the research method adopted comprised an open questionnaire, which enabled narrative accounts to be developed while overcoming the problems typically associated with more intensive methods. That a questionnaire was very familiar to the manager respondents and appeared, prima facie, to offer quick and easy completion ensured a diversity of respondents who were fully representative of the MBA cohorts.

The questionnaire layout and questions prompted extended narrative and story-telling. The 12 questions used were worded to avoid constraining accounts within theoretically determined boundaries. Two sample questions illustrate this principle. In one question respondents were asked to 'briefly describe recent, specific incidents at work that typify your practice as a manager'. In another question, respondents were asked, 'in what ways does participating on your MBA programme contribute to you perceiving yourself as a manager?' A high level of commitment was evident in the both the extent and quality of responses. Thus, one respondent wrote:

> this is not a complaint, but I needed one whole hour to complete this questionnaire—to really think about it and to understand the issues for myself.

King and Horrocks (2010: 130) note that 'qualitative research … involves entering into meaningful relationships with people' and the high levels of engagement with this study evidenced by the above response can perhaps be attributed firstly to the researcher being a participant researcher in the role of MBA programme leader and tutor. Moreover, a degree trust had undoubtedly developed by the time the questionnaire was distributed mid-way through an academic year. Secondly, however, the high quality of responses can be attributed to the research questions helping respondents to reflexively clarify and make more sense of their own practice and to appraise the processes enabling their own development. Thus a respondent from a logistics SME remarked:

because I'm normally spinning so many plates I've never really thought before about what it is I actually do here and what it is I should actually do now that I am supposedly in charge of this unit.

The challenges of analysing identity data are noted by Coupland (2007: 284) who observes that 'researchers solicit responses to questions such as "tell me about yourself?" and then depart in different directions to work out what this means'. While the current inquiry was guided by the explanatory potential of identity in understanding management development, the empirical research avoided simplistic deductive theory testing. The exact theoretical focus emerged through an iterative process both during the collection and analysis phases of the empirical inquiry. An inductive approach was thus adopted. Research findings were developed through content analysis within NVivo. The first stage of this process involved devising descriptive codes inductively from respondents' narratives. Devising codes involved not merely looking for themes in what had been written but also identifying what might have been written but was not. During the second stage of analysis these descriptive codes were compared and contrasted with themes from the literature which allowed more interpretive, theoretically informed, codes to be established. The final stage of analysis involved the organization of the coded data into a theoretically cogent account. The application of these modes of analysis to the data resulted in the following findings.

Findings

A focus on occupational identity formation is of significance in understanding manager development if, as discussed earlier, it is accurate to conceptualize management practice as primarily a processual, relational activity and if, as suggested, identity is conceptualized in social terms. The findings from this research serve to affirm the first conceptualization, encapsulated in Cunliffe's (2009: 2) assertion that 'managing is a relational practice … is embedded in relationships with people'. The deployment of knowledge or rational modes of thinking rarely featured in the respondents' accounts of 'typical incidents' characterizing management. Rather, the data overwhelmingly demonstrates the fundamentally relational, but politically contested nature of management practice. For many of the respondents, responsibility for handling relationships defined management as an activity. Several of the less experienced respondents claimed not to think of themselves as managers because, as one wrote:

I only run projects: I have no line responsibility for people.

Even so, the accounts reveal that these managers were typically just as enmeshed within relationships as the majority and possibly needed even more relational abilities than those respondent managers with direct line responsibilities. For the vast majority of respondents, dealing with relationships was both the most time consuming and the most demanding facet of being a manager. Respondents wrote extensively and in detail about a range of typical incidents that characterised management for them and 80 percent of this narrative concerned relational facets of practice regardless of the seniority of the respondent.

What is also of interest theoretically is the multiplicity and complexity of the relationships typically managed. Vertical and horizontal relationships within the organization and relationships with external stakeholders featured prominently in most accounts. Moreover, the need for contextual sensitivity and awareness of power-balances were also strongly evident respondents' practice and support the emergent, processual, conceptualizations of management discussed earlier. Thus, one middle level public sector manager reported:

I was asked to take responsibility for troubleshooting a failing service. There were problems across the board although, predictably, the 'people issues' were the big ones. I brought together the managers directly involved, the managers from interfacing services, the trade union reps. and the elected members [councillors] concerned. I also liaised with the external stakeholders, particularly representatives of the service users. The politics with a big and small 'p' was horrendous and resolving these issues in particular 'consumed' me, and 'consumed' is exactly the right word, fully for three months.

Similarly, dealing with 'difficult people' and making 'hard decisions' with regard to staff are evident in virtually all of the managers' accounts and dominated responses to the question requesting incidents characterizing management. Incidents which commonly featured included working with staff to improve underperformance, dealing with theft or fraud, helping with health issues, particularly mental health problems, resolving capability concerns and determining disciplinary matters. In sum, reconciling conflicting interests typified the incidents chosen by respondents to characterize their management practice. Therefore, in defining management more emphasis must be placed on the relational facets of the practice and, as discussed, management can best be understood as a way of being, that is, of having a particular identity.

A surface reading of the respondent managers' accounts suggest a degree of assurance in dealing with the complex relational and political issues. Therefore, it might be assumed that the managers were confident with well formed managerial identities. Indeed, a majority of respondents positively identified themselves as managers. As one quite junior manager put it, his identification was with:

the other managers in this organisation because we share similar challenges and issues which are necessarily different from those of our reporting teams.

Moreover, explicit assertions of confidence occur in most accounts. Respondents were asked in one question, 'to what extent do you regard yourself as a manager?' Responses were encapsulated by one respondent with the average of five years of management experience who asserted:

I am well established in my role, my contribution is recognised and I am sure of my capabilities.

Such confidence might reflect the fact that most respondents were in their second role that could be defined as a management position. However, as Sturdy et al. (2006: 846) caution, it might be the case that an assertion of confidence 'masks its very opposite'. Furthermore, as Vidaillet and Vignon (2010: 224) note, it is to be expected that 'younger managers … strongly invoke themselves in the organisation so as to be "recognised" for their work and competences'.

Respondents were specifically prompted by the questionnaire to reflect on possible threats to their personal sense of being a manager. Limited direct evidence was elicited by this questioning reinforcing, prima facie, the security of respondents' managerial identities. However, identity threats are readily discernible within the narratives of less experienced managers in particular suggesting that the identity formation of these managers was at any early stage. For instance, it is evident from the accounts of less senior respondents that these managers were by-passed from time to time by reporting staff. Similarly, some reporting staff seem to have purposefully 'undermined' the position of inexperienced managers by challenging their decisions. Conversely, certain respondents' identities as managers were threatened by their seniors' questioning, challenging and changing decisions. Others felt that they were 'micro-managed' and 'overly controlled'. One respondent noted that such actions meant she was 'stifled in being the manager I want to be'. Clearly, therefore, certain explicit identity threats were experienced and maintaining a managerial identity required, as Andersson (2010: 174) reported, 'constant managerial becoming'.

Other identity threats were more pervasive and intrinsic. Thus, for example, many respondents wrote of a lingering sense of themselves as a particular type of professional and not as a manager. As Parker (2007) found, professional identities can be stronger than the occupational or organizational identities characterizing management. A transformation of identity may thus be required as a professional assumes a managerial position and Watson (2007) notes that identity is as much about who one is not, as who one is. The accounts of more than half the respondents reveal tensions between established professional identities and emergent managerial identities. Thus, one former professional accountant who had recently been promoted to a generalist management position expressed his concern that:

> the sort of commercial decisions I'm now involved in making are not always the most financially sound decisions.

A different manifestation of the same tension is revealed in a social work manager's lamentation that:

> it is unfortunate that you need to be a manager to progress your career.

Managers such as this latter often expressed a strong shared identity with the team they were leading. This identification had, as one respondent noted, 'many advantages'. However, this respondent also felt that such identification, 'challenges me to be fully a manager'. This managers obvious awareness of the need to form a distinct manager identity contrasted with a substantial number of respondents whose accounts revealed their preferred self-perception as professionals rather than as managers. A senior manager leading a contracting and procurement service for a city council thus wrote that, 'in my heart I will always be a highways engineer'.

By contrast, certain respondents recognized the advantages and complementarity of their established professional identities with a managerial identity. Paton et al. (2010: 162) found that managers could use their former professional identities politically, 'deploying other, more established, identity claims' in justifying their actions. The accounts of certain managers in the current study are similarly indicative of established professional identities giving a sense of security with their new managerial selves. An ex housing officer who now managed her service wrote:

> it felt 'just right' to take on more responsibility and further the interests of the service and our users.

Additionally, continued professional identification gave the managers recognition and respect from more senior managers not just with regard to decisions requiring specialist expertise. Such broader acceptance was discernible in the narrative of managers particularly from engineering and financial backgrounds, and a degree of managerial social capital would seem to attach automatically to strong professional identities. However, certain of the respondents felt that their 'elevation' from practising professionals to management positions created expectations that they were thus far unable to meet. One such respondent was concerned that he had moved to 'the wrong side of the fence'. Another, with a strong professional background in computer systems, stated her feeling:

> I am like the king (or, rather, queen) with no clothes: only I am the only one aware that I am naked.

Examples of insecurity with management identities such as the above reflection are clearly discernible in many of the accounts. These insecurities might be interpreted as likely to prompt managerial identity-work. However, could it be the case, as suggested by scholars of a critical management

persuasion, that such respondents were vulnerable people, likely to unthinkingly succumb to the pernicious allure and security of managerial identities? In other words, could these managers have been willing dupes of identity-regulation? To some extent respondents accepted the structurally given identities of their occupational role as evidenced by the comment cited earlier of a respondent asserting his identification with the management cadre in his organization. However, this cannot be taken as evidence of determinism and respondents succumbing passively to forces for identity-regulation.

A more optimistic, agentic, reading is possible as the data clearly reveals that respondents greatly valued their managerial roles and were consciously and actively embracing identity formation opportunities. That the manager respondents were not merely passive dupes of identity-regulation is evidenced in the widespread sense of the personal value of being a manager. Many respondents wrote of the workplace status and respect that they sensed. This in turn, provided feelings of pride, self-esteem and empowerment. Such feelings were particularly evident in the writing of female respondents. For example, a female middle manager in a public-private partnership organization wrote that:

> having achieved this level in the organisation provides me with a real sense of achievement especially as a female in what has traditionally been a male role in this organisation.

This respondent went on to write

> being in this role is empowering; it gives me greater influence in the organisation and impact in the lives of others particularly our clients.

Moreover, it is apparent in many of the respondents' accounts that the managers were goal driven, relishing the challenges afforded by managerial work and the opportunity, as intimated in the above manager's remark, to initiate change. A respondent thus wrote directly:

> I get bored easily and need constant challenges to keep me interested in work.

Similarly, many of the respondents' accounts reveal a high degree of agency and the desire for autonomy to make decisions and to innovate. A more experienced respondent thus wrote:

> management is important to me because of the autonomy and creativity I can express.

A strong career orientation can also be discerned in the accounts of many of the managers. This desire to make career 'progress' was evident in, for example, the high proportion of respondents funding their own study.

The purposeful pursuit of a management identity is also evidenced by managers' reflections on their experiences of being managed themselves. For some respondents, managers in their past had demonstrated the importance of management through modelling effectiveness. Several respondents reported that managers in their pasts had given them 'something to aim for' in their own management practice. By contrast, for other respondents previous managers had demonstrated through their ineptitude, the significance of working at becoming a 'good' manager themselves. One respondent wrote of someone who had managed her; 'this woman was wreaking havoc in our lives'. The respondent concluded:

> I was sure then, that if I became a manager myself I would strive to respect people and work with them not against them.

That the respondents were being quite purposeful in their pursuit of managerial identities is further evidenced by the strong sense of personal fulfilment and value deriving from the role that was evident in many accounts. For many respondents, being a manager was a desirable identity providing interesting, varied work resulting in personal satisfaction and enjoyment. Certain respondents specifically wrote that the scope for self-development and challenge was more important to them than the status or income derived from the role. However, with regard to the enhanced income deriving from the role, a few respondents specifically wrote of the importance of the financial security deriving from their management role. Those respondents with sole parenting responsibilities were particularly likely to strive to develop their managerial identities for the financial benefits. Thus, a middle manager in the public sector felt:

> as someone without a profession to fall back on and with responsibility for my two sons, I very much want to progress within management to give us some security.

Finally, it has been noted that management represents an aspirational identity (Kempster, 2009; Gold et al., 2010) and this assertion is verified by these findings. Many of the respondents, thus wrote of the personal benefits in everyday life attributable to their being managers in the workplace. One private sector manager respondent thus felt that 'doing what matters' in the workplace gave him 'confidence outside of my job, i.e. in my everyday life'. Another respondent noted their pride at:

> overhearing one of my children telling their friends that their dad is a 'manager'.

It can therefore be concluded that respondents were purposefully and positively seeking to develop or extend their manager identities. However, as suggested by the theory examined earlier, for many this pursuit involved considerable identity-work. The latter manager's 'pride' came at the price of his feeling a need 'to live up to expectations'.

Turning then, to consider the nature of this identity-work and the possible contributions of MBA study to identity formation. Sturdy et al. (2006: 851) assert that the strongest outcome of the MBA was a 'form of language training' with management discourses enabling the 'enactment of the identity of managers'. The evidence here strongly supports such a discursive conception of identity and discourses specifically associated with MBA study were fuelling respondents' identity-work. Two discourses particularly characterized respondents' accounts of how they thought of themselves as managers. Firstly, a discourse of 'developing others' featured in many accounts particularly those of respondents in their first managerial posts. Not only was 'development' a pervasive discourse of the MBA curriculum but the respondents were also, through their being MBA students, experiencing strong personal development and change. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that extensive narratives detailed the importance of supporting and coaching individuals and teams. For a young SME manager the very '*essence*' of management was:

> achieving results through developing people. I regard myself as a successful manager if I can make sure that the lads have the right skills and, just as importantly, the right attitude, to go the extra mile for our customers.

Considerable narrative detailed the assessment of the learning needs of reporting staff and of helping staff to achieve their potential. Second, discourses of 'initiating and implementing change', of 'delivering results' and 'accountability for outcomes' were evident in virtually all accounts.

Parker (2007: 75–76) notes that 'to adopt a management identification means being *for* "excellence", "quality" and "dynamism"'. Cunliffe (2009: 93) similarly observes that '"responsibility" is one of those key words in management'. Such discourses did indeed characterize the narratives of all the respondent managers. Thus one public sector respondent summed up their sense of being a manager:

> I am responsible for the achievement of service delivery and have key accountabilities for targets, budgets and people.

A private sector manager similarly noted:

> I have overall responsibility for quality, financial performance and strategic business development throughout the northern region.

In constructing the self in these agentic terms, the managers were clearly differentiating themselves from operational, that is, from non-managerial, selves. A slight experience effect is evident in the data with these discourses of responsibility and accountability being somewhat more evident in the narratives of less experienced managers. The related but subtly distinct discourses of 'making a difference' and 'having an impact' featured more in the constructions of experienced managers particularly those in public and quasi-public sector services. These latter sets of discourses clearly evidence the re-construction of the managerial self as a more strategic player. One respondent concluded on the effectiveness for him of such MBA discourses that:

> while I might not yet be able to convincingly 'walk the talk', at least I have learnt from my MBA and the other students in my group how to 'talk the talk'.

A crucial contribution of the substantive content of the MBA lay in enabling the less experienced managers in particular to 'make sense of' what being a manager actually meant and to thereby construct themselves as managers. Drawing on Ricoeur, Cunliffe (2009: 128) notes that 'our lives and our selves are an "unending work of interpretation"'. One respondent captured the essence of this identity-work which was evident in many accounts, in reporting how the MBA gave her 'understanding of the requirements of being a manager'. This transformative effect of discourse was particularly evident in the case of those managers with a strong professional background. As Kempster (2009) found, a formal management education programme can, for professionals, have a catalytic impact on identity. A clinician who was assuming a managerial role specifically noted that 'through the MBA I am discovering my new self'. That such learning was very much a matter of identity-work is evident in the comments such as that of a newly promoted social work manager who wrote that the MBA was, for her: 'inculcating management values alongside my social work values'.

A key finding from Hay and Hodgkinson's (2008: 30) study was the 'enhanced sense of self … increase in self-confidence, self esteem and personal credibility' deriving from participation in an MBA. Instances of self-confidence being strengthened as a result of participation in the case study MBA were widespread in the narrative. Such instances typically took the form of respondents feeling reassured because their experientially learnt practice was 'validated' by the formal discourse of management associated with the MBA. Thus, a respondent asserted:

> MBA theory helps me to identify my existing skills and knowledge and to recognise that I have been and am doing the right things.

By formally naming their experientially learnt skills and knowledge, the managers can be seen naming themselves as managers.

However, could it be that such confidence was, as Sturdy et al. (2006) suggest, deceptive? Specifically, were the managers willingly succumbing to identity-regulation and to an oppressive construction of themselves through performative discourse? Again, the data here supports a more optimistic reading. As Francis (2008) found, meaning cannot be imposed but is challenged and appropriated by individuals for their own purposes. Within the narrative of many respondents is evidence of their new confidence and managerial identities being deployed to question and challenge established management practices. A respondent wrote of how:

> in the past I would have merely accepted seniors' decisions even though I could see the limitations.

From her MBA study this respondent felt that she was 'able to talk the same language' as the senior managers and thereby assert her position with more effect. Moreover, the respondents typically contrasted their own emerging managerial identities with, what one respondent referred to as 'the old guard' and another as the: '"jobs-worth" middle managers who resist change in any form'.

A further contribution of MBA study to respondents' identity-work is discernible. Kempster (2009) found that being selected for courses was affirming of particular identities and such affirmation is strongly evidenced in this data. A respondent in a large pharmaceuticals multinational thus remarked on the symbolic value of the programme in his identity formation:

> the MBA is an executive programme indicating unambiguously to my colleagues that I am now at a managerial level.

Similarly for less experienced respondents, being enrolled on an MBA enabled inner facing identity-work. Thus a newly appointed engineering manager, felt:

> that I am studying an MBA means that I must be a manager.

However, for a small number of respondents, MBA study led them to reject managerial identities. One such respondent noted that the MBA:

> has helped me to identify that I am on the wrong side of the fence and should be researching and writing about management rather than doing it.

This respondent subsequently left her managerial post having won a doctoral scholarship at a leading management school.

A final set of MBA contributions to manager identity-work and identity formation are discernible. As discussed, Hay and Hodgkinson (2008) found that manager-students jointly shaped each others' identity constructions. The evidence here shows that less experienced managers benefited from exposure to more established managers, which supports Ibarra's (1999) conclusion about the importance of role prototyping in the construction of provisional selves. Kempster (2009: 64) elaborates this process noting how individuals discover 'what constitutes credible role performance' and engage in 'identity matching with notable people who are compared to themselves'. Thus, one manager typified the less experienced respondents in reflecting:

> some of the others in my MBA group are senior managers and I can see 'how they are'. For example, they might be approachable and calm but also rational and effective. These people challenge me to change, to develop a similar approach.

Moreover, the classroom cohort provided a safe environment for experimenting with provisional selves. Thus one respondent noted how he was able to 'trial certain behaviours in the classroom' and to 'witness others' reactions'. The respondent found that such trials and reactions provided 'reassurance'. However, it cannot be ascertained whether this individual was able to transfer this new way of being into the workplace and Andersson (2010: 171) suggests that such identities are 'impossible to maintain in … daily organisational lives'. Nonetheless, participating in a cohort community of managers brought salience to management for those managers who lacked a managerial peer group in their organizations. Thus, an SME founder wrote of how the MBA had:

> started a ball rolling for me … I was in a state of 'unconscious incompetence' with regard to management. The MBA has made me aware of just how much I need to learn. If this business is to continue to be successful, I must become more of a manager and less of an inventor who dabbles in management.

Therefore, in these diverse ways, the case study MBA programme was providing a range of resources for agentic identity-work and was thereby fuelling the manager-students' identity formation.

Conclusions and implications

From the above findings, conclusions can be drawn pertaining to the contribution of MBA study to the realities of management practice and learning. These conclusions both extend and refine Hay and Hodgkinson's (2008: 24–25) revelations that 'MBA learning is more complex than is traditionally portrayed and … more helpful to management practice than critics contend', and reinforce suggestions that the unintended outcomes of formal learning programmes are more important for managers' practice than the intended outcomes (Owen-Pugh, 2008).

The first set of conclusions that can be drawn pertain to the relationality of management practice. As Cunliffe (2009: 60) asserted, 'whatever managers do it is not in isolation, but always in relation to other people'. Indeed, for the respondents in the current study, relationships were seen to define management. The extent and complexity of interpersonal relationships were significant and tackling challenging relational problems characterized the reality of day-to-day management for the respondents. The reality of management clearly existed in the specific contexts of the respondents' practice, involving a dynamic process of social interaction. Importantly, this conclusion supports assertions that management requires being a particular type of person in specific socio-cultural contexts, that is, that manager learning can be considered to be a process of becoming or of identity formation (Lawler and Ford, 2010; Watson and Harris, 1999).

However, to what extent can those undergoing formal management development be considered to be actively forming managerial identities, that is, agentically engaged in identity-work? The findings of this study revealed, for example, that the manager respondents appeared to be secure with their identities as managers commenting, for instance, on their being at one with the established management cadres in their own organizations. Moreover, direct threats to the managerial identities of the respondents were not explicit in the accounts. Nonetheless, as was discussed, degrees of insecurity were apparent and evidenced in pervasive concerns about meeting expectations. In particular, the accounts showed that many respondents needed to break away from their established professional identities. Moreover, most respondents appeared to be actively engaged in various forms of identity-work.

Whereas insecurities might have prompted identity-work, it could be the case, as CMS (Critical Management Studies) theorizing would suggest, that insecurity left respondents vulnerable to pernicious forces for identity-regulation. As was discussed earlier, such theorizing points to individuals being dupes of discursive practices, practices which are 'powerful, sedulous and … insidious' (Cunliffe, 2009: 62). However, the findings reported above enable a more optimistic, less deterministic conclusion to be drawn. The managers in this study were not the discursively deceived demons assumed by CMS scholars. Most were purposefully constructing managerial identities, seemingly aware of possible dangers while acknowledging the workplace and broader, personal advantages that derived from such identities. These advantages were construed in terms of satisfaction, quality of life, challenge, development and achievement. Moreover, the purposefulness of the respondents' identity-work in forming managerial identities was evidenced through their striving for distinctiveness and positioning themselves in opposition to established, 'jobs-worth', managers.

Turning to draw conclusions pertaining to the specific contributions of MBA study to managers' identity formation. The findings of this study have shown how the case study MBA programme provided linguistic resources for 'sense making', for understanding what being a manager was 'about'. This discursive configuration of the self was particularly important for the managers with strongly established professional identities. Moreover, the language can be seen to have enabled the construction of distinctive selves, selves that were distinct both from operational staff and from established managers. The managers were found to derive confidence from being able to define themselves using the official discourse of management. This confidence was typically attributable to the discursive validation of tacit experiential knowing. Being able to name particular forms of knowledge and practice reinforced the naming of the self as a manager. Furthermore, the language of management enabled manager-students not only to be more effective players in their organizations' management games but also to credibly challenge and change the way the game was played.

MBA study was seen to provide further identity resources for creating, strengthening or maintaining managerial selves. Chia and Holt (2008: 482) note the importance of the 'exemplification of proficient others' and membership of an MBA cohort provided role models of value particularly to less experienced managers. The findings have also shown that the cohorts provided a safe forum for experimenting with provisional selves, for becoming the type of person that might not have been so readily achievable within the workplace. However, MBA study did have symbolic value within the workplace, conveying a management identity and providing credibility with other managers and with reports. Finally, the MBA gave salience to management as a profession and as a worthwhile identity in itself thereby creating a virtuous circle of further identity-work. In sum, therefore, MBA study provided a range of powerful resources for identity-work, for building and maintaining distinctive managerial selves.

While acknowledging the limitations of a single case study inquiry, certain implications for the re-design of management education can be sustained from the conclusions drawn above. Welsh and Dehler (2007: 405) complain that 'two decades of substantive management education critique has not resulted in any fundamental change in models of content and process'. The status quo has perhaps been maintained through the continued credential value of the MBA and the power of universities as suppliers of management education. However, this status quo is now threatened by both the mounting academic critique of management education and, at a time of recession, by potential manager-students and sponsoring organizations questioning the MBA contribution to manager and organizational development. A chorus for change in management education, and specifically in the MBA, is clear. Armstrong and Fukami (2009) echo the long-standing calls for more relevant teaching approaches. O'Toole (2009: 558) reflects the thinking of most critics of the

MBA in suggesting that management educators ask themselves afresh, 'what will managers need to know and what skills will they need to possess'.

While this article has not directly challenged the existing knowledge and skills curricula or pedagogies of MBAs, the conclusions suggest programme re-designs of a different nature than the tweaking implied by Armstrong and Fukami and O'Toole. The above conclusions support Vidaillet and Vignon's (2010: 235) suggestion that management education needs to re-focus on 'the process rather than the content'. That management has been shown to be a state of becoming, so manager-students need to be assisted in exploring their evolving identities through critical reflexivity. Such reflexive exploration is particularly important for manager-students traversing identity transitions. In particular, reflexivity can, as Thorpe and Gold (2010) suggest, enable managers to see situations and their identities differently. Lawler and Ford (2010) argue for a 'collaborative, collegiate style of development'. As the conclusions of this inquiry demonstrate the relationality of management so, the claims of these authors support educational approaches based on 'dialogue in … the specific context in which the individual is working' (p. 515). Workplace mentoring from mentors who are themselves MBA graduates might thus be incorporated into provision as is the case in clinical education or children's workforce development programmes.

Finally, as the results of this inquiry reveal the importance of the MBA cohort experience, so management education providers might take various steps to extend the functioning of cohorts and the cultivation of communities. Establishing learning-sets and purposefully pairing more and less experienced managers within these sets would progress identity formation. In short, management education, and MBAs in particular, must enable manager-students to become effective managers in the dynamic social and political contexts in which management is enacted. Manager education thus needs to provide resources and tools for identity-work and the process of identity formation that is management.

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