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Dr Who? Identity Work in DBA Students

Abstract

This paper argues that the challenges experienced by Professional Doctorate students in completing their doctoral studies can be best understood through an identity lens. We explore how doctoral students engage in identity work as they transition through their studies, with a focus on the extent to which these senior managers accommodate the conferred identity as a student and finally, if and how their identity shifts to a doctorally qualified manager. We postulate that the identity work these students engage in will be influenced by the interactions they have with their supervisors. Additionally, we speculate trust within these interactions to be central to the student's identity work. Thus, we will explore the role of trust in supervisory relationships, from the student's perspective, and the implications this has for how supervisors are trained and how students' expectations are managed throughout their doctoral studies. This study aims to contribute to identity scholarship in a novel context. By exploring the influence supervisors have on the doctoral journey, we will offer a contribution to the management of doctoral studies in higher education. Through an examination of the role trust plays in different relationships, we will offer insights into how a student's trust in their supervisors can influence their identity work. Finally, by adopting an identity lens to analyse how senior managers accommodate the conferred identity of 'student', we hope to offer a typology of identity work upon which different students' positions can be located and different approaches to supervision can be identified.

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Background

Research degree programmes in which the emphasis is on the importance of contributing to professional practice, as well as theoretical knowledge, are gaining in popularity (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016). The DBA (Doctor in Business Administration) like other Professional Doctorates, is designed to encourage professionals to engage in doctoral level research and managerial reflection to investigate a work-based problem (Costley and Lester, 2012). Unlike the PhD, a central theme of Professional Doctorates is therefore applied, rather than 'pure' research, which can lead to organisational, societal or economic change (Lester, 2004; Wildly et al., 2015). Professional doctorates are more structured than a PhD with cohorts of students attending workshops to support their studies.

Data suggests that Professional Doctorate students are normally working and have significant professional expertise, reflecting the fact that many such programmes request as an entry requirement between 2-5 years professional experience as well as a Master's degree (CRAC, 2016). Motivations for studying a Professional Doctorate also appear to vary, from helping to secure a promotion, change of career or new knowledge to elevating personal status (Philpott, 2015). Research conducted by CRAC (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016) estimates that approximately half of Professional Doctorate students are fully or partially funded by their employer and most students are given time to study by their organisations. The nature of the Professional Doctorate therefore presents particular challenges for those studying these degrees. The CRAC (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016:48) report finds, for example, that many Professional Doctorate students '...had struggled (to varying degrees)...with the physical and mental capacity to combine high-level study, the demands of (sometimes senior level) professional employment and commitments to family and home'.

We argue that the challenges experienced by Professional Doctorate students in completing their doctoral studies can be best understood through an identity lens. This study is designed to explore how doctoral students engage in identity work as they transition through their studies. The focus is on the extent to which these senior managers, with the power and status associated with these positions, accommodate the conferred identity as a student (and the relative lack of importance of this role) and finally, if and how their identity shifts to a doctorally qualified manager. The implications of these identity changes and the impact these have on their ability to complete their doctoral studies and address the work-based problem they set out to investigate is of key interest. A student's shifting identity may also impact upon other aspects of the degree such as their ability to reflect on their own professional practice, how they interact with their supervisory team and other students as well family, friends and work colleagues.

We postulate that the identity work these students engage in will be influenced by the interactions they have with their supervisory team. So, for example, a supervisor's attitude to a student may encourage the student to view the DBA simply as a means to an end (e.g. career development) and result in little or no change in identity. Alternatively, they may influence the student into regarding the DBA as a vocational and aspirational goal (i.e. invoke a shift in identity to become a researcher/academic) or they may invoke some other form of identity transition. The level of trust the parties have in one another, we speculate, will be central to the student's identity work. Thus another facet of this study will be to explore the role of trust in supervisory relationships from the student's perspective and the implications this has for how supervisors are trained and how students' expectations are managed throughout their doctoral studies.

The contribution the outcomes of this study will make are therefore threefold; by exploring the influence supervisors have on the doctoral journey, we will offer a contribution to the management of doctoral studies in higher education. Through an examination of the role trust

plays in different relationships, we will offer insights into how a student's trust (or lack of) in their supervisors can influence their identity work. Finally, by adopting an identity lens to analyse how senior managers accommodate (or not) the conferred identity of 'student', we hope to offer a typology of identity work upon which different students' positions can be located and different approaches to supervision can be identified. Through this we will offer a contribution to identity scholarship in a novel context.

Literature Review

By identity, we mean '...the ongoing mental activity that an individual undertakes in constructing an understanding of the self that is coherent, distinct and positively valued' (Alvesson et al., 2008: 15). Identity studies in higher education are typically conducted from the academics' perspective, exploring how teaching and research activities inform professional identity (Clarke et al, 2013). Research has highlighted for example, how academic identity is complex and is influenced by the external environment and university structures (Clegg, 2008). It can also be insecure and fragile and change between early and mid-career stages (Knights and Clarke, 2014; Clarke et al, 2013).

Identities have been explored in terms of early career academic experience, such as that of a recently graduated PhD student (McAlpine et al, 2013). However, few studies exist which explore the identity construction of doctoral students and even less for professional doctorate students. Work by Philpott (2015), for instance, considers the identity development of professional doctorate students and its impact on supervision, arguing that tutors should be sensitive to the different needs of professional doctorate students which may be different to PhD students. Hay and Samra-Fredericks (2016), draw upon evidence from reflective documents produced by DBA students at the end of their degree, in exploring how students negotiate what they call 'the liminal space' between identity positions. Our study is designed to examine the identity work students engage in and the positions they adopt at different stages throughout their doctoral degree and to explore the role of trust in identity transitions. The research questions guiding this study are therefore:

- To what extent, if at all, does the conferred identity of 'student' become during a student's DBA studies?
- What role does trust and the supervisory relationship play in this identity work?
- What are the implications for supervisor training and the design and management of DBA degree programmes?

Research Design

The study employs a multi-method approach to gather data from students studying for and recently graduated from a DBA programme delivered by a UK institution. Questionnaires will be issued by e-mail to all current DBA students across 24 cohorts. This equates to 97 students. The questionnaire will explore the participants' motivations for embarking on a DBA, the extent to which their careers have changed as a result of studying for a DBA, how students perceive themselves before, during and after studying and how others' perceptions (family, employers, friends, supervisors) of the student may have changed throughout the duration of the course and the reasons for this. Whilst the questionnaire data will provide breadth of opinion, it is recognised that this data will not provide the depth of response required for this type of study. So, to supplement the questionnaire data, in-depth interviews will be conducted

with a total of 32 individuals, which represents a third of the target population and is reflective of the profile in terms of gender and ethnicity.

These individuals will be current DBA students at different stages of the programme (start, mid-point, thesis stage). Recent DBA alumni will also be interviewed to capture the on-going identity work of these individuals as they transition back into the workplace as doctorally-qualified senior managers. Interviews will be conducted either face-to-face when the students are attending workshops or via Skype/phone as the majority of students/alumni are international. The interviews will cover similar topics to the questionnaire survey, but in order to capture the participants 'identity talk' (Ybema et al, 2009), interviewees will be encouraged to provide 'self-narratives' that is 'a story that portrays a meaningful sequence of life events to explain how the person has developed into who he or she is' (McAdams and Olson, 2010: 528). Given the potentially sensitive nature of the interview themes for some, all data will be kept anonymous and participants will have the opportunity to decline to be involved.

Preliminary Findings

The questionnaire will be issued in July 2017 and all interviews are scheduled to be completed by August 2017. Preliminary analysis will be conducted prior to the BAM conference in September. These findings will be presented at the conference in the form of an initial model/typology which outlines the different identity transitions experienced by DBA students and the implications this might have for professional doctorate programme delivery and the student experience more broadly. We speculate that the findings may reveal a more or less 'embedded' (De Cieri, Sheehan, Costa, Fenwick and Cooper, 2009) or salient (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2006) sense of 'student', 'academic' or 'senior manager/professional' and that different degrees of trust between the student and their supervisory team will influence the degree of embeddedness of any of these identities. This, in turn, will influence a) how the supervisory team might manage the relationship; b) how likely the student is to seek to transition into a career in academia and c) inform how such degrees are designed e.g. with faculty/academic routes, professional practice routes, combined routes etc. Such understanding will also enable a more personalised approach to individual learning to be developed.

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