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How to cite:

Knights, David and Clarke, Caroline (2014). 'It's a bittersweet symphony, this life: fragile academic selves and insecure identities at work'. *Organization Studies*, 35(3) pp. 335–357.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/0170840613508396>

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It's a bittersweet symphony, this life: Fragile academic selves and insecure identities at work

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates the importance of studying insecurity in relation to identities at work. Drawing upon empirical research with business school academics in the context of the proliferation of managerialist controls of audit, accountability, monitoring and performativity, we illustrate how insecurities in the form of fragile and insecure academic selves are variously manifested. Emerging from our data were three forms of insecurity – imposters, aspirants and those preoccupied with existential concerns and we analyse these in the context of psychoanalytic, sociological and philosophical frameworks. In so doing, we make a three-fold contribution to the organization studies literature: first, we develop an understanding of identities whereby they are treated as a topic and not merely a resource for studying something else; second, we demonstrate how insecurity and identity are more nuanced and less monolithic concepts than has sometimes been deployed in the literature and third; we theorise the concepts of identity and insecurity as conditions and consequences of one another rather than monocausally related. Through this analysis of insecure identities, insightful understandings into the contemporary bittersweet experiences of working in academia, and specifically in business schools are developed that could prove fruitful for future research within and beyond this occupational group.

Introduction

Our existence is ‘filled with a desire for security’ ... [in pursuit of] ... ‘being “this” or “that” kind of person’ (Knights & Willmott, 1999, p.56). Both inside and outside of work, everyday life is full of ‘multiple insecurities – existential, social, economic and psychological’ (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009, p.37) that render identity fragile and precarious. Given that identities and the insecurities surrounding them are often a condition and consequence¹ of our striving to be creative, productive and successful in organisations, it is surprising that the topic has not attracted more research in organisation studies (c. f. Knights & Willmott, 1999; Collinson, 2003). Of course, organizational psychology identifies *job* insecurity as implicated in the health, wealth and wellbeing of employees (Heery & Salmon, 1999). Also, clinical studies pathologise insecurity as a debilitating characteristic of ‘deviant’ individuals suffering from the extremes of insecurity paranoia (Mullen, 1991). By contrast, this study focuses on the insecurities associated with ‘doing’ the job rather than threats of unemployment or workplace pathology. Our subject matter, then, is the fragility of working life insofar as ‘contemporary insecurity is the outcome of the individual employee’s self-doubt and emotional instability’ (Gabriel, 1999, p.185).

Insecurity is tied intimately to the notion of identity in the sense that the latter is always precarious and uncertain because it is dependent on others’ judgments, evaluations and validations of the self and these can never be fully anticipated, let alone controlled (Luckmann & Berger, 1964; Becker, 1971). Our identities are fragile to the extent that they are routinely subject to the potential of being socially denied or disconfirmed (Watts, 1977), while simultaneously we are seduced by aspirations of success and threatened by apprehensions of failure. In the sense that insecurity can be seen as a medium and outcome (see Note 1) of our preoccupation with identity (Knights & Willmott, 1999; Collinson, 2003), we argue that both identity and insecurity are conceptually important to the study of organizations.

Drawing upon empirical research with business school academics, this paper illustrates how insecurity is variously manifested and coupled with conceptions of identity. Emerging from our data were three kinds of insecure subjects – imposters, aspirants and those preoccupied with existential concerns and we analyse these in the context of psychoanalytic, sociological and philosophical frameworks. In so doing, we make a three-fold contribution to the organization

studies literature. First, we theorise identity and insecurity as conditions and consequences of one another; insecurity tends to generate a preoccupation with stabilizing our identity yet the contingent nature of the world makes such stability unrealizable and this reinforces the very insecurity that we expect identity to dissipate. Second, we develop an understanding of identity whereby it is treated as a topic and not merely a resource for studying something else such as organizational integration or employee commitment; in contrast, we challenge a tendency to ‘naturalize’ or take for granted our preoccupation with identity and suggest that a more sceptical relationship might relieve us of unrealizable aspirations, imposter feelings and existential meaninglessness. Third, we demonstrate how identity and insecurity are more nuanced and less monolithic concepts than has previously been deployed in the literature. So, for example, once it is recognized that identities are not only multiple, precarious and as dependent on performance as any drama, then the idea of security becomes problematic and identity can no longer be taken for granted. Through this analysis of identity and insecurity, we reflect on the contemporary bittersweet experiences of university life, linking the ‘personal troubles’ of academics to the ‘public issues’ (Wright-Mills, 2000) of Higher Education against the background of regimes of new public management involving a proliferating culture of audit, accountability and performativity. We intend this paper to make provocative reading since we as authors and our audience are simultaneously ‘subjects’ (agents) and ‘objects’ (targets) of this research.

This article comprises four main sections. First, we provide a brief examination of the literature on identity, insecurity and academic selves, particularly those in business schools. Second, we account for our methodological assumptions, research context and methods of data collection and analysis. Third, we turn to our empirical material to analyse the three types of insecurity emerging from our participants’ accounts of their working lives. Finally, we discuss and theorise our findings in relation to fragile and insecure academic selves and their implications for future studies of identity at work in organisations.

Identities and Insecurities at Work

‘People’s sense of identity is tenuous in the extreme’ (Schwartz, 1987, p.328)

Identity invokes the ongoing questions of ‘who I am’ and ‘how I should act?’ which involves notions of multiple, dynamic and potential selves (Ibarra, 1999), in contrast with essentialist assumptions implying unitary, static, or enduring continuities. Consequently, the production and reproduction of identities is a constant struggle involving ‘complex, recursive, ...[and]...reflexive’

(Ybema et al., 2009, p. 301) processes whereby a myriad of ‘possible selves serve as points of orientation for identity work’ (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012).

Arguably, organizations are arenas in which subjects assemble and reassemble their identities via ‘organizationally based discursive regimes’ (Clarke, Brown & Hope Hailey, 2009, p.325), and within these, participants must choose from a variety of discourses (Kuhn, 2009) which intersect, and are often antagonistic, contradictory, or ambiguous. Identity has to be worked at, for it is ‘something which we must achieve if we are to have one at all, and ... must continue to achieve if we are to maintain it’ (Schwartz, 1987, p.328). We suggest that identity work is also both a medium and outcome of insecurity, self-doubt and uncertainty (Knights & Willmott, 1989; Alvesson, 2010) an issue that is often underplayed in the literature for few studies address the nuances of ‘insecure, critical or self-depreciative identity talk’ (Ybema et al., 2009, p.312).

Empirical studies of insecurity within organization and management are comparatively scant but the concept does enter research broadly concerned with issues of identity (Collinson, 1992; Clarke et al., 2009; Brown & Lewis, 2011). There are also studies where insecurity is of concern, albeit not always explicitly. For example, studies of managers note how ‘work becomes an endless round of what might be called probationary crucibles’ which produce a constant state of ‘profound anxiety’ (Jackall, 1988, p.40)², insecurities (Knights & Willmott, 1999), and frailties (Watson, 1994). Other studies of the workplace have also demonstrated how management control has rendered the lives and identities of shopfloor workers permanently insecure (Nichols & Beynon, 1977; Collinson, 1992). This often leaves individuals blaming themselves for failure (Sennett & Cobb, 1977), or else the ‘failed’ identity is displaced through alternatives such as leisure (Palm, 1977) or masculine macho indifference to mainstream educational values (Willis, 1977). However, the elevation of these alternative identities is often self-defeating (Knights & Willmott, 1999) for they are no more secure than the identities that are displaced.

These ideas are important in organisational research, for ‘studies of subjectivity have sometimes neglected the extent to which human self-consciousness may be the medium and outcome of uncertainties, insecurities, and anxieties about who we are’ (Collinson, 2003, p.529), which also provokes further concerns about who we could be – ‘if only’. It is also well attested that (like most experiences) working is an activity infused with emotion (Fineman, 1993). Indeed, people at work are far removed from their representation in the literature as curiously disembodied and

rational actors (see Bolton, 2005); rather they are ‘thinking, feeling, suffering subject(s)’ (Gabriel, 1999, p.179) with anxieties, striving to secure some stability for their own identities.

Fragility (or the vulnerable self) is both a condition and consequence of insecurity, and closely intertwined with our sense of who we are, and the sweet promise of who we *could* become. An analytic distinction can be made in that we experience anxiety and insecurity not just for ontological and psychoanalytic reasons of subject-object separation, but also because the self is fragile in that the confirmation of others necessary to our identity is uncertain, unpredictable and uncontrollable (Knights & Willmott, 1999). But as the opera singer Willard White has argued, the base of insecurity is uncertainty, which stimulates the creative process and prevents us being blasé in our performance (In Tune, UK Radio 3, 23.4.12). While this is suggestive of a sweeter flavour to identity work and performance, nonetheless identities are always in the balance, as a person’s social significance could easily be disturbed, disrupted and reshaped by changes in social relations, particularly in that most important site of identity construction – the workplace.

Empirical studies of insecurity specifically among academics are even more limited although they occur in accounts of autoethnographic experiences (Humphreys, 2005; Sparkes, 2007; Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012), critical management pedagogy (Ford, Harding & Learmonth, 2010), emotion and work intensification (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004), gender (Barry, Berg & Chandler, 2006), identities (Garcia & Hardy, 2007), resistance (Worthington & Hodgson, 2005), the academic journal (Gabriel, 2010), and the research assessment exercise³ (Keenoy, 2003). The context of Higher Education also attracts a diverse and politicised literature which provides a commentary on working lives in academia (Harley, 2002; Ford et al., 2010) as an occupation where ‘competitiveness, intellectualism, achievement-orientation, hierarchy, and evaluativeness...[may give rise to] all manner of high emotions, anxieties, defences, denials, deceptions, and self-deceptions, rivalries, insecurities, threats, vulnerabilities, [and] intimacies’ (Hearn, 2008, p.190).

Gabriel (2010) argues that there are idealised expectations of what it is to be an academic – original, scholarly, pedagogically skilful, and like other professionals, the academic self is highly exposed ‘because the real or imagined demands of others invariably exceed the capacity of ordinary human beings to meet them’ (Knights & Willmott, 1999, p.72). Such ego ideals (Freud, 1914) present an image of the perfect self towards which the ego should aspire – an ideal identity (Schwartz, 1987) that directs the way we wish others to see us. Within our neo-liberal market-

oriented environment, these ideals are reinforced by an intense pressure to perform (Clarke, Knights & Jarvis, 2012) resulting in ‘winners and losers in a game of academic prestige’ (Adler & Harzing, 2009:74). This performative pressure reflects an ideology where ‘engagement with the norms of a practice is governed quite stringently by the logic of fantasy’ (Glynos, 2008, p. 276), especially one of ‘limitless potential’ (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008; Ekman, 2012).

By definition the elite and competitive nature of such performative demands (Macdonald & Kam, 2007) reflect and reproduce a normalised yet elusive ‘multiply starred academic’ identity leading others to feel abject (Butler, 1993), ‘insecure and peripheral’ (Harding, Ford & Gough, 2010, p.165). However, these demands subject *all* academics to close and constant scrutiny:

‘I doubt that there are many professions whose members are so relentlessly subjected to measurement, criticism and rejection as academics, exposing them to deep insecurities regarding their worth, their identity and their standing’ (Gabriel, 2010, p.769)

While clearly not every academic can become a ‘superstar’, the creative impulse in intellectual work can be its own reward as, in contrast to identity, it is not wholly dependent on the validation of others. Moreover, the increased pressure to publish in highly ranked journals and the concern of these journals to improve their standards as well as generating insecurity does stimulate and/ or push academics to improve the quality of their work, something that can be seen as sweet. The question is, however, does this growing intensification of work in universities result in the negative consequences of these insecurities drowning out the positive impetus? In short, the consequences of insecurity can be very bitter even though the creative and productive potential and promise of academic work can be equally sweet. In elaborating both theoretically and empirically on these bittersweet experiences in business schools, we anticipate providing the basis for the further development of research on other academics and occupations, which lie beyond this sphere.

Research Design

Our research was inspired by a belief that ‘intellectuals are inexhaustibly curious about the nature of their own activity’ (Scialabba, 2009, p.3), and yet reluctant ‘to expose their doubts, fears and potential weaknesses’ (Humphreys, 2005, p.852). While in no way immune to the problems of precarious academic identities, we did not seek to impose this on the data by asking direct questions about insecurity. Nonetheless in response to other questions, many of our respondents

expressed significant degrees of insecurity and as such this was a major discursive theme emerging from the data. Conducting research in our own backyard, however, can be seen as dangerous and damaging (if not debilitating), not least because it involves ‘hanging out our dirty washing’ for all to see and this can create problems of trust in the ‘small world’ (Lodge, 1984) of academia. Nonetheless as social anthropologists have argued, full participant observation (Spradley, 1980) offers considerable advantages for research because as inclusive members of the organization and practices under investigation, we are more immune to the effects of ‘impression management’ (Goffman, 1959).

Of course we are not the only ones in our field to research the academic community and, in articulating why we have conducted research into our own occupation, and specifically in UK business schools rather than academe in general, we must include the obvious advantage of opportunistic sampling with relatively easy access. However, ease of access is not in itself a good reason to conduct a study. A more important reason relates to the idea that if it is important to study other organizations then why not one’s own (Worthington & Hodgson, 2005; Ford et al., 2010) as this may aid our understanding of ‘the complexities and contradictions in other workplaces’ (Harding et al, 2010, p.166). Finally, academics should be ‘better equipped than most’ (Keenoy, 2003, p.138) to defend themselves against regimes for which they have little love, and it is for this reason that we specifically targeted organizational scholars. For they write and teach about management control, power, performativity and resistance so ought to be *even better* equipped than most to articulate a critique and possibly resist the disciplinary regimes that they write about critically in relation to other organizations.

In crafting this piece we ourselves are situated in ‘an historically contingent and invariably institutionalized set of knowledge producing practices’ (Ybema et al, 2009, p.315; cf. Humphreys, 2005; Sparkes, 2007), and insofar as ‘fieldwork is a creative endeavour’ inevitably we have privileged some aspects over others to achieve particular effects (Watson, 1995).

Research Context

Managerialism has settled into UK universities under a variety of different audit guises: student satisfaction surveys (NSS), quality assessment audits (QAA), league tables and, of course, the research assessment exercise (RAE) – soon to be the research excellence framework (REF) (see Note 3). This latter mechanism has been described as an ‘artefact’ whose ‘efficacy is widely contested’ although ‘its impact is undoubted’ (Keenoy, 2005, p.304). While perhaps always somewhat insecure (Gabriel, 2010), it has been argued that academic identities have been rendered

ever more fragile by the proliferation of these increased controls and performative demands (Harley, 2002; Garcia & Hardy, 2007).

It has also been suggested that a recent ‘institutionalised distrust’ has generated a ‘crisis of faith’ among academics (Deem, Hillyard & Reed, 2007) possibly undermining the values associated with the provision, pursuit, and creation of knowledge in universities, thus threatening its ‘expressed traditional culture’ (Keenoy, 2003, p.152) and aggravating doubts relating to the purpose of working in business schools. This purpose and meaning has been further exacerbated by a literature on the history of business schools (Khurana, 2007) positing numerous charges of a lack of relevance for so-called ‘real life’ businesses and organizations (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005). This thorny issue regarding what constitutes knowledge, practice and purpose within the business school continues to be debated (Adler & Harzing, 2009; Ford et al., 2010; 2012) where relationships between academics and practitioners in particular ‘remain problematic’ and ‘self-defeating’ (Beech, MacIntosh & MacLean, 2010). Ironically, such observations potentially fuel the existential insecurities that business school academics experience regarding the meaning and purpose of their work. It is against this context that our study took place.

Data Collection

Between June 2009 and May 2011 52 semi-structured interviews with lecturers, readers and professors took place within 8 different UK business schools. Our method of sampling was purposeful (particular business schools and organization studies groups) and self-selecting as participants responded to our detailed invitation to take part in this study. All interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. Participants were split 60:40 in terms of males and females respectively, and aged between 29 and 68. These interviews were ‘conversations with a purpose’ (Burman, 1994) – an attempt to understand how academics experience their working lives, and so we invited participants to talk generally about themselves, and their affinities with the profession.⁴ In attempting to research thoughtfully we ensured that participants were happy to talk about the subject, understood our research, and were confident in their anonymity. This was particularly pertinent given our own community membership, and in endeavouring to attain a rich data set, as ‘the candidness of revelations depend very much on the trust that is built up’ between researcher and participant (Fineman, 2001, p.8).

Data Analysis

In analysing our data we focused on how language ‘filters experienced realities’ (Ybema et al, 2009, p.04) for discourse is never a benign mechanism for disclosing information as ‘people seek to accomplish things when they talk or when they write’ (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p.536). As such we were reflexively aware that as academics interviewing other academics, we comprised a specific audience for whom our participants authored particular narratives. While critics of at-home ethnographies (Alvesson, 2009) argue for a tendency to reproduce and reinforce particular ‘blind spots’ of researchers, we believe this was avoided because insecurity was an emergent theme, rather than part of any *a priori* agenda.

All our data were transcribed and coded in an iterative process through which certain concepts emerged that facilitated our framing of the research using template analysis, not a ‘single, clearly delineated method’ (King, 2004, p.256) but a ‘loose and flexible form of analysis’ which we employed from a ‘contextual constructivist’ position (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000). In our analysis we initially labelled a section of text with first-order probes and prompts from the interview guide to provide high order codes (for example the initial draw of higher education, centrality of identity, emotions, and inequalities) which we then sub-divided into lower order codes (e.g. the concept of emotion was further split into anxiety, fear, frustration, envy, anger and insecurity). These resulted in tentative second and third order concepts such as ambivalence, anxiety, and insecurity. Notions of ambivalence prompted the construction of the title of this paper and the concepts of insecurity and anxiety have informed the way in which this data is presented. All the data were entered into NVIVO™ software to aid our use of template analysis.

Fragile Academic Selves

The case data are presented under three emergent types of fragilities or insecurities: ‘imposters’; ‘aspirants’; and ‘existentialists’. Despite obvious overlaps and imperfect discreteness between them, these ‘types’ serve as a heuristic device in analyzing the complex nuances of ‘insecurity’. Participants often had overlapping identifications (for example being insecure about meeting their aspirations, as well as having existential doubts concerning the meaning of what they were aspiring to) and their accounts contained tensions, conflicts, complexities and antagonisms.

Imposter

The imposter phenomenon/syndrome is a belief that one is not as capable or adequate as others think, and in a study of high achieving university faculty and students, Clance & Imes (1978) argued that this leads to feelings of ‘intellectual phoniness’. Imposter feelings are associated with

self-doubt, a belief that any success is due to luck or hard work rather than ability, and a fear that others will discover one's incompetence. It is often treated as a pathological condition deriving from a 'devalued self image' (Cowman & Ferrari, 2002, p.121), requiring early remedial action (Topping & Kimmel, 1985). By contrast, we avoid treating the imposter experience as pathological but regard it as a common response to idealised images and expectations.

Academic life can leave individuals feeling anxious and insecure about their failure to meet the multiplicity of demands (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004; Clarke, et al., 2012) especially to the level of quality expected both by themselves and others. The very conditions of self-consciousness, self-reflexivity and freedom that enable us to develop, but also to be insecure about, our identity has both positive and negative potential. It can be the source of immense creativity as we strive to be socially recognised at the same time as driving us into extreme pursuits of self-interest, or personal despair, where a preoccupation with the self loses any sense of the social conditions and consequences of its construction (Roberts, 2005).

Insecurity is often a reflection of self-doubt or an 'existential condition' where 'attachment to a particular sense of self can reinforce insecurities' (Alvesson, 2010, p.198). For some in our study, an attachment to notions of academic identity was problematic,

'I do feel quite often a sense of inadequacy...yeah the old imposter syndrome'
(Lecturer).

'I'm not quite feeling like I'm ready to say 'I'm an academic'... you-know, like the real academics. I'm expressing a sort-of underlying feeling of my inadequacies. ... as an imposter' (Senior Lecturer)

The sense of not living up to the ideals of what it is to be an academic fuels and fires our anxiety and insecurity and so we almost distance ourselves from the activity. This participant articulates a common response,

'I suppose, I don't feel I'm an academic in the proper sense... there's few academics around - I mean people who have got outstanding brains and write beautifully and all the rest of it' (Lecturer)

For this participant, becoming a ‘proper’ academic (Harding et al., 2010) requires the demonstration of incredible intellect and eloquence, even though he admits to knowing ‘very few’ examples. This ‘awareness of the gulf between the idealised self and the realised self’ (Brown, 2000, p.64) evokes self-doubt and vulnerability to exposure:

‘I feel that somebody’s going to wake up and say “oh, it’s her”, you-know, how come she’s doing that? I remember her – she was rubbish”. So I think there is an element of doubt sometimes in everything’ (Senior Lecturer)

There was a sense that participants would always be found wanting in one (or many) respects. For some, this reflected their late entry into academia - ‘carrying the baggage’ of a previous career outside academia (Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012, p.4),

‘I feel like I’m not a traditional academic so I’m slightly different...So I just constantly sort-of put myself down as not worthy’ (Lecturer).

However, insecurities were also generated in many experienced or senior respondents, such as not feeling sufficiently competent in fulfilling the various demands, despite excessive ‘diligence and hard work’ (Clance & Imes, 1978, p.244),

‘...the job is never done; it’s never done properly and it’s never done well enough. You’re always feeling terribly guilty’ (Professor)

Life as an academic involves a broad skill set and multiple undelineated tasks – *‘it’s poorly defined, it’s indefinite...and everything can always be better’* (Lecturer). Several respondents constructed ‘proper’ academics as fully accomplished, yet also challenged the impossibility of these expectations,

‘can you do all of these things in one professional label? We’re asked to teach students, engage with students, have assessment strategies, feedback strategies, supervise MScs, PhDs, mentor people, mentor other members of staff, research, write research bids, write research papers, present at conferences, publish in high quality journals, administration and all aspects of pastoral care. I mean it’s just never-ending but is it realistic?’ (Lecturer)

These demands, participants said were relentless in terms of time *‘a good, successful academic ...requires a day to have 48 hours not 24’* (Professor), and talent *‘you have to be excellent at everything...you need to be fucking amazing’* (Senior Lecturer). Such pressure conspired to produce feelings of failure and self-doubt (Alvesson, 2010) and a belief that *‘I am not good enough’* (Sennett, 1998, p.118).

Regardless of the activity, participants reported being subjected to measurement, scrutiny and negative feedback from a variety of audiences. Ruth (2008, p.107) argues that all forms of assessment *‘disembody and isolate the academic’* leaving them with feelings of inadequacy. Arguably any lack of self-confidence is aggravated by the number of points at which academics are assessed and judged not just by peers, and senior managers, but also by students via feedback questionnaires.

In summary, participants reflected this sense of being an imposter in all activities and these often rendered them feeling vulnerable and less than adequate. While these various trials can be a source of anxiety and insecurity in themselves, they are exacerbated by the feeling of not living up to an ideal image of what it means to be an academic. This is perhaps reminiscent of Humphreys’ (2005) disclosure relating to his first conference presentation *‘I am not an academic’ ... ‘I felt like a charlatan’* (p. 846- 847).

Despite participants variously defining the constitution of a *‘proper’* academic, some similarities prevailed, particularly a belief that they themselves did not live up to this representation, and that few did. While these idealized images of competence fuelled feelings of insecurity and self-doubt (Alvesson, 2010) and a degree of *‘bitterness’*, they also served as unremitting aspirations, promising perhaps, a more palatable future for *‘the self that I want to be’* (Brown, 2000, p.60). We now examine these aspirational notions of academics.

Aspirants

Consonant with Thornborrow & Brown’s conceptualizations, we employ the term aspirant to refer to those desiring a position *‘higher, better, or nobler than the one they currently occupy’* (2009, p.356). It is claimed that academics aspire to an *‘idealized Other... the highly successful academic “star”, the much published, wise, revered intellectual’* (Ford et al., 2010, p. S78). Indeed, our aspirants’ accounts were concerned with a superior future more pleasurable than the present,

working towards an ideal self they ‘would very much like to become’ (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p.954),

‘I want to feel relatively not under threat in my work, so I suppose that means ‘secure’.
And recognised, yeah, ... a promotion or progression or something’ (Senior Lecturer).

The promise of ‘recognition’ was one aspiration among a multiplicity of future selves acknowledged to be (mostly) unachievable. Despite this knowledge, participants exercised enormous effort in becoming a ‘proper’ academic, even though this only appeared to be possible ‘momentarily’ (Ybema et al, 2009), or as a ‘fantasy of achievement’ (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009),

‘I still don’t see it as a kind-of finished process, I always feel that I’m battling against that and I’m trying to overcome people’s expectations’ (Lecturer)

Such experiences are perhaps manifestations of how academics ‘express their hopes, fears, anxieties, pride and shame’ (Ybema et al., 2009, p.314). Many engage in the ‘individualistic pursuit of material and symbolic indicators of success’ as a ‘compelling and legitimate means of relieving anxieties about social position and self-identity’ (Knights & Willmott, 1999, p.83). Indeed Strathern (2000) argues that such rituals in Higher Education are normalized through these processes of accountability, which then ‘evoke a common language of aspiration [and]... anxiety’ (p.1).

Because of its necessity for career progression – ‘*it is very clear that only 3* and 4* publications⁵ count*’ (Lecturer), a great deal of fragility surrounds the submission of articles to refereed academic journals, where repeated rejection is experienced, and where emotional resilience is essential for survival,

‘it’s quite daunting because whatever level you’re at, the fear of rejection... it requires a great amount of resolve ’ (Professor)

This fear of rejection can potentially undermine or destroy academic aspiration and is ‘enough to discourage and depress most sensitive people’ (Gabriel, 2010, p.763). In this sense, the process of publishing reinforces the anxiety and insecurity that renders academic identities vulnerable, not least because ‘*four star publications; your academic worth is related to that. It is your academic*

currency' (Senior Lecturer). Gabriel reinforces this view, arguing that 'few things are more important for their self-esteem or identity ...And few things hurt as much or engender such deep anxieties as negative criticisms of their work' (Gabriel, 2010, p.764/765). This notion was reinforced by many respondents,

'the fear of failure can be difficult ... your confidence can become very fragile',
(Professor)

On the other hand, the sweetness of a publication appears to erase, or at least compensate for these insecurities because of the '*exhilaration*' (Senior Lecturer) this brings, although like a drug, the relief is usually temporary,

'what actually you need to do after [an acceptance] is to set up the new research so that it will produce the papers for the next cycle. So it's a treadmill' (Lecturer)

There is the added intensity whereby academics are presumed unsuccessful if they fail to secure publications in ranked journals, a system designed to ensure that an 'elite' (Macdonald & Kam, 2007) of research excellent academics stand out from the rest,

'I think I would feel an awful lot more secure if I had ... if I could go around thinking I've got my ten stars; I can point to it.' (Senior Lecturer)

On reflection however, the same participant observes how securing the self through accumulating 'stars' is also a form of (normative) emotional control instilling notions of self-discipline and self-surveillance,

'But, of course, if you take that line of self-monitoring and coercion and so-on, that's exactly the position that they would want us to be in isn't it? This constant insecurity about where we are and feeling that we have to do things in order to keep our jobs and so-on' (Senior Lecturer)

The anxieties and doubts associated with identity specifically reside in Western culture in so far as expectations and responsibilities for success have been individualized such that in the event of failure people 'can blame no one but themselves' (Sennett & Cobb, 1977; du Gay, 1997, p.302).

That is not to say, however, that aspirations of ‘success’ were confined only to externally verifiable and quantifiable results, as for some participants academia provided far deeper rewards,

‘people who I know who are very successful at being academics, they do it out of a sense of vocation, more than they do it out of a job where they’re meeting some performance criteria’ (Professor)

‘I enjoy doing my own research... that’s why I am in academia, you-know, not just to have a name and a title’ (Senior Lecturer)

Aspirations for most though, provided a sweetener for the current situation. Externally verifiable rewards however, did not appear to provide long-term security, but rather the opposite. We argue that as well as aspiring to treasured identities, insecurity was predicated on potential failure, for example not publishing in highly ranked journals. Because ‘academics are now expected to publish on a continuous basis until their retirement’ (Gabriel, 2010, p.762), attempts at securing one’s identity rest on constant and relentless achievement. In this context, feelings of unworthiness appear all but inevitable since ‘prestigious journals reject 95% or more of submitted articles’ (Gabriel, 2010, p.763). Interestingly, a preoccupation with publishing often led people to voice concerns about simultaneously aspiring to and being repelled by what constituted successful academic identities (Butler & Spoelstra, 2012),

‘we conform to it [the Research Exercise] entirely and yet we don’t like it’ (Senior Lecturer)

‘I see myself as being encouraged to be less of an academic and more of a publishing machine, for the safe option’ (Lecturer)

This contradiction leads us to our final category of responses, those associated with existentialist insecurity. This type of insecurity is concerned with perceived threats to the worth and significance of being an academic and what is valued and meaningful.

Existentialists

‘I think most of us are looking for a calling, not a job. Most of us, like the assembly line worker, have jobs that are too small for our spirit’ (Studs Terkel, 1972, p. xxiv)

Existentialism involves a questioning of the self over concerns relating to time, destiny and the meaning attached to our actions (Sartre, 1943), and work provides ‘an illusion of realness and permanence in the face of an unconscious fear that everything is fleeting, fragile and meaningless’ (Fineman, 1993, p.24). Arguably academics have traditionally shared with other professionals a creative autonomy and self-discipline that seeks to distinguish their work from what is ‘too small for our spirit’, as Terkel (op. cit.) puts it, for certainly in the past it has resembled more of a vocation than a job (Keenoy, 2003). However, recent years have seen a dramatic increase in the levels of managerial intervention to structure and control our work externally, which has arguably rendered academics susceptible to decreasing autonomy and ‘continual self-surveillance’ (Kuhn, 2009, p.686) as we subordinate ourselves to the task of accruing ‘quantitative ammunition’ (Cederstrom & Hoedemaekers, 2012, p.232) in the form of top ranked publications.

Our participants reflected an increasing tension between fulfilling their (career) aspirations and finding meaning from their work,

‘I could probably spend more time with students ⁶...[and] research on stuff that was more meaningful. However, inside me there is constantly, I suppose, my father who is saying ‘promotion, money, security’ (Lecturer)

For many participants the wider meaning and benefit of their work was constantly re-examined

‘our research exists in a very selfish domain... half the crap that you read in some of the four-star journals does absolutely no benefit or carries no significance for virtually anything, anywhere for anybody other than the author’ (Lecturer).

‘I would love to be able to press reset and get rid of this existential worry that I have that I should be doing something more meaningful’ (Lecturer)

The sweeter meanings ascribed to academia were often reported to be undermined by performative controls (Keenoy, 2005), as game playing and instrumental moves to secure publications resulted

in *'less interesting research'* (Reader). For some, the relentless pursuit of 'professional publications' (Grey, 1994) challenged their academic selves and 'left many with an uncomfortable and lingering sense of falseness and insecurity' (Thornborrow & Brown p.369), perhaps frightened of 'becoming the kind of people we wished we were not' (Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012, p.4),

'Business Schools become more and more irrelevant to daily practice. Am I in business to help managers? Certainly not! I'm in business to help my Department to get a higher score in the RAE and the only way I can do it is by doing more and more arcane stuff' (Professor)

'most [journals]are not read by anybody [so] don't harbour the illusion that you have done some kind of research that is very widely going to be disseminated, because it won't' (Professor)

Our data indicated participants' anxieties about the meaning of their activities, especially as high-impact journal publication has 'low or no impact on anyone outside academia' (Gabriel, 2010, p.768). Understandably there was a need to have confirmation of their own esteem through alternative positive connotations - *'the job provides you with some element of, to be blunt, you-know status and personal feelings of self-worth'* (Senior Lecturer). For some, the meaning of their job was constructed more sweetly by drawing on alternative discourses of 'making a difference', and identities relating to teaching and inspiration,

'When I was able to have an influence on a bunch of students who 'got it', who begun to understand and got enthused about something, that's what really made me feel worthwhile' (Senior Lecturer)

Careers in public service often relate to the pursuit of specific values and ideals rather than simple pecuniary rewards, what Perry (1996) refers to as a motive of 'self-sacrifice' – a philosophy more frequently found amongst those who subscribe to 'ideals of duty and service' (Feldheim, 2007, p.260). The public view of academics, however, is often negative, summed up in the phrase – 'it is just academic',

'the word 'academic' in the popular discourse is always used as pointless, irrelevant etc.' (Professor)

Also, the stereotype of academics portrayed in films and books is often that of eccentric men with greying hair (see *Educating Rita*, *My Fair Lady*, *Back to the Future*). This parodying of the academic profession is partly a function of the public misunderstanding of much of our work,

‘People can’t understand I’m not on holiday, well, no I’m not...I’ve got to prepare for next year. I’ve got to write this thing. I’ve got to do that thing’ (Senior Lecturer)

‘there is a social perception of academics; having constant holidays and not really, actually, having a job’ (Lecturer)

Of course, the public understand that academics teach but because students only attend lectures for less than two thirds of the year, academics are often thought to be always on holiday and there is little awareness regarding whatever else academics do. There is ambivalence from the public because much research is specialised if not obscure and seems only to enter the public consciousness either when made fun of or trivialised by the media. It was also reported that the public perceive academic life as easy and undemanding especially since the Government’s public deficit cuts ‘*the media represents the public sector workers as being all, somehow, lazy and not doing enough*’ (Professor). In addition, our study indicated that academics were less respected in the UK than in some other countries, and this impacted their sense of value and worth,

‘in the states...working at a university has some esteem. You are seen as being pretty clever...in the UK, I find that’s not the case’ (Lecturer)

‘in Finland...they still regard the university professor as high status so ... you feel different about yourself, as a person. When you come back to England the reality checks in, you’re just a service provider’ (Professor)

Doubts and insecurities creep back into significant parts of our (academic) identities because the self can never be fully confirmed and during times of existential doubt it is often felt that our lives lack substance. It is not surprising, therefore, that activities such as work become one of the important sites for repairing what might be lacking elsewhere (Driver, 2009). This is especially so for those attempting to secure meaning and identity through strategies of career – ‘projects’ predicated on climbing hierarchies to enjoy the ‘sweet smell of success’⁷. Learmonth &

Humphreys remind us that all too often ‘successful [or] aspirational narratives of identity’ in academia are synonymous with being well published (2012, p.12), and yet such attempts at securing identity can provide no more than ‘brief ecstatic moments of accomplishment’ (Harding et al., 2010, p.164) which reproduce rather than remove the existential void.

Is it all Academic(s)?

We are not suggesting that our academics complied unthinkingly with managerialist regimes, or that their responses were entirely homogenous and without struggle (Fleming & Spicer, 2007) as there were numerous tensions, contradictions and antagonisms. Some participants attempted to find meaning in their work whilst circumnavigating the requirements of the REF,

‘I won’t join in the game. I will continue to find the ‘so-what?’ in my own research and make it relevant and make it impactful – as far as I can’ (Senior Lecturer)

For others, there was a rationalisation of their compliance insofar as they argued that this created a freedom in itself ‘cloud[ing] the boundary of consent and dissent’ (Courpasson, 2011, p.19),

‘so you could say it’s kind of selling-out a little bit because you’re doing what they ask but then it gives you more freedom. But I’m happy to sell-out then if that’s the case.’
(Lecturer)

There were even a few participants who claimed to be untouched by the demands of the auditing regime,

‘I’m not particularly resistant to this kind-of audit culture I suppose...for me, as long as it aligns with what I’m interested in then it’s fine. If, however, it didn’t for whatever reason then I’d probably be a lot more vociferous’ (Professor)

However, a majority of participants specifically alluded or admitted to a lack of resistance.

‘One of my complaints ... is the extent to which academics are so bloody supine in the face of so much stuff that is pushed down upon them’ (Professor)

‘In spite of the fact that academics have probably moaned ever since these RAEs ..., we have colluded all the way; we’re not resisting it at all.’ (Senior Lecturer)

A more extreme example perhaps was the observation that resistance had little place in academia, because ‘*you don’t play monopoly and complain about the rules*’ (Professor).

However, perhaps the main reason why resistance has been limited is because publishing scholarly work coincides with the values of what Keenoy (2003) terms the expressed traditional culture of academia. Why would they (we) seek to resist an activity that is central to the sense of what it is to be an academic? In short, being complicit and even perpetuating the normalized judgements that are embedded in the audit, accountability and performative culture is as much about identity for us academics as is practising scholarly work. Indeed as the performative measures have proliferated so have academics discursively imposed their own discipline not *only* on themselves but also on each other. Consequently, a performative ‘panoptic’ and disciplinary regime is mediated through the academic community at large and, in this sense we are not just victims but also perpetrators of the audit and accountability culture. We now turn to a more theoretical discussion of our findings.

Discussion

Although we have intimated throughout the paper that resolutions of insecurity are unlikely to be found in acquiring identities that are a sign of material and/or symbolic success, we perhaps should now make this more explicit. We feel that the proliferating literature on identity in organization studies has tended to take the concept for granted as is commonly the case in everyday life. While accepting that the preoccupation with identity is increasingly prevalent in individualized societies like our own, we believe it is important to challenge some of the premises on which it is founded. For example, it can be argued that humanistic beliefs in autonomy and a limitless potential to realize the self underlie the self-disciplinary efforts that individuals in Western societies are inclined to devote to identity work (Knights & Willmott, 2002).

What does this mean for academics? Of course, the belief that identity can be secured by acquiring scarce material and symbolic resources is widespread and is a significant factor in motivating us to work for hierarchical success in organizations. Moreover, insofar as it rarely delivers what it promises it is the source of a self-defeating vicious spiral of ever-intensified preoccupations with identity. Would then an acknowledgement that identity can never be secured because it is

dependent on the ‘Other’ whose affirmations and evaluations of the self are uncertain, unpredictable and uncontrollable mean an erosion of motivation? We think this would only be the case if our work was carried out principally or exclusively for the material (economic) and symbolic (identity) rewards that can pertain; a view often endorsed by many in our study. Insofar as academic and intellectual production is valued as an end in itself, the performative regime need not intensify our insecurities any more than all the other sources of insecurity that we have discussed in this paper.

However, diminishing our instrumentalism might not remove the nagging doubts that we fall short of fulfilling the demands of a proper academic (aspirant) and that our knowledge is too flimsy to be described as scholarly (imposter) or that its content is ultimately meaningless (existentialist). Many of our respondents directly or indirectly reflected one or more of these insecurities concerning their occupational lives. First we theorize our findings in terms of identity and insecurity through social, existential and psychoanalytic perspectives. Then through an exploration of ideal selves and the meaning of work, we focus on the consequences and implications of our findings for business school academics.

Sociological, Psychoanalytic and Philosophical Frameworks

While imposter, aspirant and existential forms of insecurity emerged from our research data, they have a resonance with the social, psychoanalytic and philosophical modes of analysis. So, for example, many of our respondents felt like imposters because they could not live up to the image believed to symbolize a proper academic. Hence, their insecurity revolved around an uncertainty about how they would be regarded, and the possible contradiction and challenge of their identities by others (Becker, 1971; Watts, 1977). A social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) and potential deconstruction of the self is what drives us all to aspire to identities that are more secure and an escape from the negative evaluations of others often in academia delivered from the ‘safe’ position of anonymity in journal or research grant reviews (Gabriel, 2010). This account can be further strengthened by psychoanalytic arguments concerning the mirror stage of ego development where there is a misrecognition of the self insofar as it identifies with an image of itself (the imaginary) as if this were solid, separate, discrete and independent of others (Lacan, 2008). As most of our respondents were aware, this is contradicted not only by sociological accounts of the precarious self (Luckmann & Berger, 1964) but also by the forced subordination of desire (e.g. the Oedipus complex) to the Symbolic (i.e. language and the rule of the father) and its domination

over the imaginary and the real (Driver, 2009; Roberts, 2005). The aspirations of our respondents provide clear evidence that, as a performative construct (Butler, 1990), identity has to be continuously ‘worked at’ (Schwartz, 1987, p.328) but also how this is reinforced by routine attempts to please ‘significant others’ such as the ‘father’. Many of our respondents commented on the pressure of the publishing ‘treadmill’ sustained by academic institutions, and others also indicated how what they described as meaningful work was often sacrificed to satisfy the subconscious demands of the ‘father’ to chase ‘promotion, money, security’ (Lecturer).

Both sociological and psychoanalytic accounts are grounded in philosophical or ontological conceptions of the separation between subjects and objects. In existentialism these were reflected in the anxiety and insecurity generated by the overwhelming contingency of nature, its meaningless disorder and unpredictability (Sartre, 1938). Despite committing themselves to aspirational projects that are perceived to provide a treasured, secure, stable and successful academic identity, our respondents frequently referred to existential worries that they should be doing something more meaningful. Even the sweet ‘exhilaration’ of publication provides only temporary escape from the treadmill of producing the next paper or the meaninglessness of writing where seemingly there may be ‘no benefit’ or ‘significance’ beyond the pursuit of academic ideals that are often unattainable.

Ideal Academics and Meaningful Work

Ego ideals (Freud, 1914) and ideal identities (Schwartz, 1987) arguably fuel the unrelenting pressure to perform; academics must work hard in their attempts to maintain and present a knowledgeable self despite ‘insecurities arising’ from the ‘sheer impossibility of being as skilful and wise as is required’ (Ford et al., 2010, p. S76). Academics can never feel secure about their (our) competence in as much as the ‘ideal academic identity that haunts us [remains] unattainable’ because, in contrast with idealised images, only rarely is an academic judged to be ‘a major thinker’ (Harding et al, 2010, p.165). So for most, and despite aspirations to be brilliant writers, teachers, thinkers and administrators, a failure to ‘fully’ acquit ourselves may be bitterly experienced. Once internalised and individualised, this reinforces the conditions of insecurity and the meaningless void amid the omnipresent possibility of sliding from a ‘claimed expertise into a fear of failure’ (Ford et al., 2010, p.s77). This may also lead to excessive over-commitment or a ‘demented work ethic’ (Kuhn, 2006), which results in the work of academics encroaching on family and leisure space. Yet as our study has shown, these insecurities are a mixed blessing

because while they can be debilitating, they also are the driving force of our productive power that help generate high standards and pride in our work.

However, central to humanistic ideology is the notion that freedom is synonymous with human autonomy (Knights and Willmott, 2002) as a basis for realizing the self – yet this is a potentially oppressive force concerning which we should remain ambivalent (Foucault, 1982). An alternative 'ethical logic' would restrain the ideological demands of this humanistic faith in autonomy in favour of more modest expectations. Many of our participants subscribed to a fantasy of 'limitless potential' (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008), striving inexhaustibly to perform at the highest levels in administration, publishing and teaching. Whereas in acting ideologically, we tend to generate further fantasies to manage disappointment (Ekman, 2012, p.20) regarding, for example, rejected articles or failed grant proposals, an ethical logic might reflect more on the insecurities that fuel the expectations for superhuman achievement. Through such an ethic, we become more concerned about what we *do* rather than with the image or identity that we fantasize to be the outcome. Of course, fantasy enables us to 'evade the corrections, resistance, and disappointments, which a focus on "the matter" would entail. One can, so to say, hide in the limitless concern about identity' (Ekman, 2012, p.19). Where we speak about preoccupations with securing our identities being problematic if not self-defeating, psychoanalytical theory argues that too great attachment to our fantasies results in ideological behaviour that is more concerned with the image we create than the ethics and social responsibility of what we do.

It has been argued that because organizational actors generally fail to confront their own finitude, they are less likely to make meaningful decisions within the limited time available to them. This makes them susceptible to passively consume 'dominant discourses' (Reedy & Learmonth, 2011, pp. 120-121) rather than actively choosing what to do and this may provide a partial explanation of the apparent compliance of our academics. Insofar as there was any resistance it took mainly place individually in the form of ignoring 'some of the rules' on the basis that it is precisely the proliferation and complexity of the regulations, which renders their enforcement difficult. Alternatively, a few academics expressed resistance at the same time as complying with the demands through a form of consent. This reflects the strategies adopted by a number of academics (and we include ourselves among them) who simply write critically about the intensification of work and managerial demands in university while in doing so, effectively comply with them (Grey, 2010; Willmott, 2011; Clarke et al., 2012). This is no more than a reflection of a professional and ethical commitment to the values of intellectual production. Overall there was little evidence in the study that any solidarity or collective resistance could potentially result from

academics' struggles against these managerialist regimes (Courpasson, 2011).

Arguably, aspirations to publish in highly ranked journals ensure a harmony with the demands of the institution, such that academics are creating little more than 'designer' (Casey, 1995) or 'engineered' identities (Kunda, 1992) within a specific cultural time and space. However, such a reading yields predominantly to a deterministic version of sociological, psychoanalytic and existential frameworks in which academics are constructed as 'cultural dopes' (Garfinkel, 1967) who are seemingly unable to exercise agency (Thomas & Davies, 2005), or reflect on the egocentric and contradictory assumptions underlying much identity theory (Knights & Willmott, 1999). Reflections on sociological, psychoanalytic and philosophical reasoning can help us to understand how problematic or self-defeating is this attempt to render our identities secure, for identity is a perpetually revolving ephemeral construction, the security of which can only ever be transient. Admittedly our research has revealed pressures rendering individuals as objects of institutional or managerial calculation (Foucault, 1977), and hence they were often instrumentally spurred on by a desire to accumulate visible achievements in order to secure themselves a 'treasured' identity (Brown & Phua, 2011), or at least one which is known to be recognised and rewarded (Macdonald & Kam, 2007). Nonetheless, these pursuits are *also* the outcome of academics reflecting upon multiple contradictory discourses (Clarke et al., 2009) regarding their own identities and future selves. However, recognising such contradictions does not always result in changing one's practices and while these antagonisms were sometimes consciously incorporated in the narratives of our participants, it is possible to accuse academics of 'paradoxically clinging to the very thing ... [they] ...claim to abhor' (Cederstrom & Hoedemaekers, 2012, p.229).

Given our preoccupation with identity it is not surprising that we participate in the reproduction of the very controls that we criticize since these provide us with a form of external legitimacy. Of course, academics are by no means exceptional in being monitored and measured, and subjected to continuous systems of audit, accountability, and control and yet many other workers (not all), are commonly assessed through a single line manager. By contrast a myriad of different constituencies legitimately stand in judgment of the academic and there is a relentless surveillance of all parts of their work, whether it is teaching students (Vince, 2010), presenting at conferences (Humphreys, 2005), bidding for research funds, securing research access, or competing for posts in recruitment or promotion processes. These continuous assessments are notoriously anxiety provoking and involve intense identity work as audit, accountability, monitoring, and surveillance all come together to inform potential career advancements. These hierarchical observations, normalizing

judgements and examinations (Foucault, 1982) are situated in an ‘extremely competitive, if not aggressive institutional context’ (Ford et al., 2012, p.32) marking us out as successes or failures, worthy or unworthy and rendering us vulnerable to ‘deep insecurities regarding ... [our] ... worth, identity and standing’ (Gabriel, 2010, p.769).

Discourses of success and failure have seduced academics to conspire in exercises of performativity, a form of ‘often subconscious, dysfunctional collusion’ (Adler & Harzing, 2009, p.85). Perhaps this is because as Sennett suggests, ‘if we have enough evidence of material achievement we won’t be haunted by feelings of inadequacy’ (p.119). As we have suggested, working life in academia offers a tantalizing array of potential and possible selves, situated within a range of circulating discourses as ‘academics reflectively recognise and acknowledge their participation in corrosive processes that have become both naturalised and embedded in UK business schools and universities’ (Clarke et al. 2012, p.14). This conscious complicity we suggest is partly fuelled by (unrealisable) attempts to secure the (academic) self.

Limitations

In common with all research projects, this study exhibits a number of limitations. Firstly, in asking for research ‘volunteers’ we possibly attracted and marginalised certain academics but we cannot determine whether those who took part were more, or less insecure than the population as a whole. Secondly, extrapolating from UK business schools is fraught with difficulty as specific cultural, historic and economic conditions may differ in relation to other disciplines and schools and ‘question(s) may be answered quite differently by groups with distinct histories’ (Brown & Humphreys, 2006, p. 252). While the research has raised interesting questions concerning managerialist interventions in UK business schools and their impact on academic staff, it is for other research to establish whether our findings are unique or have significance for a broader population of academics and perhaps other public sector professionals. Finally, this paper has focused on insecurity and fragility but there were, of course, other feelings and concerns that arose from our participants’ accounts, for example, ‘love’ (Clarke et al., 2012). However, in our experience academics often exhibit other dysfunctions such as narcissism or self-aggrandizement and conceit. While these findings did not emerge from our study, it may be that these are more prevalent in some business schools than others and evident to different researchers, although of course such behaviours could easily be read as just another manifestation of insecurity. We trust that our research has been sufficiently illuminating and provocative to encourage others to pursue future research that might ameliorate some of these limitations.

Summary and Conclusion

Against the background of a proliferating culture of audit, accountability and performativity, this paper has drawn on primary empirical material to examine the identities and insecurities of business school academics as mutually interdependent phenomena. From our data, we have identified three emergent types of insecurities: ‘imposters’; ‘aspirants’; and ‘existentialists’ and, in turn, linked these to sociological, psychoanalytic and philosophical analytical frameworks. These insecurities partly resulted from the continuous subjection of academics to the judgments of others but our analysis sought to map (albeit with certain overlaps and anomalies), the three types of insecurity on to the analytical perspectives. First, from the philosophical perspective, conforming to the demands of excessive audits and assessments aggravate insecurities about the *existential* meaning of what we do possibly distancing us from the community that we otherwise seek to impress. Second, from a sociological perspective, idealized expectations can engender a sense of failure or of being an *imposter* whereby we are sceptical of the limited social confirmations of self that come our way. Third, from a psychoanalytic perspective, despite existential ‘drifts’ into meaninglessness, and scepticism about complying with the managerial demands, many of us still remain addicted to the pursuit of a solid sense of self that, however illusive, drives us to *aspire* to be recognised by external adjudicators, our peers, academic institution, and the general public.

In addition, our participants' academic lives were authored in ways that we describe as bittersweet in the sense that they variously displayed ambivalence along a positive – negative binary. On the one hand, they understood what constituted a 'proper' academic as being laudatory or sweet – passionate, enthusiastic, and full of expectation. However, a bitter or pejorative taste also surrounds the sense in which their ambitions often seemed unrealisable if not unrealistic. While responses to their efforts at the institutional level were often bitter in falling short of hierarchical, social or peer recognition, the sweetness of a potentially esteemed career and publicly recognised identity fuelled and fired their strivings. The ambivalence of the public could also be seen to exacerbate the bittersweet and contradictory sense of what it is to be an academic.

Empirically this study has contributed not only to an understanding of one part of the academic profession but also how insecurity figures in the way that work is experienced and identity

rendered fragile and precarious. While the three types we focused upon are far from exhaustive, they do illustrate how insecurity is a driving force in the pursuit of (academic) identities that are forever illusive if not entirely illusory. We have argued that techniques which are both performative and panoptic contribute to a form of self-regulation that is extremely compelling and seductive, and which renders academics *over-committed* and yet simultaneously falling short of an idealized, and by definition impossible, set of managerial, peer and self-induced expectations.

Through illustrations of how identity and insecurity have illuminated the understandings of this specific occupational group, we believe that our analysis can also be extended beyond the world of academia where the pressures of increased accountability, control and work intensification generated by the audit and performative culture are also in evidence. This can provide a new visibility to some of the processes of identity management and the insecurities surrounding it as well as the ways that compliant, committed and loyal selves are produced. In addition, insecure and fragile identities could inform studies relating to both career and the audit society. Future studies might also address whether insecurity promotes or stifles creativity. Insecurity could also provide another ‘string’ to the emotional theorists bow regarding emotional selves, and the stresses and anxieties involved in working lives. Finally, our three categories of insecurity could be broadened or refined, and other typologies could also be proposed to enhance the conceptual links between identity and insecurity. Although other occupations are likely to manifest different kinds of insecurities, our research is relevant to a broader range of workplaces and organizational studies of identity.

In writing this piece we are aware that we as authors cannot be absent even though ‘exposing the vulnerable self through autobiographical process can be fraught with personal and professional risk’ (Boyle & Parry, 2007). For example, we are conscious that in this study of academics we are not only writing about ourselves, but we are doing so in a way that potentially boosts our own REF return, with the risk thereby of becoming a parody of ourselves. In conducting this research and presenting our work at conferences (and in this paper) we have experienced a ‘familiar strangeness’ with our occupation, as some accounts resonate more than others, and particularly because our own insecurities associated with publishing this paper have surfaced in ways that perfectly reflect the subject matter – bittersweet. However, when studying one’s own occupation the focus shifts uncomfortably between a tendency to transform research subjects into objects of our representations, and acknowledging ourselves as embodied in their world just as they are in ours. Consequently, writing this paper has been partially an exercise in providing an embodied and

meaningful relationship between our ‘personal troubles’ as academics and the ‘public issues’ of Higher Education. We now invite the reader to undertake similar considerations for themselves.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the contribution of our colleague Carol Jarvis who was involved in conceiving the project and conducted some of the research interviews but whose other pressures of work prevented her participation in writing this article.

We are very grateful to Andrew Brown for his untiring advice, support and valuable comments on our work. We would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers and the editor of Organization Studies for their insightful comments and criticisms during the review process.

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¹ The phrases condition and consequence or medium and outcome were deployed by Giddens (1979) to avoid dualistic and deterministic forms of analysis in social theory and we adopt it in this paper for similar reasons.

² We do not imply by this that academics are actually in a constant state of formal probation, but they are subjected to constant trials of judgement (peer review, student ‘happy sheets’, funding applications) which means that their working identities are rarely secured but constantly under the gaze of surveillance.

³ The UK government’s first Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) for purposes of an evaluation of academic performance through peer review, primarily of publications was in 1986 and has been conducted every 4 or 5 years. It provides the basis for a competitive allocation of research funds to universities. It has now been renamed the Research Excellence Framework (REF) that although also demanding evidence of the impact of academics, for all practical purposes has similar effects.

⁴ For example we asked: At a social gathering how do you explain what you do for a living? What drew you into higher education? What activities are legitimate and rewarded in your business school? What political and socio-economic changes in the last decade have influenced the way you take up your role?

⁵ The star system for publications was created by the research assessment. Each article of the 4 submitted to the REF is rated from 1* to 4* so that a top ranking submission would be 16*. The UK Association of Business Schools constructed a ranking of all the journals in the management field to coincide with this requirement.

⁶ We could have provided more data on teaching but space did not permit.

⁷ A Broadway film from the 1950s.