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Jugglers, Copers and Strugglers: A conceptual framework for interpreting the career trajectories of academics who become HoDs in a UK university (0141)

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Over the last few years, although much has been written about the changing nature of academic work, relatively little has been published on academic career trajectories, particularly in relation to university heads of department (HoDs). Drawing on a recent study which investigated the career trajectories of academics who became HoDs in a UK university, this paper proposes a conceptual framework to help interpret the study's findings. The framework is based on the nexus and interrelationships between the concepts of socialisation, identity and career trajectory and proposes three groups into which the participants can be tentatively placed: the jugglers, the copers and the strugglers. It is hoped that the proposed framework may have transferability for researchers of HoDs in other universities. It is also hoped that this framework may help detail and develop existing career theory, as the empirical evidence and theory base connected to modern professional careers is rather sparse.

Jugglers, Copers and Strugglers: A conceptual framework for interpreting the career trajectories of academics who become HoDs in a UK university

Outline

Although much has been written over the last few years about the changing nature of academic work (for example: Collinson, 2004; Deem, 2004; Henkel, 2002; Knight and Trowler, 2000; Nixon, 1996), relatively little has been published on academic career trajectories, particularly in relation to university heads of department (HoDs). Following his extensive review of current areas of research in higher education, Tight (2003) argues that further research is required into the experiences of "specialist academics, such as those pursuing research careers and those exercising managerial or administrative functions" (p. 166). Other authors have identified the need for research into leadership roles in general (Bryman, 2007), and into the role of the academic HoD specifically (Smith, 2005), particularly in post-1992 universities (Smith, 2002). This paper may thus be seen as contributing to this call. It is organised over three sections. First, the concepts that make up the framework are introduced. Second, the study on which the framework is based is detailed and finally the conceptual framework is outlined in detail.

Drawing on a recent study which investigated the career trajectories of academics who became HoDs in a UK university, this paper proposes a conceptual framework to help interpret the participants' career trajectories. The framework is based on the key concepts of socialisation, identity and career trajectory. The nexus and interrelationships between all three of these concepts provided the analytical framework for this study. It is argued that organisational, professional and personal socialisation experiences help to form our identities and self-images (Giddens, 2006; Jenkins, 2004). It

is further assumed that identity then helps people adopt certain roles within an organisation and influences the job roles they take on, which in turn influences their career trajectory (Chen, 1998). Taking on different roles within an organisation means a person is likely to be subjected to new socialisation experiences that in turn may help form a new professional identity, and they may lose or suppress a former identity whilst in this new role (Henkel, 2002; Parker, 2004).
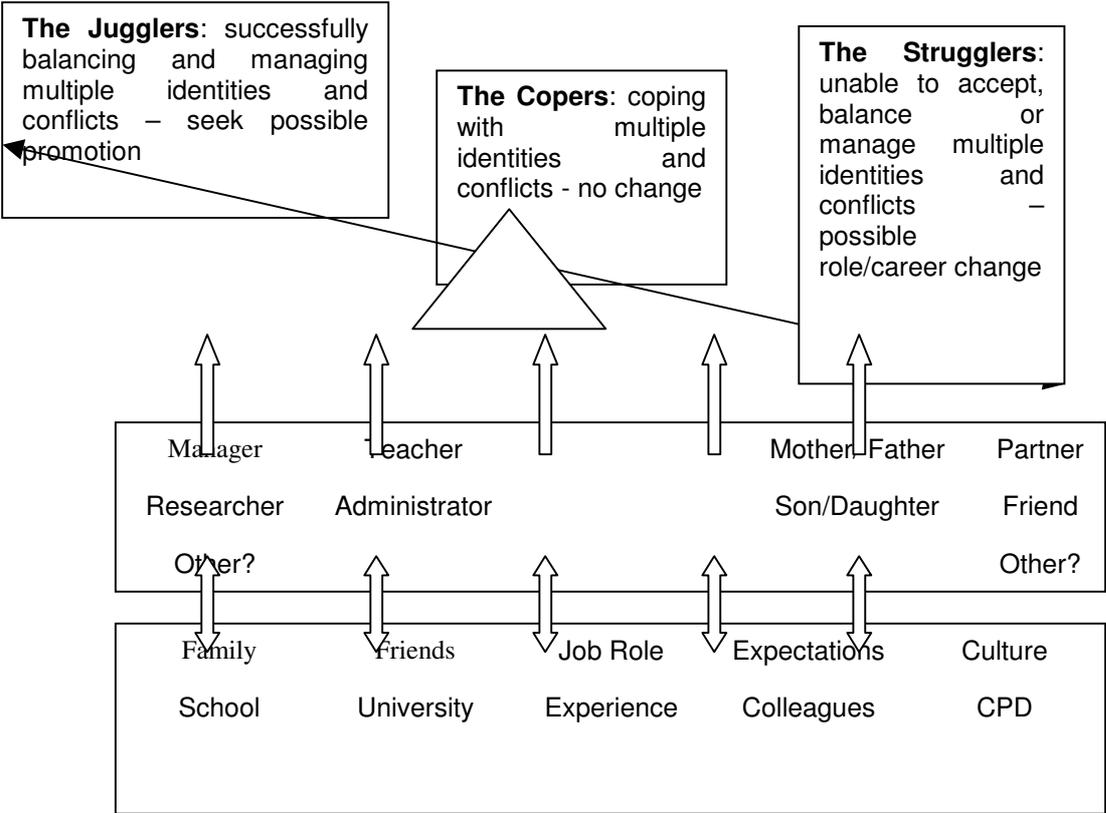
Based on the research question, "What are the career trajectories of academics who become HoDs in a selected post-1992 university?" the study on which the proposed framework is based aimed to achieve greater understanding of why academics become HoDs, what it is like being a HoD, and how the experience influences their future career plans. The study adopted the interpretive paradigm, in line with social constructivism, and used a life history approach (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). Both paradigm and approach were justified by the nature of the research aim and research questions, namely, to understand, through their own perceptions, the career trajectories of academics who become HoDs. In total, life history interviews were undertaken with 17 male and female HoDs, from a range of disciplines, at a selected post-1992 UK university.

The findings from this study suggest that academics who become HoDs need the capacity to assume a range of personal and professional identities that are formed and changed by socialisation experiences at home, in society, and at work. Being a HoD means that an individual needs to regularly adopt and switch between these multiple identities. Some of these identities are perceived as more appropriate and important than others, either overall, or in different situations. Whether individual HoDs can successfully balance and manage these identities, or whether they experience major conflicts within or between them, influences their views and experiences of being a HoD. Those who are more capable of switching, and feel more compatibility between, multiple roles, seem more likely to stay the course as HoDs and even aspire to higher positions. The reverse applies, too. Those who find difficulty adopting and switching between multiple roles and identities, are more likely to resign, change occupation or retire early.

In relation to balancing and managing these multiple identities as HoDs, some of which conflict, each of the 17 respondents in this study can be tentatively placed into one of three groups. The first group are those who felt they could successfully manage and balance their multiple identities and associated conflicts – this group could be termed "the jugglers". Second are those who could just about "cope" with, and accept, the identity conflicts and differences – this group could be called "the copers". Finally, a third group are those who find real difficulty in accepting, balancing and managing their identities and as a consequence, were reflecting on the possibility of changing their HoD role. This group could be termed "the strugglers". The "jugglers" tended to enjoy being in the HoD role, with some even thinking about possible future promotion. It seems that they felt they had the capacity to experience and manage a further range of professional identities. The "copers" were mostly determined and able to remain in the role, even although some of them did not appear to particularly enjoy being in the position. They felt they did not have the capacity to accept any further changes to their professional identities. Finally, the "strugglers", who felt the HoD experience was too challenging, even unfulfilling and negative, were experiencing career "turning points" and were consequently considering a change in job and role, or even a change in career. These participants felt that they

were unable to manage, balance or even accept the professional and personal identity conflicts arising from the multiplicity of expectations associated with being a HoD. Although these groups have been separated for ease of distinction, it is acknowledged that they are part of a continuum, that each individual conforms to the characteristics of their group to a greater or lesser extent, and that there might well be fluidity in relation to group membership depending on situational circumstances. These groupings are shown in figure 1 along with the socialisation forces and multiple identities participant academics experienced in their careers. Figure 1 provides a conceptual framework for interpreting the career trajectories of academics who become HoDs in the case University. Although the findings from this study cannot be generalised, it is hoped that the framework may have transferability for researchers of HoDs in other universities who might wish to replicate this study. It is also hoped that this framework may help detail and develop existing career theory, particularly as, compared to traditional career research, the empirical evidence and theory base connected to modern professional careers is rather sparse (Iellatchitch et al., 2003).

Figure 1 - Career Trajectories of Academics who become HoDs

The Jugglers: successfully balancing and managing multiple identities and conflicts – seek possible promotion

The Copers: coping with multiple identities and conflicts - no change

The Strugglers: unable to accept, balance or manage multiple identities and conflicts – possible role/career change

Manager	Teacher			Mother Father	Partner
Researcher	Administrator			Son/Daughter	Friend
Other?					Other?

| Family | Friends | Job Role | Expectations | Culture |
| School | University | Experience | Colleagues | CPD |

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