

Dr who? Identity crucibles and the DBA doctoral degree

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Dr Who? Identity Crucibles and the DBA Doctoral Degree

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This paper explores the triggers and identity crucibles facing professional doctorate students pursuing a Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA). Unlike prior research, which centres on full-time PhD students, our study examines the identity work of DBA students, many of whom do not foresee a transition to academia. Through 35 semi-structured interviews, we explore the identity work involved in ‘becoming a doctor’ and the identity crucibles that DBA students encounter. We identify the internal and external triggers that lead to identity work and identity crucibles, with their accompanying emotions, and examine how these crucibles are resolved. This research develops current thinking in critical management education, revealing how DBA students do not uniformly aspire to become practitioner-scholars or academics. Instead, they start and end their doctoral studies from various and different identity positions, highlighting the complexity of these long, intellectually challenging programmes. By exploring the triggers, identity crucibles and resolutions, this study offers a nuanced understanding of the DBA student experience and provides valuable insights into how these individuals can be supported throughout their doctoral studies. This support enhances retention and completion rates for those tasked with managing these programmes and reduces the likelihood of losing exceptional scholars/practitioners.

Introduction

Professional doctorate students experience numerous challenges triggering ‘crucibles’ (Shannon *et al.*, 2020) when studying, which may impact their identity and how they see themselves. As one participant in our study remarked, questioning her decision to start her studies, ‘Why have I set out to do this? I am not capable of doing this’. This can have profound effects, ranging from demotivated students to reduced completion rates and loss of fees. It is therefore important to address gaps in current knowledge by understanding how these professional doctorate students engage in identity work during, and as the result of, their studies to help them navigate the identity crucibles associated with studying. We do this by examining students on a part-time profes-

sional doctorate, specifically a Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA), to explore the identity crucibles of DBA students during their doctoral degree. While previous critical management education research has examined identity transitions from student to academic made by full-time PhD students, scholars have so far failed to consider the identity work in part-time professional doctorate students. This gap in the literature presents significant shortcomings in our understanding due to the distinct profiles of DBA students. DBA students usually hold senior management positions and possess extensive professional experience before starting their doctoral studies. This seniority and experience shape their identity differently to PhD students, who might still be in the early stages of their careers. The professional network, leadership roles and requirement to balance work with study uniquely affect DBA students’ identity as doctoral candidates. Furthermore, the motivations behind pursuing a DBA often include

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professional advancement, practical research applications and contributing to their organizations. These motivations are markedly different from the academic and scholarly aspirations typically associated with PhD students. Such differences in goals and professional contexts necessitate tailored support systems and educational strategies for DBA students. By not addressing these differences, current literature fails to provide a comprehensive understanding of the identity work of doctoral students across diverse contexts. To address this gap, we examine how students engage in identity work throughout their DBA studies and the factors influencing this. Using data from qualitative interviews, we address the call to investigate doctoral education from the students' lived experience (Dos Santos and Lo, 2018; Lee, 2011), exploring the challenging process of 'becoming a doctor' and which triggers and identity crucibles this learning involves (Huber and Knights, 2021).

The DBA thesis can be seen as a 'boundary object' intersecting social and cultural worlds (Nicolini, Mengis and Swan, 2012) of academics and practitioners brought together through collaborative inquiry to develop 'researching professionals' (Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2019). Yet, limited research remains exploring triggers, identity crucibles and how part-time, professional doctorate students can be supported to navigate these challenges. Instead, literature regarding DBA programmes is sparse and focuses on their nature, purpose and impact on groups, organizations, policy and society, rather than their effect on individuals (Creaton and Anderson, 2021; Hawkes and Yerrabati, 2018). In addition, research on the individual impact of doctoral programmes has focused on more traditional PhD programmes, aimed primarily, though not exclusively, at developing academics (Banerjee and Morley, 2013; Feng Teng, 2019). In contrast, building on and extending the work of Hay and Samra-Fredericks (2016, 2019), this in-depth study offers a detailed analysis of the triggers that cause identity crucibles experienced by individuals during their DBA programme and explores potential resolutions.

Our research makes several noteworthy contributions to critical management education theory by responding to criticisms that scholars have failed to explore in depth how student identities evolve in a teaching and learning context (Ibarra, 1999). Therefore, in this study, we seek to investigate the 'uncertainty' and 'discomfort' associated with identity challenges in a learning environment (Knights, Huber and Longman, 2022, p. 614). Firstly, we explore the triggers experienced by DBA students, examining how these triggers can lead to the emergence of identity crucibles, offering a closer look at the challenging process of 'becoming a doctor' and the identity crucibles this learning involves (Huber and Knights, 2021). We adopt an interpretivist view of identity and are interested in the 'ambiguities, un-

certainties, indeterminacies, equivocalities, contradictions, plurality, contingencies and antagonisms' individuals face (Brown, 2021, p. 1224). To that end, we contribute to identity theory by highlighting unidentified triggers and the diverse aspects of identity crucibles experienced by DBA students. We demonstrate how identity crucibles vary in duration, frequency and intensity, and are associated with positive and negative emotions.

Our findings align with the broader conversation on temporality, dialogue, reflexivity and praxis in management research, enriching the discourse on critical management education (MacIntosh *et al.*, 2017). Thirdly, we provide insight into the emotions associated with identity challenges experienced by students as they navigate the identity crucibles. This phase prompts engagement in identity work, experimentation with different identities and adopting self-supporting behaviours to resolve their identity struggles, for example, fear of non-acceptance into academia and/or alienation from the practitioner world. Our study highlights the practical implications of supporting DBA students (Anderson, Ellwood and Coleman, 2017) as they navigate their own diverse identity positions, which can be thought of as temporal, discursive identity positions that are 'tenuous, fragile and elastic' (Brown, 2015, p. 28).

Our multifaceted exploration challenges assumptions about the uniformity of doctoral student identity shifts. We observe that DBA students prioritize, compartmentalize and establish distinct boundaries among their multiple identity positions. This contribution enriches the broader discourse on identity and our understanding of DBA learning experiences. Lastly, our study offers guidance for programme directors, supervisors and students to enhance the educational experience and address potential challenges in DBA programmes by highlighting the complexities inherent in the DBA student experience.

Professional doctorates in the management field

According to the Executive DBA Council (EDBAC), in 2022, there were 298 professional doctorates in management globally, 263 of which were part-time; 43% of these were offered in Europe (Graf, 2022). EFMD Global predicts the DBA market is set to grow significantly, particularly as the MBA market has matured, with leading institutions such as Harvard, Cambridge and University College London offering programmes (Kalika, 2023). The report finds that over a third of the global institutions surveyed that do not have a DBA intend to offer one in the next 5 years.

Professional doctorates were developed originally due to criticism of the practice relevance of a PhD, to

provide doctorly qualified career professionals to satisfy the demand for applied research and to allow speedier assimilation of findings into organizations (Banerjee and Morley, 2013; Halse and Mowbray, 2011; Neumann, 2005). The DBA is aimed at senior managers who want to utilize research skills to benefit their career and organization or have a wider impact on policy or society (Foster *et al.*, 2024). However, DBA students experience differing levels of assimilation into academia. Indeed, they may seek to remain exclusively part of their organizational community (Stoten, 2016). In contrast, PhD students are assumed to forge their identities to gain membership into the academic community and, therefore, construct and reconstruct a range of identities during their doctoral journey (Feng Teng, 2019).

Another aim of the DBA is to develop the student's capacity to be a reflexive practitioner or practitioner-scholar (Cunliffe, 2004). Practitioner-scholars are 'actors who have received traditional academic training and apply their knowledge of theory and research to an organization's particular challenges to resolve business problems' (Tenkasi, 2011, p. 212). If this happens, transforming senior practitioners into reflexive practitioners or practitioner-scholars will likely involve skills, knowledge and identity changes. It has been suggested that doctoral education is 'as much about identity formation as it is about knowledge production' (Green, 2005, p. 153). Doctoral research is, therefore, a 'process of transformation and identity development beyond that of an undergraduate or masters level student' (Coffman *et al.*, 2016, p. 30). Due to the intellectual rigour involved and the extended duration of the average DBA (6–7 years) (Careers Research Advisory Centre, 2016), coupled with these individuals' senior managerial positions, they potentially encounter more frequent and intense identity crucibles over an extended period compared to participants in a management training programme. As DBA students embark on their doctoral degree at different life stages, with possibly different pressures (e.g. caring responsibilities) and shifting identity positions, it is essential to understand how they can be supported. For example, supervisors are influential in shaping students' identities as researchers (Posselt, 2018) and vital to an individual's progress in doctoral education (González-Ocampo and Castelló, 2019).

We argue that DBAs' starting point differs from other doctoral students; therefore, their identity positions and end points are also likely to vary. In this paper, we seek to understand the identity work in which they engage. Research has overlooked this aspect by focusing on the assumed outcome of practitioner-scholar rather than the identity experience throughout.

Identity and identity work

By identity, we mean 'the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves' (Brown, 2015, p. 23). Identity enables us to distinguish ourselves from others (Beyer and Hannah, 2002) and is shaped by multiple characteristics such as profession, organization and work group (Dutton, Roberts and Bednar, 2010). Roles can influence identity, although individuals may 'play' a role without feeling that the role particularly defines them. Further, preferred identities are not necessarily linked to past or present roles (Brown, Lewis and Oliver, 2021). Identity is fluid as it depends on the referent groups with which we have contact and how they see us, as per Cooley's (1922, 1983) concept of the 'Looking Glass Self'. This leads to an ongoing struggle to maintain a coherent sense of self within a shifting context (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2006). This struggle has been conceptualized as identity work that involves forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising identities in a power-related environment (Brown, 2021; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

Identity work is broadly about maintaining a coherent sense of self amid identity challenges and is distinguished from identity play, which refers to the iterative engagement in provisional trials of future selves (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016). Provisional selves might be met with excitement and anticipation, bringing a perceived benefit (Kirk, 2021), or viewed negatively and repressed (Brown, 2021). Identity work and play are essential in developing, maintaining and shaping identities. Brown (2021) characterizes identities as multiple, self-reflexive, actively worked on, fluid and constructed within relations of power.

Changes in an individual's self-perception and aspirational identity or identities (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009) are not a smooth, linear process. It may involve several 'rites of passage' (van Gennep, 1960), during which an individual may occupy a liminal space (Hawkins and Edwards, 2013). The rites of passage may be seen as both a point in time and a state of being (Barradell and Kennedy-Jones, 2015) and include a disruption of self, followed by recrafting new identities.

Individuals may experience intense identity episodes that prompt identity work, which challenges, solidifies or transforms their identities (Ashforth, Harrison and Corley, 2008). Identity work is ongoing and occurs most intensively during specific junctures (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010). It is not conducted in isolation but is stimulated by experiences of uncertainty, confusion and anxiety (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Triggers and identity crucibles

Triggers are defined as interruptions in cognitive flow (Weick, 1995) and can be single or multiple (Osland *et al.*, 2023), leading to identity crucible(s). A key trigger may be a personal crisis such as a bereavement, which may lead to a conflict between two or more identity positions (Ashforth, Harrison and Corley, 2008), such as an individual's identity as a grieving partner/child and their student identity. This would result in an identity crucible, prompting them to critically reflect on, ruminate and review how they see themselves.

Thus, identity crucibles test, shape and reveal how people see themselves (Roberts *et al.*, 2005), prompting individuals to evaluate their values (Byrne, Crossman and Seijts, 2018). However, some authors do not distinguish between triggers and identity crucibles. For example, Bennis and Thomas (2002, p. 63) define 'a crucible experience' as 'transformative experiences through which individuals come to a new or altered sense of identity'. This insight offers a useful starting point to develop a more nuanced understanding by distinguishing between triggers and identity crucibles.

The scant research to date has focused on crucibles in leadership development (Bennis, 2009; Bennis and Thomas, 2002; Hinge, 2016; Thomas, 2008), including those that might be experienced during education programmes (Byrne, Crossan and Seijts, 2018; Thompson *et al.*, 2019). To our knowledge, there has yet to be research on the nature of triggers and identity crucibles in a doctoral education setting. This research is important as students need to respond to these triggers and work through these identity crucibles to complete their doctoral studies.

Identity and doctoral students

Most studies have focused on the identity work of PhD students and their transformation into independent academic researchers (Mantai, 2019). This includes, for example, exploring identity work in relation to publishing to secure tenure, developing scholarly writing in a second language and developing an author's 'voice' in academic writing (Botelho de Magalhães, Cotterall and Mideros, 2019; Xu and Grant, 2020). This identity work by PhD students is strongly regulated by the drive to be an academic (Hall, 1996). However, these studies overlook the experiences of professional doctorate students, who may face a different set of challenges and identity work throughout their studies and do not explore the range of challenges and corresponding identity work students undertake throughout their studies.

There has been an assumption that professional doctorate students make a linear transition from a managerial identity to a single identity position, for example,

a 'reflective practitioner' (Sambrook and Stewart, 2008) or a 'doctoral researcher' (Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2016). While Hay and Samra-Fredericks' work on DBA students suggests that they never complete their separation from their practitioner identity, the emphasis remains on a linear transition to a single new identity. Further, they assume this transition is punctuated by negative experiences, which they call 'monsters of doubt' (Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2016, p. 418). We contend that this emphasis over-simplifies the identity experiences of DBA students and has implications for doctoral management education. In contrast, we explore students' identity work during their studies, focusing on identity work rather than identity outcomes. We investigate the triggers, identity crucibles and identity work DBA students engage in to resolve these struggles. Therefore, we address the following research questions:

1. What factors may trigger identity crucibles for students while studying for a DBA?
2. What is the nature of identity crucibles for DBA students?
3. In what ways do DBA students seek to resolve these identity crucibles?
4. What are the implications for the design and support of DBA and other similar programmes?

Methods

Our interpretivist study is designed to explore the lived experiences of DBA students. This approach enables researchers to capture events and 'the meanings and interpretations people attribute to these experiences' (Frechette *et al.*, 2020, n.p.). In doing so, we seek to creatively challenge what is known (Corley, Bansai and Yu, 2021) about these students' experiences, thus enabling their social construction of reality to be explored (Neergaard, Shaw and Carter, 2005). We used semi-structured interviews to explore the meaning and experiences of participants in-depth, captured in their own words, while maintaining consistency across the interview questions to ensure comparability (Marshall and Rossman, 2016).

Context

Our sample consisted of students and alumni from a well-established DBA programme at a UK university. The institution has a strong reputation as an applied university offering a 'gold' standard of teaching across various undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral programmes. The course aligned with the UK's Quality Assurance Agency Code of Practice for doctorates (Taylor and Wisker, 2023) and attracted senior

managers worldwide. These students studied part-time and aimed to complete the programme within 4 years; however, most participants took between 5 and 6 years. The programme's structure resembled other DBA courses in the United Kingdom and Europe. Students joined the programme as a cohort and were required to attend in-person skills-based block workshops for the first 2 years of the programme. Coursework assessments for this stage included a methodology proposal, literature review and pilot studies. In the post-taught stage, students progressed to the independent thesis phase, where they were supervised, mostly remotely, by two academics. The thesis usually focused on a workplace issue the student was experiencing, investigated through academic research. To be conferred, the student had to demonstrate through their thesis and *viva voce* (oral defence) that their study contributed to professional practice and academic knowledge.

Selection of participants

Participants were identified through purposive sampling to ensure that the interviewees met the criteria to respond to the interview questions (Bryman and Bell, 2015). We sought a sample that ensured all the different stages of the DBA were represented, namely, the early stages of studying, mid-point, writing up and post-completion (alumni). Participants at the early stages were in the taught element of the course. Those in the mid-point and writing-up stages were in the independent thesis stage. Importantly, and given the part-time nature of the DBA, some participants had taken up to 10 years to complete the degree; thus, inevitably, we could only ask participants to reflect on their experiences to date. We also included individuals who had completed on time and others who had prolonged completion, and ensured the sample was diverse in gender, age and ethnicity. However, typically, DBA students are mature (the average age of our participants was 49 years old) because of the requirement for a minimum level of senior managerial experience entry. Potential participants were contacted via email, inviting them to be involved in the study. Thirty-five DBA students/alumni were interviewed. At this point, theoretical saturation was reached, with no new themes emerging (Bowen, 2009), so no further interviews were undertaken. Table 1 provides a profile of the respondents with pseudonyms assigned for confidentiality.

Data collection

All researchers were experienced DBA course leaders and supervisors in UK universities, so they understood the educational context well. Having 'prolonged engagement' with the research field meant that the research team had insights into the context of the study, thus in-

creasing the trustworthiness of the data (Anney, 2014). Semi-structured interviews were undertaken by three of the researchers, who were affiliated with the same institution as the participants. The advantage of this was that they could take an 'insider' view (Milligan, 2016), although care was taken to ensure researchers did not interview their supervisees or students they knew well, to avoid any conflicts of interest. To reduce any further potential bias in the interview process and increase the trustworthiness of the data, the interview questions were developed and triangulated with the wider team of researchers who were unaffiliated with the data collection institution (Anney, 2014). The semi-structured interviews explored a range of themes (Appendix A shows the interview guide).

The interviews were conducted by telephone or online due to the international profile of the respondents and the fact that students were not required to study full-time and on campus. A small number of interviews were conducted face-to-face. All interviews were conducted in English, as this was the language used in the participants' DBA programme. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes and was digitally recorded and transcribed. Although we all tell stories to some extent, some individuals have stronger narrative skills than others (Watson, 2009). The stories told by these so-called 'diachronic' (Strawson, 2004, p. 430) were of particular interest as their narratives offered a deeper understanding of life and experiences. Accordingly, we have included these quotations wherever possible to illustrate the 'life stories' of these participants throughout their doctoral degree.

Data analysis

Reflecting other qualitative studies, our abductive approach to analysis involved moving between theory and interview transcripts, each informing the other to identify themes and respond to the research questions (Awuzie and McDermott, 2017; Cunliffe, 2011). Following a process of data reduction and data interpretation (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2019), we created a set of first-order codes using NVivo. Each of the three interviewers engaged independently in the first-order coding process (e.g. identifying simple descriptive phrases). Then, through a dialectical process and multiple rounds of open coding and comparing interviews to those coded by the other two researchers, intercoder agreement was established amongst the research team, leading to a shared perception of the phenomenon (Yin, 2009). This form of investigator triangulation can, therefore, strengthen the trustworthiness of qualitative analysis by increasing the integrity of the findings (Anney, 2014). By having the codes defined and compared independently by the other two 'outsiders' (Milligan, 2016), definitional drift was also avoided, leading to a

Table 1. Profile of interview respondents

No.	Pseudonym	DBA stage	Professional position	Industry	Ethnicity	Age	Gender
1	Greg	Awarded MPhil	Senior Manager	Professional Services	White British	63	M
2	Ivan	Alumni	Senior Manager	Finance	Arab	47	M
3	Claudette	Alumni	Senior Manager	Professional Services	White	46	F
4	Margaret	Mid-stage	Managing Director	Health	African	47	F
5	Wilfred	Alumni	Senior Manager	Finance	African	53	M
6	Paul	Alumni	CEO	Professional Services	Other White	53	M
7	Jon	Alumni	Senior Executive	Professional Services	Other White	56	M
8	Helen	Writing up	Senior Manager	Public Administration	Other Asian	50	F
9	Yaaman	Mid-stage	Senior Manager	Information & Communication	Arab	41	M
10	Abigail	Mid-stage	Senior Manager	Finance	African	44	F
11	Maaz	Writing up	Senior Manager	Information & Communication	Arab	43	M
12	Minny	Writing up	Senior Manager	Professional Services	Arab	46	F
13	Molly	Writing up	Consultant	Professional Services	Arab	44	F
14	Jonathan	Early stage	Senior Manager	Public Administration	Other White	40	M
15	Fiona	Writing up	Senior Manager	Public Administration	Arab	53	F
16	Anastasia	Mid-stage	Senior Academic	Education	White Irish	54	F
17	Arham	Writing up	CEO	Public Administration	Arab	42	M
18	Gregory	Writing up	Senior Executive	Transport	Other White	43	M
19	An	Mid-stage	Senior Academic	Manufacturing	Other Asian	36	M
20	Zabee	Writing up	Senior Manager	Health	Arab	49	F
21	Tamiz	Mid-stage	Senior Manager	Public Administration	Arab	44	M
22	Siobhan	Early stage	Senior Academic	Education	White British	56	F
23	Marcus	Early stage	Senior Academic	Education	White British	38	M
24	Haba	Mid-stage	Senior Manager	Information & Communication	Arab	48	M
25	Graham	Early stage	Senior Manager	Education	White British	46	M
26	Sylvia	Alumni	Director	Health	White British	60	F
27	Simon	Mid-stage	Senior Academic	Education	White British	53	M
28	Meera	Alumni	Senior Academic	Education	Other White	55	F
29	Terrance	Alumni	Senior Academic	Education	White British	60	M
30	Ethan	Alumni	Consultant	Education	White Irish	52	M
31	Skylar	Mid-stage	Director	Recreation	Other White	48	M
32	Ryder	Alumni	Senior Executive	Finance	Other White	56	M
33	Rowan	Alumni	Senior Executive	Finance	Other White	50	M
34	David	Mid-stage	Senior Manager	Public Administration	Arab	50	M
35	Dylan	Alumni	Senior Executive	Manufacturing	White British	56	M

more rigorous, analytical approach (Gibbs, 2018). This was particularly important, for example, when categorizing the different emotions as either primary or secondary. As Bericat (2016) notes, emotions are complex, transmutable (i.e. shame can become anger, etc.) and can exist in families (e.g. anger can range from annoyance to indignation, rage, fury, etc.).

We then revisited the literature to identify theoretical constructs which could help explain our findings emerging from the data. This led to identifying second-order codes, that is, first-order codes grouped according to theoretical categories (Walsh and Bartunek, 2011). The final stage of analysis involved organizing the second-order codes into aggregate dimensions (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2012) relating to the crucibles themselves (including the triggers and the emotional responses they caused) and the resolution of these crucibles. In line with other qualitative identity research (see e.g. Brown, Lewis and Oliver, 2021), we looked for commonalities across individual accounts. Table 2 provides evidence of concepts derived from our analysis.

Figure 1 shows the data structure derived from the analysis.

Findings

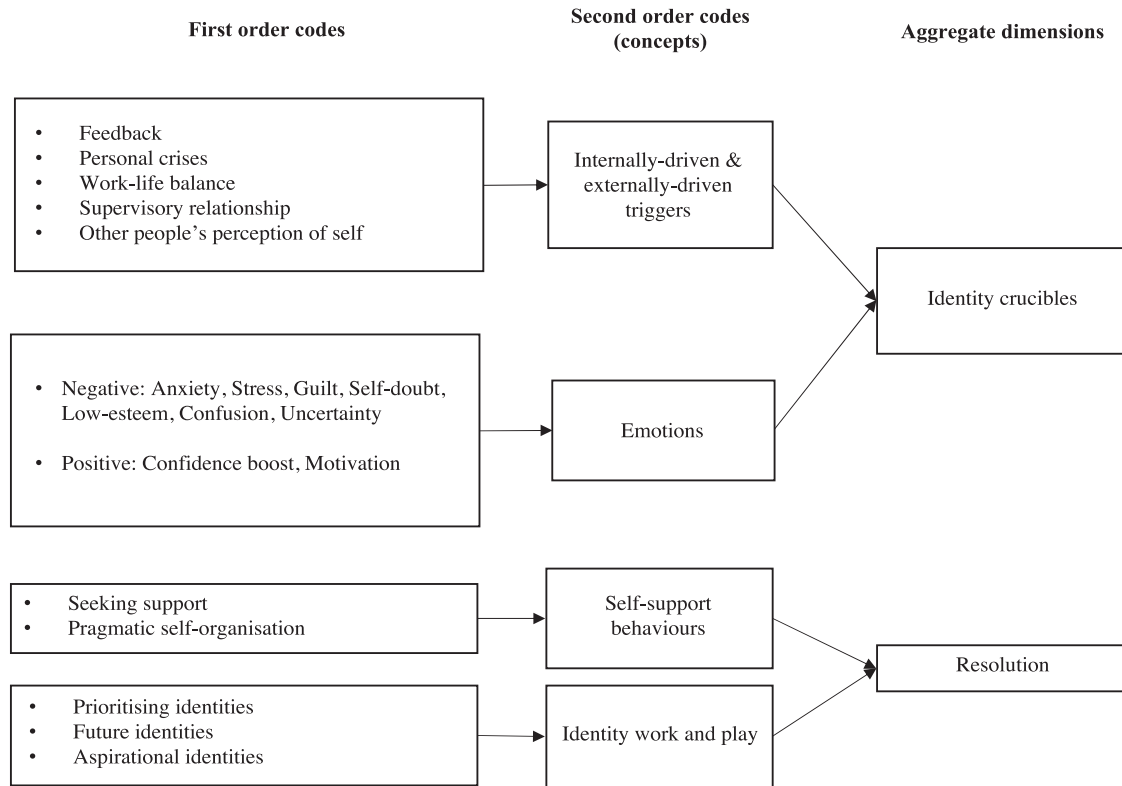
All the interviewees experienced triggers and identity crucibles at various stages during their DBA studies. No significant, generalizable patterns emerged in the data based on participants' age, ethnicity, job role, gender or stage in their study. However, these factors influence identity work at an individual level throughout a person's life, but with different intersections and thus differing impacts. Triggers and identity crucibles were linked to their multiple identities reflecting their life stage (as parents, carers, etc.) and the fact that they were all very senior, successful professionals established in their careers. The findings also indicate that the students did not see themselves as moving between different roles, nor do they see themselves as 'change agents' in a fixed institutional setting (Creed, DeJordy and Lok, 2010, p. 1337).

Table 2. Evidence of concepts

Concepts (second-order codes)	Representative quotations in the data (first-order codes)
Internally driven and externally driven triggers	<p>Feedback And he has shown me and with a lot of patience he has told me I mean this document is good, these are the good parts but it lacks this or there is a lot of that and this means a learning process. (Jon)</p> <p>Personal crises Now, there were some personal health issues, but mainly my wife's illness and subsequent death. (Greg)</p> <p>Work–life balance I do not want the DBA to take over and my research to take over to the detriment of other areas that I'm doing. And so that balance, work–life balance, has got to continue. (Skylar)</p> <p>Supervisory relationship I unfortunately had at one stage a particular supervisor who was quite biting in his comments, and I did not have a good relationship with him. (Ethan)</p> <p>Other people's perception of self Even my colleagues used to say that after 1 year or 2 years on the programme, they are speaking to an entirely different person. (Maaz)</p>
Emotions	<p>Negative <i>Anxiety</i>: I eat, drink and sleep it, I struggled terribly with it. I think because I doubted myself so much. (Anastasia) <i>Stress</i>: And at some point, there were so many demands within my work which I could not delegate and so many other things happening. (Abigail) <i>Guilt</i>: It makes me feel sometimes... I feel guilty because I leave my family alone. (Ivan) <i>Self-doubt</i>: I'm having an issue – a crisis with confidence at the moment in that you know, why did I do this? Why have I set out to do this? I am not capable of doing this. I'm having an issue – a crisis with confidence at the moment in that you know, why did I do this? (Siobhan) <i>Low esteem</i>: And I would say I would strongly recommend that those kind of supervisors be extremely careful in the damaging effect they could have on a person's self-image. (Ethan) <i>Confusion</i>: I was the student and I acted like a student... I was confused as a student. (Paul) <i>Uncertainty</i>: My dislike of the job and then on the horizon seeing what my life is going to be like over the next four or five decades. What do I want to do for four or five decades? What job do I want to do? (Meera)</p> <p>Positive <i>Confidence boost</i>: Well, it's a value that adds to you in the society that, okay, people regard you as a person who has achieved the highest level of education because doctorate is the highest level of education that anyone can achieve. (Maaz) <i>Motivation</i>: Dr XX signalled that he was interested in my progress, and I relied on those signals. (Ryder)</p>
Self-support behaviours	<p>Seeking support So her [another student] journey was just a little ahead of me, so she could kind of give me, you know, support and advice. (Meera)</p> <p>Pragmatic self-organization Planning, planning. For example, I finish work at 5, so I decided that every day when I finish work from 5 to 7-ish, for 2 hours, I really need to do reading or writing or doing anything related to my studies. This is in the normal days when I don't have any assignment or whatsoever. Of course, from that time, I increase the hours, but in general, I spend like 2 hours a day in reading and whatever. And at the weekend, I increase it to 4 hours per day. (Haba)</p>
Identity work and play	<p>Prioritizing identities I cannot be tired for flying. And I have to find available time to study. And I have to find available time for my family as well. (Gregory)</p> <p>Future identities So, the doctor status is important, and I think it will certainly help me with having that Dr title in front of my name to assert myself and professionalize a little better and assert myself better in my professional life. (Marcus)</p> <p>Aspirational identities I said originally there's an element of it being a vanity project, and I actually wanted to be a doctor. (Terrance)</p>

Rather, they describe accommodating different identities (through identity work and play) to navigate identity crucibles throughout their studies. Instead of transitioning from one identity to another, we argue that these students learn to prioritize different identities as needed.

This next section explores the triggers and identity crucibles and how the interviewees attempted to resolve these identity challenges. Although the triggers and crucibles were conceptually distinct, in narrating their stories, the participants tended to move between the two and reflect on the emotions experienced at the time.



Findings

Figure 1. Data structure

Therefore, in analysing the participants' experiences, we have not separated the triggers from the identity crucibles, as this would have led to a very disjointed presentation of the findings.

Triggers and identity crucibles

It is important to note that different individuals may react to and experience the same trigger differently; however, it is vital to understand what constitutes a trigger, an identity crucible and what responses these might elicit. In our interviews, we identified triggers that lead to crucibles that, for some individuals, engendered identity challenges they needed to navigate. For example, Sylvia described a liminal period during her studies where she felt between temporal identity positions, and she struggled because, as she put it, 'You are not what you were, but you are not what you are going to be yet'.

Interviewees described experiencing crucibles as identity struggles related to their different identities, forcing them to reflect on how they see themselves. These crucibles were triggered internally, while others were triggered by externally driven perceptions of self, such as an interaction with their supervisors. Nevertheless, in all cases, the outcome still resulted in internal identity work accompanied by emotions. 'Depending on

whether identity work is socially constituted as an opportunity or a threat, the associated emotions will receive a positive or a negative connotation' (Winkler, 2016, p. 2). These emotions can range from fear, shame, pain, anger (Creed, DeJordy and Lok, 2010) through to happiness (Koerner, 2014) and can vary in intensity and be considered primary or secondary (Bericat, 2016). The crucibles differed in size, duration, intensity and frequency and were not always perceived negatively. The findings suggest that the participants' identities were fluid, multiple and shifting, depending on the context in which they found themselves.

Crucibles triggered by feedback. Most interviewees recounted incidents where they had a crisis of confidence triggered by negative feedback. For example, Sylvia, a middle-aged DBA alumna reflecting on supervisory comments on her first assignment, explained:

So, I panicked because I didn't have confidence in my own ability... so, I kind of had the self-doubt of, oh my gosh, do I really think I'm capable of doing this?

Almost all interviewees struggled with finding their academic voice, leading to a crisis of confidence and an identity crucible in which they questioned their ability to become a doctor. They described the difficulties of

learning to write academically and how this made them feel uncertain, confused and anxious. Ivan, a senior financier, explained how he feared his work would never reach the right standard:

The most challenging aspect is... the academic writing style because this is new for me because I did not use it [in] my professional life.

Conversely, Sylvia had a positive crucible moment triggered by feedback on her second assessment. She explained that her supervisors said she had 'turned a corner'. Reflecting on this, she said, 'I could feel it, I could feel it in myself'.

Crucibles triggered by personal crises. Interviewees identified triggers caused by personal crises, some of which were enduring, such as bereavement, illness and divorce, linked to their life stage. For instance, Claudette explained how she had experienced more than one identity crucible in quick succession as she took on family responsibilities. Her father passed away during her course, and she became ill with glandular fever. She feared that she might not complete her studies, creating tension between her student identity position and her identity position as a grieving daughter (Brown, 2021). She said:

I started to panic because all of these things that were happening... they were all personal things and I thought... they're going to prevent me from doing the DBA.

Sylvia told us about her son being admitted to hospital and recalled how 'we nearly lost him'. During this time, she explained that she 'wasn't in a good place' but still attended a DBA workshop during which she had a crisis of self and broke down because she felt like she had 'no idea what I am doing'.

Crucibles triggered by work-life balance. The interviewees recounted triggers associated with work-life balance issues that created crucible moments for them. These issues were not gender-related and were experienced by both male and female participants. A common theme was the ongoing challenge of balancing their DBA studies with work and non-work commitments and maintaining a coherent sense of self in the face of competing priorities. Haba, in his mid-forties and working in telecommunications, told us how stressful it was for him to manage his different commitments:

Doing doctorate level study requires you to be engaged fully in reading, writing and whatever. I find that a bit challenging to balance the efforts.

Similarly, Anastasia, a married mother and senior academic, described the conflict she faced trying to accommodate the work-life balance pressures associated with her professional identity, her identity as a student and her other non-work-related identities. She explained:

The negatives are what happens when you go home... I have lots of problems with reconciling my workload and making time for the DBA.

Terrance, an academic approaching retirement, reflected on the time pressures created by work and DBA commitments and questioned whether he needed a doctorate at his career stage. This was an intense identity crucible for him as he explained how he questioned his judgement regarding the value of a higher degree for someone whose identity was about to change to a 'retiree':

I think for the sacrifice I made, it's not worth it... I felt I was coming towards the end of my career... it took much longer than I thought, I started thinking what's the point of me doing this?

Another participant, Paul, a CEO, described how, at one point, his identity as a husband triggered a conflict with his student identity due to continuous pressure from his wife. This conflict made Paul feel guilty and anxious as he reflected on this:

I was spending a lot of weekends working on the DBA. I don't have more excuses, especially to my wife, who is completely fed up.

Crucibles triggered by the supervisory relationship. Supervisory relationships were the source of many crucibles (both positive and negative) exacerbated by the length of the DBA, the heavy dependence on supervisors' support and the identity of 'student', which is inherently lower status than that of a senior manager and/or their supervisors. Despite being a senior academic, Meera explained how different perceptions of her project made her reflect anxiously on her identity as both a student and someone who had taught in higher education for many years:

He had a very different take on what I should be doing... so it really threw me. It really depressed me and upset me.

Similarly, Sylvia, a director in healthcare, recounted how she had 'a really tough time with my supervisors' in relation to defining her topic. She recalled how she 'couldn't understand his language, and I couldn't make him understand mine, and I felt like it was them against me. It was really difficult'.

Helen, a middle-aged mother, encapsulated the challenge triggered by receiving negative supervisor feedback. She reflected on the conflict between her powerful senior manager identity position and her perceived subordinate student identity position as a DBA student. This was exemplified by her interactions with her supervisors, which, although initially negative, ultimately strengthened her resolve:

In the manager's position, you may think 'oh, I am the best, everyone has to listen to me (laughs)', but now when I think I have contributed the best of myself and my supervisor

says, 'No, that is not okay'... I have to learn to accept it and to build up from this point.

Crucibles triggered by other people's perceptions of self. Trying to maintain a coherent sense of self led to struggles for the interviewees, triggered by inconsistencies between how they viewed themselves and how other people saw them. Reconciling the identity position of a DBA student when mixing with 'ordinary' people who did not know academia was a challenge for Ethan. He explained:

Imagine me going into a pub... I start talking to the person beside me and say, 'Would you like to hear about my DBA journey?' I think they'd probably think I'd had some sort of mental breakdown.

Interestingly, DBA students employed in academia still experienced crucibles triggered by others' perceptions of their abilities in an academic setting. For instance, Anastasia explained how, as a senior lecturer, she felt the discomfort of 'unknowingness' (Hay, 2022) as she was expected to know more about the academic content than the non-academic students in her cohort. This always made her feel uncomfortable:

When you're already in academia... everybody feels that you should know it already, and you don't.

In contrast, Simon, also a senior academic, reflected on his first DBA workshop, delivered by an academic colleague who greeted him by saying, 'How the hell did you get in here?'. Rather than being offended by this implied criticism of his intellectual competence, Simon explained how this created a positive identity crucible for him as he laughingly told us this further incentivized him to become a doctor. He said, 'That's fine. Guess what? That motivates me even more'.

Resolution

In seeking a resolution to crucibles, interviewees engaged in two types of behaviour: 'self-support behaviour', such as actively seeking help from others; and 'identity work and play', such as attempts to prioritize identities and imagine future and aspirational selves.

Resolution through seeking support. Some interviewees resolved their identity struggles by forming learning support sets. Sylvia, who, in her words, 'did not have particularly good schooling', explained:

We continued our action learning set... we still meet now... they never made me feel like I was any less intelligent than them.

For some students, informal student networks offered identification and continuity, giving them a sense of belonging and acceptance. Meera, who struggled throughout her DBA, explained how other students helped her

work through periods of self-doubt related to her student identity, reinforcing how identity work does not occur in isolation:

I felt so useless... like I didn't know what I was doing... all the worries, all the stresses? One of them [another DBA student] was a bit further along than me... so she could kind of give me... support and advice.

Another important source of support in overcoming identity challenges was previous students. Abigail explained how she struggled to accommodate the demands of her identity as a senior manager and student. In looking to reconcile these conflicts, she stated:

I have also former students... here in Zimbabwe who have also supported me... reviewing my documents and seeing what I have put together.

Interviewees described how they sought other forms of practical help in prioritizing different identities, such as from administrative or course leader support. Most interviewees stated that their key source of guidance came from their supervisors. Maaz, who was globally mobile for work, explained how he sought advice from his supervisors to help him balance his identities as a senior manager and student when relocating again to another country:

I'm trying to maintain constant communication with [my supervisor] to see how can we overcome this situation? Should I maybe... suspend it for a couple of months... until it's at least settled in Denmark and then continue again, or what will be the other option?

Ethan, who had not been in education for many years, explained how he overcame the challenges with the help of his supervisors, who understood his identity struggles as a senior manager becoming a student again:

In terms of my self-image certainly both... supervisors were very conscious of the need to be supportive and to do criticism in a way that was very objective and not personalized.

Helen explained how her very experienced supervisor helped her navigate her identity challenges by providing psychological support:

She [supervisor] gave me a lot of motivation, and I think she's a big role model for me.

Fiona explained that her lifelong ambition was to get a doctorate. She told us how her supervisors helped her to resolve her identity conflicts in her DBA studies by helping her 'to understand what person I am'. They did this by allowing her to reconcile her different identities, encouraging her to apply for assignment extensions when needed and being responsive to her moments of self-doubt.

Dylan, a married expatriate with a young family working in the Middle East, shared how, when he confronted his most significant identity crucible, his wife assisted him in engaging in identity work that ultimately helped him overcome the challenge:

I was about to give it up. My wife said, 'you've come this far; just keep on doing it'.

Resolution through pragmatic self-organization. Interviewees explained their engagement in pragmatic self-organization as a way of attempting to manage identity crucibles. Ethan kept his diary up-to-date and used his project management skills to regulate his student and work identities. He recounted how he learned to tackle the tasks he did not relish at first, saying:

Mark Twain said one time, 'Before you start your day eat a frog', and if you can eat a frog, you can do anything after that.

Other students dealt with workload challenges associated with being a senior manager with a full-time job and studying. Graham, an expatriate senior manager and part-time lecturer, relayed how marking demands led him to prioritize his work identity by taking his 'foot off the DBA pedal'. Another approach was restricting additional activities that individuals would have typically engaged in at work. Terrance explained how he changed 'as little as possible' in his life and did not apply for promotion to prioritize his student identity. Meera prioritized her student identity by going part-time:

I had to take a salary cut and go down to three days a week in order to get it done.

Sometimes, however, the identity and workload challenges were too great. Greg explained how the biggest challenge was balancing identities and the impact this had on his 'own management of time'. This challenge recurred throughout Greg's studies and became a series of identity crucibles he overcame by exiting the programme.

Resolution through prioritizing identities. Interviewees undertook identity work by prioritizing one identity over another throughout the course. Most highlighted the challenges inherent in accommodating their work, home and student identities. Marcus, who was just starting his DBA studies, was already contemplating the impact his doctoral studies would have on his identity as a husband and father: 'I think I will see my children less. I will see my partner less'. He said he was resolved not to neglect his studies and intended to overcome this identity challenge by foregrounding his student identity.

Another interviewee, Helen, who had a young family and worked as a senior manager in public administration, explained how challenging it was for her to accom-

modate her different identities and how she had considered prioritizing work and family:

There are times when I am so tired... I might think of quitting this one [identity as a student] because I work and I have a family as well, so it's kind of hectic for me.

This prioritizing of identities extended beyond completing their doctoral studies. Terrance, an alumnus, told us that only sometimes did he prioritize his doctoral identity:

Most of the time people say Mr XX and I say 'yeah that's fine. Unless they really annoy me, in which case I say 'No, it's not. It's Dr XX'.

Ethan, also an alumnus, explained how the 'Dr' designation could be beneficial in certain situations where the power inherent in the title could be leveraged through interactions with others. Referring to themselves as 'Dr' would improve their credibility, leading to an ideal or better version of themselves, as he explained:

So how people see DBAs in Ireland... If you were going in to do some research for an organization, they're going to pay you because you have a DBA...

Resolution through playing with future and aspirational identities. Identity play could also be a form of resolution to the challenges experienced. Interviewees described 'playing' with their 'Dr' title since it was regarded as a future, aspirational and tangible sign of one's identity, but not necessarily guaranteed. When asked if he saw himself as an academic, Simon, a senior lecturer who was mid-stage in his doctoral studies, laughed and said, 'I don't. I don't think I ever will. I want to be!'

On the other hand, Marcus had failed to complete a PhD and described his DBA as 'a story of redemption'. He referred to how positive he would feel about his future identity if he could get his DBA and be accepted into what he called the 'community of scholars'.

Anastasia, whose partner had recently acquired his PhD, laughed as she imagined how becoming a doctor would mean that he 'won't be able to lord it over me anymore'. An had a more instrumental view on his future possible selves, saying the identity of Dr would be 'an asset, which you can choose when you want to use'.

Discussion

We responded to calls from critical management education scholars to investigate the lived experiences of doctoral students (Beauchamp, Jazvac-Martek and McAlpine, 2009; Lee, 2011) by examining the impact of pursuing a professional doctorate, specifically a DBA, on an individual's identity. Research tends to focus on PhD students or doctoral programmes more

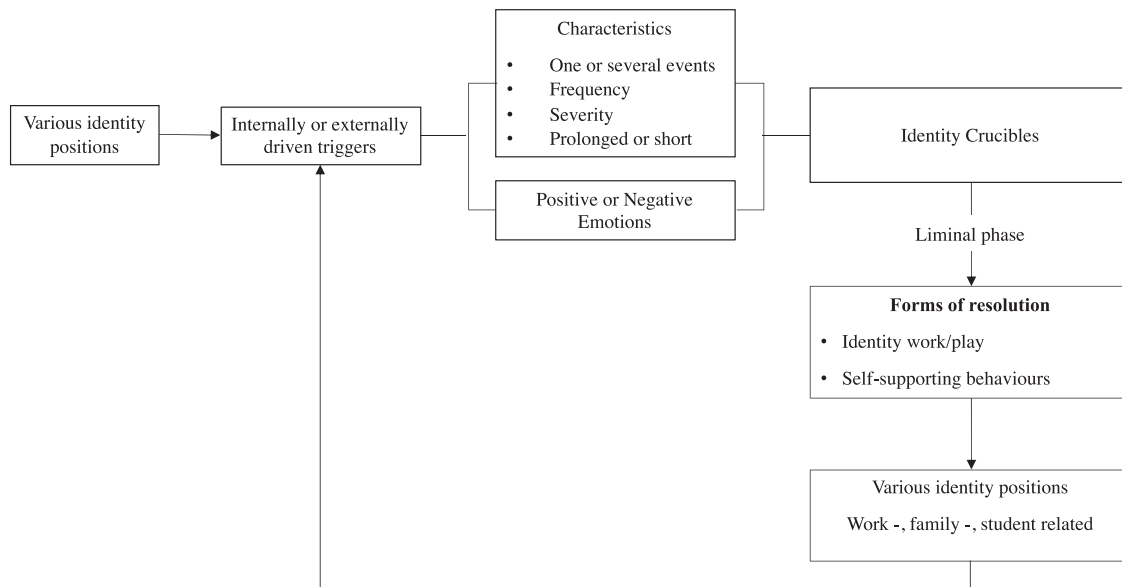


Figure 2. Identity work of a DBA student

generally, while our research centres on the individual effects of pursuing a DBA (Banerjee and Morley, 2013; Neumann, 2005). Our study explores identity work throughout the doctoral degree rather than focusing on the endpoint, where the goal is often seen as transforming individuals from expert practitioners into ‘researching professionals’ (Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2019).

We examine the triggers and the identity crucibles (Bennis and Thomas, 2002) experienced by DBA students. We investigate how students resolve these crucibles through self-support behaviours and identity work and play. Figure 2 illustrates that individuals commence the course with diverse identity positions, subsequently encountering triggers and crucibles (Barge, 2018; Byrne, Crossan and Seijts, 2018), leading to a liminal phase. Individuals then engage in various forms of resolution to shape future identity positions, which may or may not differ from their initial ones. Individuals may adopt multiple identity positions, and identity refinement and prioritization persist throughout the DBA programme.

Our study reveals various external and internal triggers, such as personal crises, feedback, work–life balance issues and supervisory relationships that may lead to identity conflicts. These factors create positive *or* negative emotions, leading to identity crucibles, unlike Hay and Samra-Fredericks (2016, p. 418), who argue that students only experience negative emotions or ‘monsters of doubt’. In contrast, we found that these emotions can be positive or negative and include primary emotions, such as fear, anger, depression, happiness, sadness or secondary (i.e. ‘socially and culturally conditioned’), for instance, guilt, shame, love, resentment and disappointment (Bericat, 2016). Crucibles can be initiated by mi-

nor and major events, be brief or prolonged, and occur once or multiple times during a student’s doctoral studies. The important point to note is that individuals may experience the same trigger in alternative ways, resulting in different identity crucibles and emotional responses. In short, triggers do not evoke consistent responses in terms of emotions or resolutions across all participants. However, regardless of this, it is important for educators to understand the nature and impact of triggers and identity crucibles on the student experience. Considering the senior status of DBA students, along with their life stage, they may encounter numerous triggers and crucibles. While Bennis and Thomas (2002) suggest that crucibles can be planned or emergent, our findings indicate that, for students, crucibles are typically triggered by unforeseen events and/or events that are foreseen, but in either case, the impact may be unanticipated. Crucibles are typically associated with negative but relational emotions that are experienced through interaction with others (Bericat, 2016), like anxiety and uncertainty. However, students occasionally recounted crucibles that positively impacted their self-perception.

This study supports the notion that identity crucibles can result from incidents or interactions, leading to a period of liminality (Beech, 2011) in which students experience conflicts in their identity or identities. Indeed, management learning has been conceptualized as a period of liminality (Hawkins and Edwards, 2013; Yip and Raelin, 2012), that is, of being betwixt and between states or identities (Beech, 2011).

The presence of multiple identity positions (e.g. student, senior manager, parent) can lead to identity struggles (Ashforth, Harrison and Corley, 2008) and internal conflict. This necessitates foregrounding one identity

position over another (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2006) as students attempt to accommodate shifting priorities during their doctoral studies. Hay and Samra-Fredericks (2016, p. 418) suggest that to do this, students temporarily suspend or 'bracket' identity work 'to fix a sense of coherence'. In contrast, we observed that students tended to prioritize and establish boundaries in relation to their various identities and associated identity work.

Our findings demonstrate that students employ a range of inwardly focused and relational tactics to navigate identity crucibles (Barge, 2018; Byrne, Crossan and Seijts, 2018; Watson, 2009). These include seeking support from others – referred to as scaffolding by Hay and Samra-Fredericks (2016) – using self-organization techniques, and engaging in identity work and, at times, identity play (Brown, 2021; Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016), some of which may be hindered or enhanced by organizational and institutional structures.

Practical implications

Our findings have implications for the design and delivery of DBA programmes. For instance, students should receive guidance on how to navigate their identity challenges reflexively. To some extent, programme-related 'triggers' could be incorporated into DBA programmes to encourage students to anticipate identity challenges. In doing so, they would learn to accept ambiguity and tolerate the disquiet that this may bring in line with the perspective of CME scholars (Knights, Huber and Longman, 2022), thereby normalizing the crucibles they may encounter. This could involve preparing students for potential setbacks, such as failing an assessed document. Additionally, students could be required to include a reflexive piece in each assessed document, reflecting on their identity challenges and how they resolved them during their studies. To ensure equity of student experience, DBA programmes must be designed to enable students to suspend their studies if and when required without detriment and to enable flexible delivery modes, such as hybrid online and in-person delivery, to accommodate work and personal commitments.

Given the predicted growth of DBAs globally (Kalika, 2023) and the DBA students' diverse life stages and elevated work status, supervisors need training to better understand their unique triggers and identity crucibles and how to support them through these. This form of mentoring involves getting to know the student 'as a person' by tailoring the doctoral process to each individual (Kumar and Johnson, 2019, p. 66), fostering trust-based relationships (Robertson, 2017). This can be reinforced by using scenarios in supervisory training to provide 'immersive experiences' (Osland *et al.*, 2023, n.p.), illustrating triggers and identity crucibles that students may encounter and ways to cope with these. Alumni and

supervisors could be invited to share their experiences resolving identity challenges during the training. This training, which goes beyond regulations, is crucial, as previous studies have emphasized the role of supervisors in ensuring successful student progression (Simpson and Sommer, 2016). Moreover, some supervisors' experience may be limited to PhD students, making them less attuned to the challenges faced by DBA students. Supervisors should also be encouraged to recognize the broader benefits of supervising DBA students, such as gaining access to empirical work and the opportunity to have a research impact beyond academia (Foster *et al.*, 2024).

Further, there are organizational implications for employers who sponsor DBA students. It is clear that there is a need to develop HR policies and practices that support flexible working and also accommodate different routes and timeframes for promotion for students engaged in doctoral education.

Conclusions and future research

Our research contributes to the critical management education literature by reappraising accepted concepts and questioning our own and others' assumptions (Hibbert, 2012) about DBA students' doctoral experiences (Hay, 2022). We contribute to identity theory by highlighting previously unidentified triggers and the diverse aspects of identity crucibles experienced by DBA students. We show how identity crucibles vary in length, frequency and severity, and are linked to emotional responses. The findings show that identity work during a DBA programme is not linear. Instead, students oscillate between different identity positions related to work, home and study. This aspect has been overlooked in the work on DBA students in the management education literature and in identity studies. Furthermore, the assumption that DBA students aspire solely to become reflective practitioners or practitioner-scholars (Tenkasi, 2011) tends to prevail. Significantly, our study challenges this assumption, suggesting that DBA students do not all aspire to the same identity position(s) upon completing their DBA studies. Therefore, we question the assumption that all doctoral students undergo a linear transition towards becoming more academic (Banerjee and Morley, 2013) or aspiring to become more academic. We also reveal the diverse range of identity positions that DBA students may hold, highlighting the complexity and challenges of their identity work.

Our study has limitations, as it is based on a single UK DBA programme, which may restrict its applicability to other programmes and countries. Nonetheless, the programme's characteristics are common in many DBA programmes, suggesting that our findings may be applicable more broadly. Indeed, the findings may offer useful insights for those running programmes for

students with a similar profile, for example, studying part-time whilst working in a senior position. In addition, the notion of triggers, identity crucibles and resolutions may prove relevant in other educational contexts, albeit they may differ. We also acknowledge that the interviews were collected through different modes, which may have impacted how the participants responded to the interviewer (Hoebel *et al.*, 2014; Żadkowska *et al.*, 2022). However, adopting this approach meant that we could capture the experiences of participants based overseas, which, if we had used in-person face-to-face interviews only, would have been extremely difficult to do. Further, a different research approach, such as quantitatively tracking the intensity or duration of discussions around identity crucibles, might yield additional insights. Lastly, a more in-depth study on work–life balance issues might reveal more specific dynamics beyond caring responsibilities, for example. Future research could also explore identity work and crucibles in other DBA samples and investigate supervisors' perspectives on supporting DBA students.

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