# 'Jugglers', 'copers' and 'strugglers': academics' perceptions of being a head of department in a post-1992 UK university and how it influences their future careers

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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**'Jugglers', 'copers' and 'strugglers': Academics' perceptions of being a head of department in a post-1992 UK university and how it influences their future careers**

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**Abstract**

This study investigates the experiences of academics who became department heads in a post-1992 UK University and explores the influence that being in the position has on the planned future academic career. Drawing on life history interviews undertaken with 17 male and female heads of department, the paper constitutes an in-depth study of their careers in the same University. The findings suggest that academics who become department heads not only need the capacity to assume a range of personal and professional identities, but need flexibility to regularly adopt and switch between them. Whether individuals can successfully balance and manage such multiple identities, or whether they experience major conflicts within or between them, greatly affects their experiences of being a head of department and seems to influence their subsequent career decisions. The paper concludes by proposing a conceptual framework and typology to interpret the career trajectories of academics who became department heads in the case University.

**Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is firstly, to investigate the experiences of academics who become university department heads in a selected UK University and secondly, to explore their perceptions of how being in the role influences their future career plans. The paper draws on data from life history interviews with 17 male and female department heads from a range of disciplines, in a post-1992 UK university undertaken as part of a larger study (Floyd, 2009).

Over the past four decades in the UK and elsewhere, university leadership and management practices and the accompanying culture of higher education institutions have changed towards managerialist practices enforced by government and university funding bodies (Deem, 2004; Winter, 2009). Among the drivers of these changes have been the large increase in student numbers, a more academically diverse student body, an increase in the use of staff on fixed term contracts for both teaching and research, an increase in bureaucracy, and above all, an increase in both market and government accountability (Collinson, 2004; Henkel, 2002; Knight & Trowler, 2000; Nixon, 1996). These change forces have significantly impacted on university leadership and management at all levels, including that of department head.

Although the role of the academic head of department has always been important to university management and performance (Middlehurst, 1993; Smith, 2002), the policy and culture shifts outlined above have greatly elevated the importance of this position, with the department head now taking on more strategic roles within their organisations (Hancock & Hellawell, 2003). Changes in student and research funding, the increasing importance of the Research Assessment Exercise (now termed the Research Excellence Framework), and greater accountability for the quality of teaching have resulted in the head of department being placed firmly at the centre of university management procedures (Bolton, 2000; Knight & Trowler, 2001). Concurring with this view, Bryman (2007, p. 694) argues that the

university department 'represents a crucial unit of analysis in universities' and that it is 'the chief springboard for the organisation's main teaching and research activities'.

Previous research has suggested that as academics move into head of department roles, they require different skills sets, values and knowledge (Bolton, 2000; Knight & Trowler, 2001). Issues also arise as to how they manage their combined functions and roles of teaching, supervision and research on the one hand and leadership and management of the department on the other (Smith, 2002, 2005). A key ESRC funded research project (Deem, 2000) found that UK academics who assume department leadership roles experience higher workloads and longer hours than in the past due to the increasing pressures of accountability. As a result, research output, seen as a crucial part of an academic's ability to progress (Court, 1999), may suffer. A reduced research profile may have implications for an academic's ability to make career progress in the future. Undeniably, some academics who become department heads struggle to accept the 'unwanted interruption' to their research careers (Henkel, 2002, p. 36), but the evidence base is insubstantial on whether and how this phenomenon affects department heads in pre-1992 universities, where the role is often rotated around members of the department, and in post-1992 institutions, where the role is often permanent (Smith, 2005). This study provides evidence on this question from the perspective of department heads in a post-1992 University.

Changes to the role and position of UK department heads have been driven in recent years by both external pressures, such as those influenced by government and university funding bodies, and internal university forces, all of which may affect the career trajectories of academics. Among the internal university forces affecting career trajectories are - gender, age, organisational culture, academic discipline – their status and their generation of university income,  and size of department (Deem, 2003a, 2003b; Karp, 1985; Smith, 2005; Twombly, 1998; Ward, 2001). The range and magnitude of the internal factors mean that

although one might expect department heads working in the same university to have similar experiences and career paths, there may in fact be considerable differences, even within the same School and certainly between Schools, in the same university. Conceivably, even within the same university, department heads may encounter very different experiences and problems, successes and failures, with subsequent repercussions for their careers and career trajectories. These differential experiences, some of which may influence their subsequent career paths, are likely to be due to more than personal abilities and dispositions; it is possible that they are also the result of internal organisational politics, and status and financial differences between departments and schools. It is the prospect of such variance across heads of department in the *same* university that justifies the present study. Hitherto, investigation has tended to focus on department heads across different universities, highlighting some of their differences in terms of the role in general (see for example, Deem 2000; Smith, 2005). In contrast, the present study focuses on academic heads of department within one post-1992 University in order to investigate the range of experiences *within* a university. In this respect, the study was guided by the research question - To what extent do perspectives and experiences of department subject heads across the University converge and diverge?

Following this introduction, the paper is structured in four main sections. First, the theoretical framework underpinning the study is outlined. Second, the context of the case study institution is given along with a description of the participants. Third, the findings are discussed thematically and finally, the implications of the findings are explored.


**Theoretical framework**

In order to generate new theoretical insights into the career trajectories of university heads of department, the study from which the data presented in this paper is drawn is built on three

key concepts - socialisation, identity and career trajectory. 'Socialisation' is the learning process by which an individual comes to be part of a particular society, gaining an awareness of the social norms, values and cultural capital of that society (Giddens, 2006). 'Identity' is how we perceive ourselves, our self-image in relation to specific contexts and roles in life and work (Giddens, 1991). Personal identity relates to how a person sees the private informal self; professional identity derives from their self-perception, their self-image, and their self-efficacy in relation to their work and career (Knight & Trowler, 2001). According to Clegg (2008, p. 329), an individual's identity as an academic does not exist in isolation but '…exists alongside other aspects of how people understand their personhood and ways of being in the world.' Moreover, these identities are fluid and continually changing (Jenkins, 2004). 'Career trajectory' refers to the historical sequence of past, present, and possible or intended future, roles and positions. Ball and Goodson (1985) distinguish two components of career trajectory – an objective, social element, influenced by economic and political conditions, and a subjective element, as seen and influenced by the individual. Developing this notion that careers are multi-faceted, Iellatchitch et al. (2003, p. 729) argue that '…careers are multi-level phenomena. Cutting across individual, group, organizational and societal levels, careers potentially influence all these levels and, in turn, are influenced by these levels.'

The nexus and interrelationships between all three of these concepts provide the analytical framework for this study. It is argued that organisational, professional and personal socialisation experiences help to form identities and self-images (Giddens, 2006; Jenkins, 2004). This means that for academics as for others, identities are constructed through experiences of family, schooling, university, and employment and the associated cultural expectations learned through these experiences. Furthermore, academics may experience multiple and changing identities as they move through their career path. Assuming different roles within an organisation or between different organisations means an academic is likely to

be subjected to new socialisation experiences that in turn may lead to existing professional identities being lost or suppressed, and possible new identities formed (Henkel, 2002; Parker, 2004). Thus, a person's core values, cultivated and developed around becoming and being an academic, may be tested as they experience different job roles within one or several different institutions.

Recently, it has been argued that the growing rise of managerialism in the HE sector has led to an 'identity schism' in the academic workplace between those who manage, and those who are managed, in relation to personal and organisational values (Winter, 2009). This may well mean that conflicts arise as academics struggle to balance different and multiple identities within and between home and work. While the above argument is generally well rehearsed, this study sought to apply the concept of 'identity' and its affiliated concepts as a heuristic analytical aid to academics in the case University who became department heads.

*Academic career capital.*

In addition to the conceptual framework introduced above, this paper draws on Bourdieu's ideas (1984, 1988, 1998) in order to explore academics' perceptions of how the head of department role influences their future career plans. Applying Bourdieu's concepts of *field* and *capital,* academics may be conceptualised as developing their careers within a career field and its associated cultural norms and rules, and that each career field values particular sorts of capital (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Iellatchitch, et al., 2003). For academics, valued capital normally relates to qualifications and research outputs (Court, 1999). The more valued the capital someone is judged to have, the more successful his or her career development might expectedly be. The data from this study gives rise to the notion of academic career capital with both *internal* aspects – linked to a person's job role, internal networks and associated standing within the institution in which they work, and *external* aspects – linked to

their research outputs, conference presentations and external networks. Thus individuals may develop - by virtue of their position and their abilities and proclivities - both internal and external academic career capital. While exercising caution in over-generalising, the evidence from the present study is that external academic capital is valued as more important for career progression, particularly if an academic wants to move to another institution. However, the data also suggests that because of time pressures linked to the administrative duties of being in the role, academics who become department heads may be stultified in developing their external academic career capital, thereby reducing their chances of future career success outside of the institution within which they work. This notion is developed later in this paper.

**The case university context and participants**

The institution chosen to be the case study was a post-1992 university (ex polytechnic). As such it demonstrates many of the features that are typical of its type within the university sector in the current UK higher education climate:

1. It is primarily a teaching focused university with ambitions to increase its research capacity and reputation;

2. It has a large and academically diverse student body, which has substantially increased in recent years;

3. It has a large number of department heads in place across the range of academic Schools, each with a different working culture and set of practices;

4. Most head of department appointments across the University are permanent, although there are some schools where department heads are appointed on a rotational basis.

In total, edited life history interviews were undertaken with seven male and 10 female heads of department, with participants' ages ranging from 41 to 62 years. Nine participants were heading departments in the social sciences, four were in the natural sciences and four in arts and humanities. Although these numbers appear to favour social science subjects, this spread reflects the structural, organisational and academic emphasis of the case University. A profile of the participants, using pseudonyms, is presented below in table 1.

**Table 1 Profile of the Participants**

| Name | Gender | Age | Discipline | PhD |
|------|--------|-----|-----------|-----|
| Alex | M | 53 | Social Sciences | No |
| Harry | M | 62 | Social Sciences | Yes |
| Hannah | F | 41 | Arts and Humanities | No |
| Gary | M | 55 | Arts and Humanities | Yes |
| Maria | F | 59 | Social Sciences | Yes |
| Sheila | F | 54 | Social Sciences | Yes |
| Donna | F | 53 | Social Sciences | No |
| Michael | M | 45 | Arts and Humanities | Yes |
| Miranda | F | 43 | Arts and Humanities | Yes |
| Helen | F | 57 | Social Sciences | Yes (Prof) |
| Chris | M | 61 | Natural Sciences | Yes |
| Clive | M | 53 | Natural Sciences | Yes (Prof) |
| Wendy | F | 48 | Social Sciences | No |
| Michelle | F | 49 | Natural Sciences | Yes (Prof) |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rebecca | F | 40 | Natural Sciences | Yes |
| Elizabeth | F | 45 | Social Sciences | Yes |
| David | M | 54 | Social Sciences | Yes |

**Balancing identities**

The data from this study reveal that, through experiencing different socialisation experiences, heads of department develop multiple professional and personal identities, each with their own expectations of role behaviour. Multiple identities appear to exist *within* a role, such as being both a researcher and manager as a department head, as well as multiple identities *between* roles, for example, being a mother and an academic and individuals experience and cope with these multiple identities in different ways. If there is a major conflict between these identities, or one is seen as more important than another, this may lead to a 'turning point' and a decision that affects a person's career trajectory (Floyd, forthcoming ).

Eight respondents claimed that becoming a head of department had negatively affected their personal life. Maria, for example, reflected that since taking on management roles, she did not have much time for herself and felt that even holiday experiences had changed:

> I think the more responsibility I have had, the more I have had to work just in order to manage not to go under…Before I took on any kind of management responsibility, I had holidays. I still have holidays, but not in the same kind of way. I had more holidays, I had more time off, I had more time to do other things entirely.  Now my whole life seems to be dominated by work really, and I'm not sure that's very healthy. (Maria, 59, Social Sciences)

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Some of the respondents articulated strategies that they used to manage these conflicts they were experiencing between their personal and professional identities, particularly those respondents who disagreed with the values of the organisation, their school or their line managers. For Gary, these strategies included compartmentalisation, that is, a clear separation of his personal and professional lives. He tried to engineer separation between his job role and his home life, as the following comment illustrates:

> I am certainly much more inclined to differentiate kinds of activities in my life and put much stronger boundaries in place as I get older…I think about my job as increasingly separate from my identity as a human being. (Gary, 55, Arts and Humanities)

This separation allowed him to accept different values and to act out different identities in each of these two spheres of his life. However, this meant that comparisons were made between his personal life and identities and those associated with his work. Many procedures at work were 'tolerated' rather than agreed with, and he was buoyed by his home environment with which he felt more aligned, more in control and reflective of his personal beliefs and values. This in turn had forced him to evaluate the head of department role in terms of a cost benefit ratio of coping with the role conflicts, the outcome of which was his decision to continue in the position.

**The erosion of academic identity**

Eleven respondents identified a conflict between their initial reasons for entering higher education and the actual day-to-day reality of being a head of department. The conflict centred on an inability to do what they valued as core academic tasks, namely research and

teaching; having to do too many management tasks; and being moved away from their areas of interest.

Elizabeth, for instance, explained why she felt fraudulent in claiming still to be an academic, because she felt no longer had she the skills to keep up with developments in her subject which would enable her to serve her students effectively. She exclaimed:

I almost feel I can hardly do the student stuff now. I've just recently been viva-ing an MPhil and a PhD and even that was a struggle. This is not an academic job I am in. I am not on top of the debates any more. So, yes, I do have my postgraduate students and in the main, I can do them because they are pretty bread and butter stuff, but actually, the academic stuff is leaving me. (Elizabeth, 45, Social Sciences)

Similarly, Alex felt that he had been 'de-skilled' as an academic by becoming a head of department. Others, such as Wendy and Maria, mentioned how important it was to stay in touch with their subject discipline to maintain their academic identity, but because of the workload, this was becoming increasingly difficult. For Maria, 'keeping the academic side going' was important, as this was why she had entered academia in the first place and how she maintained her 'academic credibility'. For these participants, assuming the role of department head disallowed the maintenance of academic professional identity because of a lack of time to spend on core academic tasks. Their resultant experiences were frustration and identity conflict.

**What is valued as academic career capital?**

From the findings of this study, 11 out of 17 participants valued research activity above department leadership experience as the most important form of academic career capital within the UK higher education field in general. In this regard, nine respondents in this study,

including Hannah, suggested that since becoming a head of department, their research had suffered a serious decline and, paradoxically, as a consequence of taking on the role, so had (or would), their academic careers. These respondents clearly felt that conducting research activity, rather than developing a reputation as a departmental academic manager, was more important for academic identity and career progression. None of these participants were yet at professorial level, hence it is perhaps not surprising that they perceived research as more capable of influencing any possible future promotion than departmental leadership experience and responsibility. This view became even more pronounced when some argued that occupying the role of head of department would actually prevent them from developing their research profiles and would thus impede their academic careers. This reasoning was also set against the changing case University context, namely, one where the development of a publication record was becoming increasingly important for promotion and University positioning, as its culture switched from a previous teaching to a research focus.

In addition, some respondents, such as Michael, Harry, Maria and Gary, felt they had different internal and external professional identities according to their different academic tasks and roles which were, in turn, linked to perceived internal and external academic career capital. External identities, and their part in accumulating external academic career capital, were linked to research outputs and conference presentations, while internal identities, and their capacity to develop internal academic career capital, were linked to management roles and status within the case University. Michael, for example, realised that he had been developing his internal academic career capital within the institution by becoming a HoD and sitting on a variety of working parties and committees, but had not been developing his external academic career capital, valued in terms of current research activity: 'I've not been doing the networking and the conferences and the sort of research profile stuff that I probably should have been doing', he reflected.

Michael was also one of several respondents who were feeling anxious by the change in culture and emphasis towards research in post-1992 universities in the UK:

> I feel increasingly out of step with the whole climate of academia at the moment, as I feel it has become so excessively research driven. I mean I think that research is hugely important, but what I would like to see is a balance between research and teaching. I think it has become so excessively research driven that I don't feel entirely in step with that... (Michael, 45, Arts and Humanities)

Similar tensions have been found by Grbich (1998), who investigated the socialisation experiences of academic staff who had moved from a teaching only to a research and teaching environment in Australia. Her findings suggest that there was resistance to this culture change and those members of staff who actively resisted acquiring the skills, knowledge and profiles valued by the institutions studied, were targeted for possible redundancy or for teaching only positions with limited career pathways. Other research also suggests that promotion within higher education is greatly enhanced by research performance more than teaching (Roworth-Stokes & Perren, 2000). Moreover, of central relevance to this study, the conflicting relationship between teaching and research is particularly acute for staff taking on management roles within a university (Deem, 2000; Smith, 2002, 2005). Our study shows that some HoDs do not just experience a conflict between teaching and research, but also between administration and research. Thus, what is valued as academic career capital, both by an institution and by the higher education sector as a whole, and whether and how an individual can develop academic career capital by virtue of the head of department position, may significantly influence an academic's career trajectory. It seems that even in post-1992 universities in the UK, and even for academics occupying important middle level leadership positions, career advancement is influenced by the balancing of research, leadership and management, and teaching, with research performance playing a major part.

**Institutional loyalty**

Some participants, such as Sheila, were beginning to realise that they needed to be more selfish in order to survive, particularly as the case University was becoming more research focused. Such participants were consequently feeling a diminution in their institutional loyalty, while realising they had to look after themselves and their own professional development. As Sheila reflected:

> ... it just sounds ruthless but I've been driven to this realisation that I have to protect my own academic professional development because that is the only thing that matters in the end…institutions can do whatever they like, and they do, but in the end you only have what you've built up for yourself. (Sheila, 54, Social Sciences)

Similarly, after experiencing a number of re-organisations throughout his career, Gary felt that his professional loyalty now had to shift to his subject area, and not to the management structure of the School in which he worked:

> For better or worse, I have become sufficiently dislocated, disillusioned might be another way of putting it, with the school as an entity that frankly I am not wanting to spend much, if any, of my time engaged directly in its management for the sake of the school. It doesn't much matter to me whether the school exists or in what form it exists. What matters to me is that the work of my subject area is done and done well, done for the benefit of the students and the wider community. (Gary, 55, Arts and Humanities)

Both of the above examples show the painful realisation that, in line with modern career theory, 'firms no longer cause careers, individuals do' (Dany, 2003, p. 821), and it is up to individual academics to ensure that they develop what is valued as academic career capital. If they do not, continual re-structuring and re-organisation of higher education institutions could

mean that an academic who is in a position of relative power one day, is no longer in that position the next. With less institutional loyalty, and the notion that people develop more individually-focused career paths based on ideas of portfolio work and the 'boundaryless' career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), academics such as the participants in this study feel the need to ensure they maintain and develop their external profile and, in turn, their external academic career capital. Universities as organisations could and need to play their part by improving benefits for staff by providing enhanced professional development opportunities (Becker & Haunschild, 2003), especially for those who seem to sacrifice their personal research agendas for the welfare of running the department. As Hannah reflected:

> I find it difficult to be selfish and say I'm not going to do x y and z, I'm going to spend three weeks doing my research. But I'm getting to the point now where I'm going to have to do that. I'm going to have to do that if I'm going to survive in this place. And I really resent what the institution has done in that sense. And I feel there is a real lack of value…in people who've actually kept the audits going, the quality, all of that kind of basic, boring stuff that keeps the place going, that keeps students happy… all the detail…(Hannah, 41, Arts and Humanities)

**Enhancing influences on career**

In contrast to the perceived negative effect of department headship on academics' career trajectories, portrayed above, six of the respondents said they would use the experience as a springboard to actively seek promotion in the next few years, if an appropriate position became available. Three of these respondents, Elizabeth, Wendy and Alex, said they would like to be promoted to associate dean or dean level, but they conceded that this was likely to be within the case University. Elizabeth talked about how she would consider promotion, mainly for financial reasons:

If it was a step up and it was more money…I'm very extrinsically driven these days. It was intrinsic at one time, but actually if people are willing to pay me enough I am probably willing to do it…I could see myself doing another job in academic management. (Elizabeth, 45, Social Sciences)

For these individuals, taking on the role of head of department had enhanced their professional identity, and thus their internal academic career capital, as academic managers. They felt that being a department head contributed positively to their career trajectory in academic management and helped them gain a broader institutional profile (Henkel, 2002).

Two respondents who said they would actively apply for promotion, Rebecca and Miranda, stated that they would apply for research professorships rather than pursue administration type roles. They felt that the experiences of being a department head, along with their research records, would help them achieve this and that getting a chair at the case University or elsewhere was likely to be enhanced by being a head of department. These respondents felt that their socialisation experiences, learned through being a department head, made a positive contribution to their academic careers. One explanation for Miranda's view, in contrast to the other respondents, was that she had managed to agree with her dean that, at the end of three years in post, she would be given a sabbatical to allow her to 'catch up' on the research time she had lost as a head of department. Thus, following her experiences of being a department head, she would be able to develop her external career capital, and thus her external identity, through 'earned' study leave. This situation was an anomaly within the case University and was not part of management policy. Similarly, Rebecca had managed to secure a year's research sabbatical during her term as head of department and so had managed to keep up her research profile, therefore maintaining her external academic career capital while in the role.

**A threefold typology of department heads – 'Jugglers', 'Copers' and 'Strugglers'**
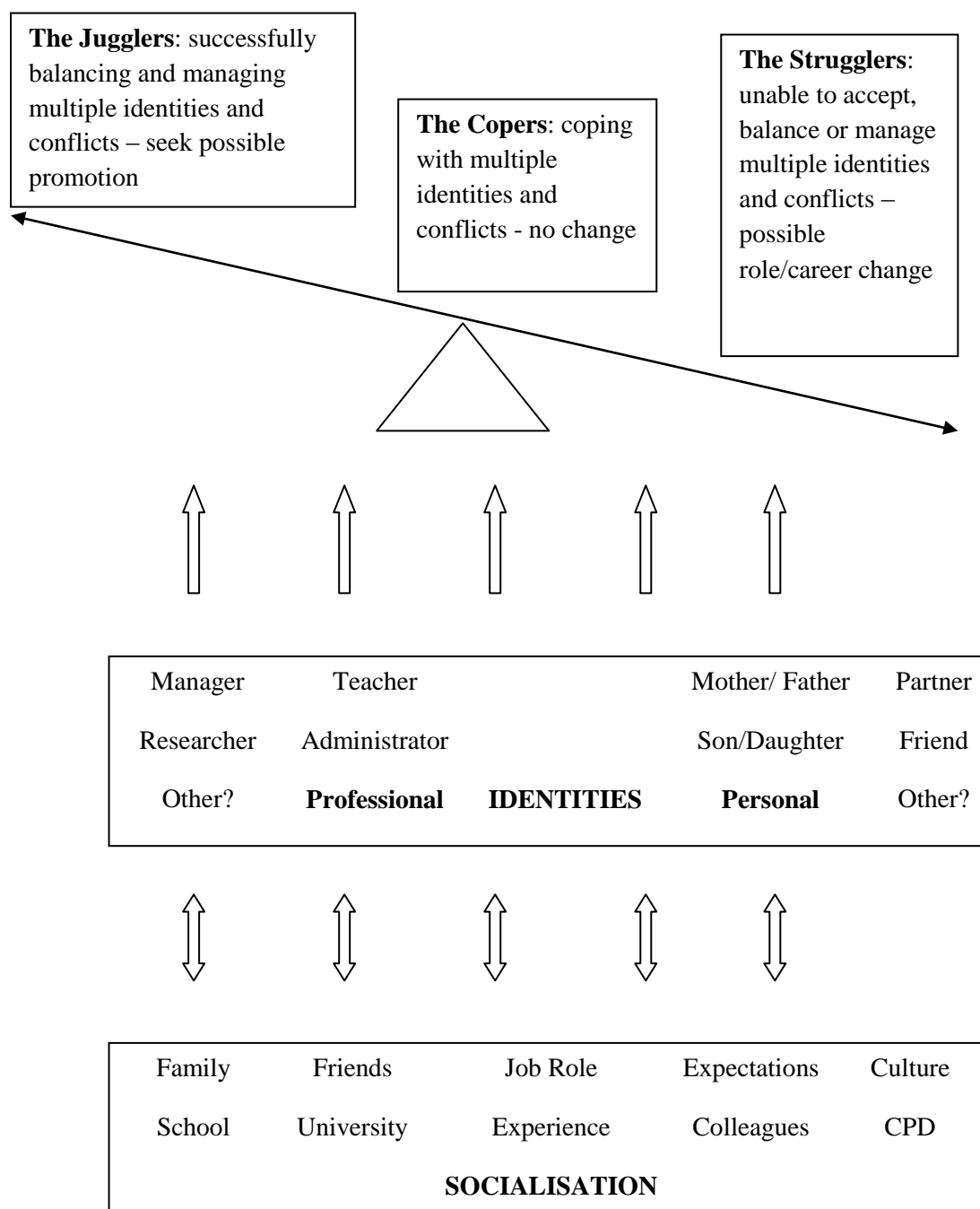
The findings from this study suggest that those academics who become heads of department and as a consequence see their careers shaped by the experience, develop a range of personal and professional identities that are formed and changed by socialisation experiences at home, in society and at work. As academics and department heads, they are challenged to adopt and switch between multiple identities. Whether individual department heads successfully balance and manage these often conflicting identities, or whether they fail to manage major conflicts within and between them, exerts a major influence on their views and experiences of being in the role, and ultimately their career progression plans. Those who are more capable of switching - and feel greater compatibility - between multiple identities, seem more likely to stay the course as department heads and to aspire and move on to higher positions. Inversely, those who find difficulty adopting and switching between multiple roles and identities, are more likely to revert back to their previous positions, to resign, change occupation or, if in an advanced stage of their career, to retire early.

In relation to respondents' capacities to balance and manage multiple identities as department heads, and in order to answer the question posed in the introduction - To what extent do perspectives and experiences of department subject heads across the case University converge and diverge? - data analysis revealed that each of the 17 respondents in the study can be 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 – these might aptly be termed 'the jugglers.' This group comprises Donna, Helen, Miranda, Clive, Elizabeth, Rebecca, and Michelle. A second group are those who were fully extended by, but could just about 'cope' with, and accept, the identity conflicts and differences – this group might be called 'the copers'. The group includes Michael, Alex, Garry, Maria, Chris, Wendy

and David. Finally, a third group found great difficulty in accepting, balancing and managing their identities and as a consequence, were reflecting on the possibility of leaving the head of department role. This group could be termed 'the strugglers' and is made up of Sheila, Harry and Hannah. The 'jugglers' tend to enjoy being head of department, with some even aspiring to higher and more senior level leadership and management positions in future. It seems that they felt they had the capacity to experience and manage a further range of professional identities. The 'copers' were determined to remain in the role, even though some of them, including David and Chris, did not appear to particularly enjoy being in the position. One of the main ways that these participants coped with their identity conflicts was by carefully and consciously separating their personal and professional lives. They had exhausted their capacity to accept any further changes to their professional identities. Finally, the 'strugglers' (Sheila, Harry and Hannah), who felt the head of department experience was too challenging, even unfulfilling and negative, 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 department head.

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 predominant group to a greater extent and to the other groups to a lesser extent, and that there is some fluidity in relation to group membership depending on situational circumstances. The threefold typology is 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 became department heads in the case University. It may have some transferability for researchers in other universities who might wish to replicate and develop this study.

**Figure 1 Career Trajectories and Typology of Academics who become Department Heads**

**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? | **Professional** | **IDENTITIES** | **Personal** | Other? |

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

**Implications**

With a small sample size - 17 department heads and the setting of one post-1992 UK university – it would be misleading to claim that the findings of this study are generalisable. Moreover, generalising would be out of kilter with the key epistemological tenets of interpretive research (Thomas & James, 2006). Nonetheless, these findings may be transferable to other department heads in similar university contexts, and may provide insights and understandings into the phenomenon of academics who become heads of department. As such, they '…serve as touchstones against which readers can play off their own reflections, realities and experiences' (Dimmock & O'Donoghue, 1996, p. 142),  and may help academics in similar contexts relate to, and perhaps gain an understanding of, their own and others' situations (Silverman, 2006). It is also hoped that a more thorough understanding of department heads' experiences will be useful for policy-makers, managers and researchers in the leadership and management of universities.

For the majority of respondents in this study, acting in ways and adopting practices that in effect developed external academic capital was crucial for career progression, particularly if they intended to rely on career progression by changing institutions, and that research activity was valued as the most important form of such capital.  Importantly, their general perception was that being a department head had been detrimental to, or restrictive of, accumulating such 'capital'. It has been argued elsewhere that there is a need for more strategically planned professional development and research support strategies in higher education, taking into account the academic's whole career (Gordon, 2005). Unquestionably, one way to improve the career opportunities for academics in the case University would be to ensure that academics who become department heads are given protected time (and research support) in order to continue with their research careers, as has been argued by Gmelch (2004) in the United States. A further idea to enhance the prospect of department heads

continuing with rather than curtailing their research activity, would be for the case University (and universities in general) to introduce the formal position of deputy head of department, with designated title, job description and appropriate financial reward. There is no doubt that most department heads rely heavily on others in their department to help them, but there is rarely any formal recognition or reward for such contributions. The case for such a position is especially pertinent given recent changes to UK higher education policy and culture -  more competitive and targeted research funding, the increasing importance of the Research Assessment Exercise (now termed the Research Excellence Framework), and greater accountability for the quality of teaching – have meant that the position of department head is now more than ever, crucial to university performance as a whole (Bolton, 2000; Hancock & Hellawell, 2003; Knight & Trowler, 2001).

This paper has investigated the phenomenon of academics who became heads of department in a post-1992 UK University and explored the influence that being in the position has on the planned future academic career. Unlike most previous studies of the head of department role and experience which have taken a number of universities, this study deliberately targeted department heads in one case UK University in order to explore the variation and range within the same organisation. This emphasis, it is argued, is more likely to reveal the effects of variation in organisational and departmental cultures, departmental academic and research profiles and statuses, and their financial situations, as well as individual head of department differences in ability and tendency.  In view of the relative paucity of research in both the UK and elsewhere on the theme of the academic who becomes head of department, and the subsequent effects and influence the experience has on their career trajectories, there is clearly a need for further research across a wider range of institutions. Research is needed that explores the similarities and differences between pre- and post-1992 universities in the UK, and the same phenomenon – comparisons between

older more traditional 'research-led' universities and newer 'teaching-led' universities - in other countries, such as Australia, United States, and Canada.

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