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Identity work, loss and preferred identities

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Identity Work, Loss and Preferred Identities: A study of UK business school deans

Abstract

This paper investigates how leaders construct 'loss' identity narratives which defuse the scope for external attack and sustain self-meanings. We draw on a sample of 31 UK business school deans, who although often depicted as multi-talented, high status achievers are also targets for criticism and have high rates of turnover. Our study makes two principal contributions. First, we argue that leaders may employ a specific pattern of identity work involving talk about loss to construct identities that bolster their leadership by presenting them as making sacrifices for their institutions. Losses are ubiquitous and malleable discursive resources that constitute both identity threats and opportunities for constructing preferred identities. Second, we deepen understanding of 'preferred identities', i.e. normative self-narratives that specify who people want to be, and to be seen to be, and which serve self-meaning and impression management functions. Preferred identities, though, do not necessarily serve people's interests, and deans tied themselves to demanding requirements to fabricate themselves as research credible, scrupulously moral, hard-working professionals.

Introduction

What do leaders say about themselves to lessen the scope for external criticism and to support their self-meanings? We address this question with reference to a sample of UK business school deans. While often portrayed as politically skilled strategic thinkers able to bridge interests to promote institutional goals (Davies, 2015; Sinclair, 2013), deans are upper-middle managers who are 'rarely loved or overtly appreciated' (Gallos, 2002, p.175), prone to multiple insecurities (Collinson, 2003), and have a continuing need to author identities both to impression manage and to cope with existential concerns. One strategy such leaders may employ is to author identity narratives drawing on a discourse of loss. While work-related losses pose threats (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014), they can also be used opportunistically to construct preferred identities. These preferred identities, we argue, mitigate the threat of harm posed by loss and represent deans as self-sacrificing; supporting their leadership (Grint, 2010) by reducing the scope others have to denigrate them. Identities, however, are not chosen unfettered but within community-imposed discursive constraints, and 'preferred identities' do not necessarily serve individuals' interests.

The focus of our research is deans' discursive identity construction processes, i.e. how they drew on and manoeuvred in relation to putative losses as they authored, edited, and evaluated their identity-narratives (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). 'Loss' here refers to articulations of 'ceasing to possess' or being 'deprived of' some personally valued thing, state or attribute, most often to their self-assessed detriment or disadvantage. Our study draws principally on the literatures on work identities (Brown, 2015; Ybema et al., 2009), identity narratives (Linde, 1993; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001) and identity threat/loss (Conroy & O'Leary, 2014; Petriglieri, 2011). Scholarship on identities and identity work in organizations includes studies of diverse professional groups, but not business school deans, whose role, Davies (2015,

p.5), argues, 'has been neglected'. There is literature on loss due to adverse life events (Murray, 2001; Weigert & Hastings, 1977), and some conceptual research on the losses experienced in careers (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014), but little scrutiny of how individuals employ loss/threat as a resource for identity work. It has occasionally been recognized that identity threats may have beneficial consequences, but as Petriglieri (2011, p.656) argues 'More work is needed to…understand…clearly how individuals convert a threat response into an opportunity for identity gain and growth'.

We make two primary contributions. First, complementing the well-established finding that leaders engage in self-aggrandizing talk about their satisfactions and achievements (Khurana, 2004), we argue that they may also employ a specific pattern of identity work that involves talk about loss. We argue that leaders' talk about loss (i) to mitigate loss-related threat and (ii) to construct identities designed to bolster their leadership by presenting them as making sacrifices for their institutions, a process Grint (2010) describes as establishing the 'sacral space' required to lead. Losses are ubiquitous and malleable discursive resources that constitute both identity threats and opportunities for constructing preferred identities. Second, we refine understanding of 'preferred identities', defining them as normative self-narratives regarding who people want to be, and to be seen to be, that while always multiple, potentially fragile, and temporally complex, serve valuable self-meaning and impression management functions. Leaders' preferred identities, however, are formed within relations of power and do not necessarily serve their interests.

Identity Work and Preferred Identities

Conceived as 'the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves' as they seek to address the questions 'who am I?' and 'who do I want to be?' subjectively construed identities

have become a major topic for research in organizations (Brown, 2015, p.23; Caza, Vough & Puranik, 2018). This perspective regards identities as authored by individuals from discursive resources they employ actively both in soliloquy and in interaction with others (Athens, 1994; Goffman, 1963). Defined initially by Snow and Anderson (1987, p.1348) as 'the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities' our focal interest is in the discursive identity work by which people form, repair, maintain, strengthen and revise versions of who they are (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p.1165). While people often have considerable agency in identity matters, they are also subject to regulatory processes (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Foucault, 1977). Studies of the micro-politics of identity formation show how, through disciplinary processes, people's identity options are often restricted, their choices coerced and subjectivities colonized (e.g., Thomas & Davies, 2005; Thornborrow & Brown, 2009).

Self-identities take narrative form (Giddens, 1991; McAdams, et.al., 2001). Defined by Linde (1993, p.20) as 'an oral unit of social interaction' life stories are disparate assemblages of explanations and chronicles rarely fully integrated and sometimes contradictory, patched together by people questing for 'self-narrative constancy' (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008, p.114). Generally, identities alleviate threat and promote liveability, helping 'guard against the chilling possibility that one's life is random, accidental, unmotivated' (Linde, 1993, p.6). One major strand of theorising concerns the life story 'types', 'templates', 'scripts', 'plots' and 'sequences', and associated discursive resources, that people author to account for their selves (Linde, 1993; McAdams & Bowman, 2001; cf. Obodaru, 2012; Thornborrow & Brown, 2009). Little attention, however, has been devoted to 'loss' as a resource for people's discursive identity work and how self-assessed losses are employed to construct preferred selves[i].

Considerable research focuses on the 'positive' identities authored by people in organizations (Roberts & Dutton, 2009; Kreiner & Sheep, 2009; Maitlis, 2009). Typically, positive identities 'are beneficial, good, or generative' (Dutton et al., 2009, p.3) and 'competent, resilient, authentic, transcendent, and holistically integrated' (Kreiner & Sheep, 2009, p.24). An alternative 'critical' stream of scholarship eschews use of the term 'positive', pointing out that 'identity work does not always culminate in positive identity states' (Caza et al., 2018, p.12) and that many people's identities are (arguably) neither beneficial nor felicitously generative for them, not necessarily 'resilient', and rarely 'holistically integrated' (Learmonth & Humphreys, 2011). Consonant with this theorizing, our focus is 'preferred identities', a concept occasionally mentioned but rarely defined. Conceived here as identity narratives favoured by those who formulate them and offered to others as notionally acceptable selves, they are flexible, *ad hoc* constructions tactically devised to stave off harm in response to threat. Although people seek to promote advantageous self-outcomes, imposed upon by discursive regimes (Foucault, 1977), they may be mistaken or self-deceiving, and fabricate infelicitous identities that lead to criticism, stress, and feelings of inauthenticity (Knights & Clarke, 2014).

We analyze the preferred identities of business school deans who, (most often) are upper-middle managers serving 'as a bridge between external stakeholders, school goals and his [sic] faculty's own interests and motivations' (Thomas & Thomas, 2011, p.530). Deans are hybrids, characterized by Posner (2009) as 'pracademics' who strive for both academic and practice credibility. Although there are optimistic accounts of hybrid middle managers (Kitchener, 2000) the literature emphasises the difficulties they experience 'in securing notions of the self' (Thomas & Linstead, 2002, p.77). This is particularly true of business school deans, in the UK, and the US, who are often highly constrained, subject to the unpredictable whims of university leaders, and pressured to maintain revenues and rankings positions or risk being replaced

(Byrne, 2013; Roaten, 2018). Moreover, business school deans are considered by many to be 'necessary evils' (Cooke, 2009) trapped by 'delusions of grandeur' (Bedeian, 2002, p.165) and not infrequently confronted by discourses suggesting that leadership should be collective and distributed. Yet, most business school researchers, like Cooke (2009, p.10), have chosen to 'gloss … over the personal and existential difficulties of holding a Deanship'.

A substantial literature notes that leaders may be labelled as toxic and abusive and stigmatized and victimized by followers (Vince & Mazen, 2014; Grint, 2010). Grint's (2010) analysis of leadership as requiring processes of sacralisation is particularly germane to our inquiry in that it suggests how, if deans are unable to establish significant differences between them and others, cannot manage effectively symbolic violence against them, and silence followers' anxieties, they can become sacrificial victims. 'Loss', we argue, is one discursive resource leaders draw on in their attempts to author identities that position them as making sacrifices to lessen the scope others have to attack them.

Loss: Threat and opportunity in identity work

Sociological and social psychological research suggests that loss is 'a fundamental aspect of the lives of all people from earliest childhood' (Murray, 2001, p.234) and that 'the painful loss of an irreplaceable and personal identity is a common theme of human existence' (Weigert, & Hastings, 1977, p.1171). Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly (2014, p.67) argue that 'Our work lives involve loss. None of us makes it through a career without loss of a cherished sense of self that comes from work, whether loss of a valued position, close work relationship, treasured team membership, or prestigious work location'. In contrast to objectivist accounts we recognize that the '…meanings of loss are embedded in assumptions and discourses', and what counts as 'loss' is pliable (Charmaz, 1995, p.660). Loss as a discursive resource employed tactically by

reflexive individuals to fabricate preferred identities. While social psychologists draw hard distinctions between loss and its cognates such as harm and challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), our interest is in people's talk. In practices of talk, loss-themed words and phrases are employed often in confused, ambiguous, paradoxical or even contradictory ways as people blend temporalities, contexts and experiences in pursuit of sufficiently convincing identity narratives (Fairclough, 1995; Weiss & Wodak, 2003).

People's identities are precarious, fragile and insecure, and remembered identity threats often re-lived in the present and anticipated in possible futures (Collinson, 2003). Talk about loss is most often associated with threat, harm and sometimes stigma, and can make the world appear '…a less predictable, more fearful place' (Murray, 2001, p.231; Goffman, 1963). There are, however, no empirical studies of how the losses organizational leaders talk about are a source of identity threat. The ubiquity of identity threats is recognized (Petriglieri, 2011), yet there is little agreement on what constitutes a 'threat', with most scholarship focused on their causes such as bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008) or the conduct of dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Our conception of 'threat' suggests it is construed through processes of discursive identity work: a threat is a unit of talk that represents a challenge to one or more of an individual's identity narratives (Brown & Coupland, 2015). This approach emphasizes the scope most people have to choose what and how losses are narrativized.

Most research regards threats as debilitating negative forces with problematic consequences (Petriglieri, 2011, p.643; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). There is, though, increasing recognition that 'individuals can strategically use the force of the threat itself as a catalyst for increased self-awareness and positive change' (Kreiner & Sheep, 2009, p.32; Maitlis, 2009). Less recognized is that 'losses', like other threats to the self, are actively constructed in talk and

valuable 'material' that may be deployed opportunistically to author identity narratives (Brown & Coupland, 2015). Our discursive approach complements theorising on identity threats posed by loss, and responses to them, as 'primarily cognitive exercises' (Conroy & O'Kelly-Leary, 2014, p.82). Identity threats and defensive strategies are linguistic constructions and interconnected aspects of 'the reflexive project of the self' (Giddens, 1991, p.185). That is, when people talk about loss in relation to the self they do so to evoke preferred identities that adapt, deflect and defend them from harm.

Research Design

Following a tradition of inductive, in-depth interview-based research on poorly understood phenomena (e.g., Gabriel et al., 2010; Gagnon & Collinson, 2014), our choice of business school deans' was driven by three considerations. First, increasingly, deans are viewed not as scholar-administrators but 'as politically astute and economically savvy' leaders (Rosser et al., 2003, p.2) who occupy 'an executive position' (Davies, 2015, p.21) of 'increasing complexity' (Thomas & Thomas, 2011, p.529). Second, deans 'can be likened to partners in professional service firms in that they are promoted to deanships on the basis of expertise, knowledge and intellectual capital' (Thomas & Thomas, 2011, p.530): findings based on a study of deans may have broader resonance for understanding this category of manager. Third, there is a *prima facie* case for focusing on a cadre of professionals who have taken on a role when many consider that the pressures associated with it 'outweigh the perceived rewards of the position' (Floyd, 2012, p.272).

Context

In 2015 in the UK, 121 business schools (some styled as faculties or departments) employed more than 10,000 academic staff (Davies, 2015). These institutions varied considerably in

terms of their age, scale of operations, income and degree of autonomy but all operated in allied markets. Most deans were British-born men, with women leading 22 schools (Davies, 2015). Across the sector, deans had generally been in post for less than three years. Few remain in the same role for a decade (Bradshaw, 2015). While valued by university leaders for the financial resources they generate, business schools are also subject to criticism that they are intellectually bereft, lack legitimacy, and should be either closed or transformed, that expose their deans to attack (Alajoutsijarvi, et al., 2015; Gioia & Corley, 2002; Parker, 2018). Another noteworthy peculiarity is that many individuals move to a deanship was 'unintentional and serendipitous' (Davies, 2015, p.25), not least because other well-qualified potential candidates are often unwilling to serve (Davies & Thomas, 2009)[ii].

Data collection

The data set comprised 31 semi-structured interviews with 13 serving and 18 former business school deans[iii] recruited through snowball sampling from the authors personal contacts (see Table 1). Of those approached, just one (a former dean) declined to participate in this study. 23 deans were or had been heads of business schools in England, 5 in Scotland, 2 in Wales and 1 in Northern Ireland. All our interviewees had led at least one University-based business school[iv]. The interviews[v] were audio recorded, of 47 to 221 minutes duration, and had a mean length of 88 minutes. We made full transcripts of the interviews the shortest of which was 5,666 words, the longest 27,300 words, with a mean of 12,470 words. We asked mostly open questions about what it meant to individuals to be a dean such as 'what has your experience as head taught you about yourself?' 'How did becoming dean change you (if at all)?' 'To what extent do you feel that you can be yourself in the role?' Our intention was loosely to structure a conversation with the purpose of encouraging deans to talk in-depth about their selves.

Assured of anonymity, no interviewee declined to answer any question, and the interviews conducted in a relaxed atmosphere.

Table 1

Some further issues require brief mention. This is a study of business school deans conducted by business school scholars, one of whom had himself previously served as a dean and was interviewed for this research. We note also the personal nature of many of the questions asked, our established relationships with some of the interviewees, and that the researchers were from the small world of UK business school academe. The value of 'insider research' of this kind, which is open to accusations of narcissism and unwarranted bias, has also attracted broad support. Bishop et al. (2019, p.4) for example, assert that 'Research conducted from an insider perspective by people personally involved with an organization and/or events under study can generate a more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon'.

Data analysis

Our principal interest was in how deans constructed their identities through talk about who they were and what they did. The identities that our interviewees authored were 'practical discursive accomplishments' (Brown & Coupland, 2015, p.1320) co-constructed with the research team at a specific time and place and for a particular purpose. Identities are always fluid and often tensional - there is always another self-story that can be told - yet they, and the work undertaken to create them, also bind people 'to systems of ideological and self-legitimation' (Thompson & McHugh, 2002, p.354) that impose a degree of order, stability and control. That is, we can reasonably expect that the identity stories deans authored in their interviews with us will have commonalities with those they constructed with colleagues in work settings.

In keeping with our exploratory, inductive approach, initial processes of analysis overlapped with data collection. On completion, interviews were transcribed and uploaded onto a shared online platform (Dropbox) and key themes noted. Initial discussions of the transcripts between research team members surfaced a large number of potentially interesting empirical findings relating, for example, to leader authenticity and stakeholder engagement, but it was the finding that deans talked about different role-related losses that was striking. While continuing to be sensitive to a range of other issues, after an initial six interviews, we began to engage with the literature on loss/threat and modified our interview schedule to focus on identity talk relating to loss.

Drawing on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Weiss & Wodak, 2003), our data were systematically coded with excerpts of 'talk' extracted from the transcripts and placed in Word documents under category headings. Our interest was both in explicit identity work (e.g., 'I do the job with integrity') and other forms of talk where identity was (implicitly) at stake (e.g., 'Being a dean is stressful'). We concentrated on what deans apparently regarded as experiences, qualities, decisions etc. that said something important about them. In this way, a large number of themes linked to 'loss' were identified and subsequently integrated, discarded and refined through iterative processes, generally into increasingly broader categories as connections between them emerged. Importantly, mention of actual harm was rare with deans' talk about loss usually conditional, nuanced and equivocal. For example, they talked often about their 'sense of loss' and the 'potential for loss' rather than definitive loss, and this gave them latitude to use the possibility of loss for other identity purposes. Recognizing that there are no definitive readings of qualitative data (Fairclough, 1995; Weiss & Wodak, 2003), we continued to code the transcripts for talk about loss until no new themes emerged.

Through discussion, we recognized deans were engaged in three broad categories of identity work: talk about different kinds of loss (loss of a 'researcher identity', 'integrity' and 'equanimity'[vi]), the assessment of the threats these losses posed for them (relating to 'researcher status', 'moral identity', and 'professional competence'), and the construction of preferred identities. Each loss was associated with both an externally construed threat (a threat to their self they associated with others) and an internal threat (a threat to their self they posed to themselves). We came to interpret these forms of talk as the bases for attempts to claim preferred identities as research-credible or to deny the importance of a researcher identity, having integrity or playing a role, and as hard-working, and having become tougher and wiser. Additional analysis of our data in relation to extant literature led us to understand that preferred identities both mitigate threat and serve an impression management function (Goffman, 1963; Schlenker, 1980), representing deans as making sacrifices in order to support their leadership[vii]. At this stage, lengthy Word documents focused on aspects of loss were produced in which we selected, joined and separated data in combination with ideas from the literature as we sought further to interpret our findings.

We looked for differences in patterns of talk between past and serving deans, but no clear trends emerged. This was not unexpected as all deans, including those currently in-role, were engaged in similar processes of retrospective sensemaking, albeit over different timeframes (Weick, 1995). Internally appointed deans were compared with externally appointed deans and men with women, but no systematic differences were evident. Loss-related data were analysed using other potential differentiators such as the nature of the institutions deans headed, most notably their size (faculty number, revenue), the age of the school, and the degree to which they were research intensive. With the exception of the extent to which deans were likely to claim identities as researchers, which we consider later, there were no clear differences in their talk.

An explanation for the relative similarity in deans' identity work is provided by Linde (1993, p.219): '…life stories involve scale systems of social understandings and of knowledge that are grounded in a long history of practice; indeed, these stories rely on presuppositions about what can be taken as expected, what the norms are, and what common or special belief systems are necessary to establish coherence'. That is, British business school deans (and ex-deans) constituted a relatively small and cohesive 'community of practice', were well-acquainted with their peers' identity talk, and what deans said about each other, and their own self-narratives were indexed to this storytelling community. In addition, our interviewees all operated in the same national context, the UK public Higher Education sector, and all had to deal with similar accreditation issues and competitive pressures, meaning that institutional challenges (for revenue generation, student quality, research output etc.) were different in tone and intensity but not in kind. Table 2 provides a summary of our final coding scheme and indicative data.

Table 2

Deans' Construction of Preferred Identities

Deans engage in much identity work centred on the satisfactions – not least their leader status and access to decision makers and networks – and achievements – for example, as helpers of others and institution-builders (Bedeian, 2002; Davies, 2015; Gallos, 2002). We contribute by demonstrating how deans also talk about losses and the threats they pose, to construct preferred identities.

Loss of a researcher identity

Deans talked about losing the ability to engage in activities that had previously been important to them but which now played a less significant role in their professional lives. While a few mentioned teaching and consultancy, they spoke mostly about loss in relation to research:

… to move from that, where my identity was very much as a researcher, to the role of Dean, where you're juggling everybody else's priorities…there was a progressive sense of loss in terms of the inability to maintain that side of what I was doing' (#15).

Interviewees spoke about how, on becoming dean, they sought to remain research active, but found that the demands of the job made this impossible: 'I have stopped being engaged with my own research …it's not real anymore but by proxy. …it's gone' (#1):

'I'd fooled myself in a way that most days it would be possible to do some research in the evening…there was just no prospect of that happening. The much stronger temptation was to have a glass of wine' (#9).

Externally construed threat. Deans were uncomfortably aware that being research inactive could mean they were not regarded by their faculty as high status leaders but as well-paid 'charge-hand[s]' (#11):

'…there's sometimes none too thinly concealed, snidey comments from colleagues that you were Dean because you couldn't do research' (#6).

'…this refers to a switch of identity, right, so you are an academic, a scholar, a researcher and now you have gone to the dark side….so there's a saying "those who can, do, those who can't, teach, and those who can't teach, they become deans"' (#8).

Internally construed threat. Deans also articulated personal anxieties regarding their research performance such that 'I've got my own personal research career being compromised' (#5) and 'I do feel that my research career is close to tatters' (#7). One long-serving now retired dean remarked that 'I'm sad that in reputational terms my reputation became for managerial stuff rather than academic stuff' (#12), and another that '…you feel a bit of a fraud because you haven't done anything for 5 years… you start to feel as if the discipline's slipping away' (#30).

Construction of preferred identities. Deans engaged in two distinct threat mitigation strategies to construct preferred identities either as research-credible or to deny the importance of a researcher identity.

Assertion of a Researcher identity. Most deans used talk about loss to claim identities as credible researchers: '[I]…never mentally made the shift from being a research active academic to being a manager' (#15), and a few insisted that they were fully engaged in scholarship:

'I particularly enjoy doing this role [dean] but it doesn't define me. I am a researcher' (#22).

I don't give up my research, you know, I'm reading articles every day. I make sure I read articles every day. I'm putting in grant applications (#23).

Some were adamant that they had previously established 'an international reputation' as a scholar (#20), others who admitted to being research inactive nevertheless claimed research credibility, arguing that they '…enjoyed scholarship in a sense of the intellectual engaging discussions about theory' (#21). Several maintained that, while serving as dean it was (or had been), 'crucial that I kept the research going' because 'my plan was to go back to a normal life afterwards' (#9), and a few had done so:

'I think the thing I learned about myself after 5 years [as dean] is that deep down I'm an academic and although that was jolly good fun, I missed being an academic and so over the past year I've reverted to being purely researching business' (#29).

Denial of a researcher identity. In contrast, a handful of deans expressed no sense of researcher identity loss. Various reasons were given for this. One said that he had become 'a little bit bored and cynical about research, art for art's sake' (#6). Others said that they had never been particularly interested in management scholarship:

'…the dean is somebody who is basically - you're not going to be a star academic and so on and that never really bothered me, I'm not a massively um, ambitious - in that respect' (#19).

Predictably, these deans were affiliated mostly with institutions where research was not prioritized[viii], or there was cultural acceptance that the dean was not required to be a researcher, and the threats associated with being research inactive were, perhaps, less intense. Our findings are consonant with other studies that have found some deans seek to conduct research and are fiercely protective of research time while others do none at all (Davies, 2015).

Loss of integrity

Deans talked about how they sometimes felt that their sense of integrity was compromised in the performance of their roles:

'…it's necessary to justify decisions without being able to tell the whole story…sometimes I'm clutching at logic……I think that's been one of the most difficult parts of the role is standing up and justifying the position without being able to justify… [it]… (#9).

The difficulty, they maintained, was simultaneously to be both moral (according to their own personal codes) and institutionally effective:

'… you've got to be a manager you've got to do what the management role is. You've got to do it competently… there was a union dispute where union members were not marking scripts. I'm a union member. That was quite morally demanding…. I did some things which were not ideal. But…if you're gonna take the role on you've got to make some compromises' (#3).

Particularly notable were deans accounts of the moral discomfort they felt about being 'used' by their institution to make or support decisions with which they disagreed or that had negative consequences for others:

'I find myself compromised more often than I'd like to be … fronting up stuff that I don't necessarily have full faith in … In a meeting with 2 senior administrators in the School um, I raised concern about something and in a direct quote I was told, "You are paid enough to lie about this…you're paid enough to lie, get back in your bath"….' (#5).

Externally construed threat. Research suggests that there is a 'need for leaders to be trusted and to be seen as people of integrity' (Bryman, 2007, p.699), and one threat to deans are accusations that they believe 'they are exempt from moral standards' and engage in 'self-

interested actions' (Bedeian, 2002, p.167). Deans reported that despite their best efforts they were on occasions cast as 'the Devil Incarnate' by faculty intent on adopting 'the moral high ground' (#6), and commented on how much they disliked being depicted by others as 'the bad guy':

'I don't know how many people thought that [I was] – incompetent, deceitful or somehow morally wanting, suspect. I hated that' (#13).

Internally construed threat. Deans spoke movingly about their struggles to retain a personal sense of integrity, and to do the 'right' thing, often in difficult circumstances. Being a dean, they said, involved seeking continually to resolve value clashes that meant navigating a moral labyrinth:

'… you drive home at night thinking "was it the right thing?" "What's going on?..."…it's about trying to find a way through a moral maze' (#17).

They articulated concern that doing their jobs meant 'veracity' could be forfeited for pragmatism as 'you can't always tell exactly the truth' (#7) and despite their best intentions 'you could easily be sort of seduced further down the line' (#18):

'There were real integrity challenges, yes…that's the most stark thing that I will ever remember about integrity, that it's so easy to get drawn across the line and seduced into a position, you know, where you could've made the wrong decision because of that. You could've definitely gone wrong in some way at that point' (#28).

Construction of preferred identities. Deans mitigated threat by constructing versions of their selves either as people with integrity or as consciously playing a role in which moral issues were secondary to the business of managing.

Assertion of integrity. Deans said they engaged in considerable introspection regarding 'what it is to be a moral agent' (Weaver, 2006, p.341):

'…it comes down to integrity. It comes down to being a leader with integrity. The way I make decisions is based on principles, my own principles' (#23).

They were particularly concerned to construe themselves as 'good' and truthful people. Some, evidently aware that deans were not infrequently the subjects of moral opprobrium, insisted that they were more 'honest' or 'authentic' than their peers: 'I suspect I compromise on my authenticity less than some people might' (#26). Others said 'I didn't try and dissemble, I never tried to dissemble the reality on any point' (#13) and that '… I think you've got to be true to yourself, you've got to be true to what you believe' (#27). They expressed certainty that 'I never lied to anybody, can't think of any examples of doing that' (#6) and insisted that 'I think I do it [being dean] with integrity' (#7):

'I mean ultimately it comes down to your own personal values…and I think you have to be able to look at yourself in the bathroom mirror in the morning and live with yourself' (#4).

'I think in my mind the point about authenticity is absolutely right…. To my mind that is the driving principle that one should follow' (#10).

Playing a role. An alternative threat mitigation strategy employed by a handful of deans was to deny that their job involved ethical dilemmas. These deans claimed to experience few integrity issues in the performance of their roles, maintaining that 'I didn't ever feel hugely compromised on a personal level' (#22) and that 'I think … every role is an act' (#19). Indeed, some said they regarded any strategy for getting things done as reasonable as long as it was effective:

'I think you can become quite Machiavellian. I used to say that with faculty in particular, "I'll love them, I'll cajole them, I'll persuade them, I'll bribe them, I'll kick them, I'll do whatever it takes to try and get to where I want to be"' (#12).

Rather than a total denial of the prominence of integrity issues, those who downplayed ethical issues, also often claimed to be pragmatic predicated on a moral stance:

'…as long as I had a background moral position that I, that I was happy with, I tended to approach each decision pragmatically … and I had no trouble with it morally as a business model (#9).

Loss of equanimity

In line with other research findings that deans have 'a tough and unrelenting lifestyle' (Davies, 2015, p.25), interviewees said they had to cope with role-related loss of equanimity, i.e. a loss of composure or tranquillity of mind. They were, they maintained, dean '24 hours a day, 7 days a week' (#15), that their work lives were 'absolutely intense' (#7) and in consequence that they often became 'worn down' (#21): 'You've got a big time pressure...the job's never done' (#3):

'…in terms of one's ability to have any sort of personal family life, it impacts very seriously' (#10).

Many deans spoke about their concerns 'dealing with difficult colleagues' (#14) and personnel issues associated with employment tribunals:

'We had one particularly difficult case in the Business School…with an employment tribunal and that was the worst day-and-a-half of my life … I thought … this is not the life I signed up for' (#9).

Others remarked on the problems they faced dealing with senior members of their university who, they said, often had little sympathy with business schools:

'There's a power thing which is that universities want a business school but they don't want a business school. [This institution's] an extreme case of that…It was really annoying. Drove me mad' (#3).

Externally construed threat. One dean described how 'I had lots of people sniping' and how '…there were some unpleasant incidents' (#23) as factions within his School contested his decisions and more generally his fitness to lead. Another described how:

'…you don't know what people are thinking. … There might be a coup, I don't know what they think. They seem OK at the moment, but who knows? It is a Tudor court. … So it's like that, it's like a court and it's whispers and the King is the Vice-chancellor… and the rest are the courtiers' (#11).

Particularly notable were deans' descriptions of their treatment by close colleagues whose behaviour was, they considered, unprofessional:

'I think it's a job where I at least expected to be stabbed in the back at some point soon, and you weren't quite sure by whom or by which group but you knew it was going to happen. And, therefore, I used to worry about that all the time' (#4).

Others said that they had been 'quite often under threat and obviously I was insecure' (#3), not least because '…nobody gives a shit about you! I mean nobody really cares about you' (#11).

Internally construed threat. Deans described their roles as 'ageing' (#20), '…always gruelling' (#28) and as involving 'an awful lot of underlying angst' (#16):

'I found it difficult having all these people who wanted time and I couldn't do it all. It felt like you were failing because there were things that people wanted you to do and it was just impossible. I just couldn't do it. So that was stressful' (#25).

For many deans, stress was compounded by their difficulties in making and retaining friends, which left them isolated at the helm:

'What … I didn't expect was … the loneliness, very lonely job … you've not really got anybody who's a real [friend], they all want something from you … it's a lonely job and it is lonely (#19).

Construction of Preferred Identities. To mitigate threat and construct desired identities, deans described themselves as hard working, tough, and having become shrewder in their handling of politics and understanding of organizations as they battled with the 'sheer impossibility of being as skilful and wise as is required' (Ford et al., 2010, p. S76).

Hard working, tougher and wiser. Deans' talk positioned them as capable professionals who managed in difficult circumstances. Interviewees emphasized how assiduously they worked to ensure the success of their institutions:

'…whatever it took, worked ridiculous hours, was always there, was entertaining clients, always dropped in over the weekend to make sure that the Organisation was OK. Excessive dedication….' (#12).

Deans construed themselves as having changed to become stronger, commenting that performing the role had led them justifiably to 'toughen up' (#19), 'become hardened' (#20), and 'a wee bit harder' (#23), so that 'I can deal better with confrontation' (#7):

'…you have to be a bit tougher about not pleasing everybody all the time, you have to be a bit tougher…there are tough battles out there and you've got to be pretty kind of thick skinned to go into battle' (#21).

Many deans also said they had 'wised up', especially in terms of their political skills. They sometimes said they had begun their tenure believing that '…surely everything can be resolved by debate' (#12) to construct themselves as having learned to be 'politically astute' (Davies, 2015, p.19), and engage '…in the politicking that you do to position and manoeuvre people' (#31):

'…you do have to be political… there's always fighting over resources and money - but that's just part of the course isn't it? And you've got to stand up for your bit of the university' (#30).

Deans also claimed they had become more sophisticated and reflexive:

'I think the sophistication of my understanding of organisations, of management, of leadership, has grown' (#13).

'I think it has made me more reflective and I feel I've learned more about several aspects of organisational behaviour in 5½ years of being a Dean than I did in the previous nearly 25 years of reading about it' (#6).

To summarize, each of the losses was a threat because it exposed deans to the potentially negative judgements of others and rendered salient to them their own self-doubts[ix]. Loss of a researcher identity was troubling for many because mostly 'academic staff members expect heads of department to maintain a research and publications profile' (Bryman & Lilley, 2009, p.341), and not doing so opened them to others' and their own self-accusations that they were not winners but 'losers in a game of academic prestige' (Adler & Harzing, 2009, p.74). Deans' concerns regarding integrity loss were perhaps guided by an awareness that effective leaders are deemed honest by others, media reports of unethical behaviour by deans (e.g., Jump, 2015; MacLeod, 2007), and their personal anxieties centred on being institutionally effective and 'true' to themselves. Loss of equanimity was threatening because it was associated with others' challenges to their authority and competence and deans' own sense that they were struggling to cope and insecure. Their loss of friends (and reduced opportunities to make new friends)

also meant deans were less able to derive 'social and career support from close-knit networks of relationships' (Morrison, 2002, p.1551). These findings chime with studies of middle managers showing them to be preoccupied with 'factors associated with effectiveness' (Bryman & Lilley, 2009, p.333) but also vulnerable and anxiety-prone (Collinson, 2003).

Deans talked about losses to mitigate the threat they posed by authoring preferred identities that portrayed them as making (though often only potentially) sacrifices (of their researcher status, integrity and equanimity) for the good of their institutions. Most deans' spoke about the possibility for loss of an identity as 'research active' and used this to construct themselves as nevertheless 'research credible'. A few talked about being research-disinterested to deny any sense of loss and to construct their selves as unconcerned with scholarship. For these individuals, threat was neutralized by rejecting the need for them to be an active researcher in their institution. Generally, deans said that the potential for loss of integrity was important for them, and employed such talk to work on identities that positioned them as morally adroit. A small number denied the significance of integrity issues and instead authored identities as pragmatic role-players. Almost all deans said they at times suffered from a loss of equanimity, and drew on this talk to fabricate identities as selfless hard-working professionals, who had become tougher and wiser.

Discussion

The purpose of this discussion is threefold. First, we outline a leader identity narrative that involves talk about loss, threat and preferred identities. These identity narratives mitigate specific threats, define role identities, and help protect leaders from criticism by presenting the narrator as self-sacrificing. Second, we elaborate the contributions we have made to the organization-based literatures on preferred identities, loss and threat. Preferred identities, we

argue, are fragile constructions, serve both self-meaning and impression management purposes, draw on multiple temporalities and are embedded in relations of power. Finally, we consider some limitations of our study and its implications for further research, before drawing brief conclusions.

Loss narratives

Our study contributes to efforts to identify and analyse types of work-life narratives (Brown, 2015; Collinson, 2003; Gabriel et al. 2010). There is, we suggest, a 'loss' identity narrative those in leadership positions may deploy. This story-type involves (i) protagonists' descriptions of the losses associated with their organizational role, (ii) an assessment of the threats associated with each loss, and (iii) the mitigation of threat through the production of preferred identities. Our identification of a 'loss narrative' is important because it shows how leaders are able opportunistically to construe and appropriate threats both for purposes of self-meaning and to neutralize challenge to their leadership.

Impression management. Consonant with past theorizing, deans' loss narratives were, arguably, adaptive responses to identity threat that sought to promote affirmative meanings associated with their role performance (Petriglieri, 2011). Subject to societal and university-based discourses that disparage business schools, and stigmatized by faculty who question their qualifications, drives and competence, loss narratives were low cost means for deans to combat threat by promoting favourable views of them. This narrative strategy served to decrease 'the likelihood or severity of … identity harm' (Petriglieri, 2011, p.648) and were most likely one stratagem among others that deans deployed on an ongoing, contingent basis to ameliorate threat.

Deans become practiced in giving nuanced performances of the self that position them as making sacrifices to defuse (actual and potential) criticism of their leadership (Goffman, 1963; Schlenker, 1980). Indeed, claims of 'identity loss' featured together with a variety of other often more positive statements about their achievement, notably how they helped individual faculty members' career progression and strengthened their institutions by launching new revenue generating initiatives. Many studies have documented the self-aggrandizing discourse of leaders in which they cast themselves as corporate saviours (Bedeian, 2002; Khurana, 2004). This interleaving of loss with achievement is understandable. To talk solely about their successes would invite accusations of narcissism, whereas to focus just on loss might lead not to sympathy but charges that a leader is incompetent or otherwise temperamentally unsuited to the role.

Arguably, loss narratives were one means by which deans sought to deal with ineffective processes of leader 'sacralisation' that exposed them to external criticism and internal self-doubt (Vince & Mazen, 2014; Grint, 2010). As Grint (2010) has argued, leadership involves being 'set apart', 'sacrifice' and 'silencing' that when effective result in the sacralization required by leaders to operate. Deans' roles are problematic because faculty often simultaneously deny significant differences between them and leaders whilst making deans 'sacrificial victims' (Grint, 2010, p.100), processes reinforced by the difficulties deans' face silencing alternate accounts of their schools. Loss narratives allowed deans to emphasize the personal sacrifices they made on behalf of their organizations permitting them to construct 'the sacred space without which leadership cannot occur' (Grint, 2010, p.100) and neutralize others' attempts to scapegoat them.

Loss and self-meaning. Loss identity narratives were one aspect of deans' self-strategies that defined 'the salience and boundaries' of their role identities (Koerner, 2014, p.84), guided their action and connected them to others (Linde, 1993; McAdams, et al., 2001). They were means by which deans cast themselves as agentic, able to transform what McAdams and Bowman (2001, p.28) refer to as 'negative scenes' into notionally positive outcomes and thus to 'exert a form of *interpretive control* over daunting personal challenges' (p.25). Moreover, deans' talk about how they had dealt with losses to 'prove' themselves worthy, often to become tougher and wiser, represented them 'as growing, moving forward, making progress over time' (McAdams & Bowman, 2001, p.5). Such stories 'humanized' deans, positioning them as plausible protagonists in institutional dramas (a dean who could not talk credibly about loss would be an anaemic figure). They were vehicles also for constructing themselves 'as moral actors in others' eyes' (Löyttyniemi, 2001, p.199; Linde, 1993) who were often misunderstood, occasionally the victims of others' unethical plots, though mostly well-intentioned institution-builders. That is, deans' loss identity stories had a redemptive narrative arc in which the threat of a spoilt identity was alleviated through talk that showed them to be trustworthy, honest and humane.

Preferred identities

Our study advances and refines understanding of *preferred identities*, conceived as normative identity narratives that capture aspects of who one would like to be, and how one desires to be regarded by others. First, like other identities preferred identities are 'inherently fragile' (Giddens, 1991, p.185). Framed in relation to threats, they are vulnerable to re-articulations of those threats, either by others or in soliloquy, and thus require continuing identity work. Second, we have demonstrated that preferred identities are not simply attempts by individuals to support the self by reading meaning into their lives (Charmaz, 1995) but also to impression

manage. Preferred identities are tactical rhetorical constructions authored to prevent harm. Third, people may have multiple distinct preferred work identities. Indeed, while we focused on deans' preferred identities centred on claims for research credibility, moral integrity and administrative competence, this is unlikely to be a complete set. As we have previously observed, other studies have found leaders promulgate success and achievement narratives that construe them as saviours (Khurana, 2004). Fourth, preferred identities are not temporally bounded and not just about the construction of future selves based on present circumstances. Preferred identities are not simple, linear constructions but reconstruct the past and anticipate the future, merging information from different temporalities 'to confer on the chaos of (post) modern life a modicum of direction' (McAdams & Bowman, 2001, p.11-12).

Finally, the similarities between deans' preferred identity narratives suggest that, while in part assembled through individual trial and error processes, they are forged also in relation to a community of peers with whom consensually agreed ways of presenting themselves are negotiated[x]. That is, preferred identities are not the products of unbounded agency or expressions of a 'true' or 'authentic' self, but subject to relations of power and formed through regulative processes (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The identity work that creates preferred identities, and which maintains, strengthens and revises them, may not necessarily benefit those who engage in it. Some largely research inactive deans evidently felt compelled to represent themselves as research credible. Many deans struggled with integrity issues. Most deans positioned themselves as notably hard working, and their articulations of loss of equanimity perhaps symptomize the distress they experienced as a result. Our evidence suggests that deans' preferred identities led often to their failure to sustain friendships, engage with their families or indulge favourite pastimes. Preferred identities are thus very different constructions than positive identities (Roberts & Dutton, 2009).

Loss and threat

This research makes two key contributions to our understanding of loss at work. First, while it is long established that 'felt loss is intrinsically linked to personal identity' (Weigert & Hastings, 1977, p.1171), attention has focused mostly on infrequently occurring loss events, resulting in the marginalization of loss as a discursive resource in research on people and organizations. Our study contributes by demonstrating how commonplace talk about work-related loss is. Second, we have shown how losses, and threats associated with them, are employed to author preferred identities.

In making these arguments our data and theorizing complement and sometimes contest Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly (2014) who argue that work-related identity losses 'require surrender of the current meaning of the self and realignment to a new meaning' (p.67). People can use losses to reinforce current (preferred) identities without either surrendering or realigning meanings relating to the self: it is not (always) the case that loss creates 'the need for development of a new sense of self' (p.67). Nor is there, as Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly (2014) argue, a possibility of arriving at 'a post-loss self' (p.78) that is entirely distinct from the pre-loss self. People draw continuously on losses (those that have notionally occurred, are occurring or may happen in future) they associate with who they were, are and may become in creative ways as they flex and flux versions of themselves. Few work-related losses are absolute, and most are highly interpretively flexible. Further, while Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly (2014, p.71) argue that those who experience loss 'carry the baggage of negative *loss-related emotion*' our research suggests that loss can also represent opportunities for optimism, pride and delight (e.g., in being a person who is hard working and has integrity). What is more, there is no final denouement in which all narrative strands are reconciled and threats dispelled so that 'punctuated equilibrium is

concluded' (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelley, 2014, p.80). People's talk about identity loss is nuanced, replete with reservations and caveats, and always provisional.

Our research has implications for how identity threats more broadly are researched and theorized. It suggests that researchers should focus not on the 'experience' of identity threat, but its construction, not on a singular threat but multiple simultaneous threats, and not on the putative consequences of threats but how they are narrativized. Threats and the harm associated with them are neither necessarily debilitating and unsettling (Petriglieri, 2011) nor catalysts for satisfying change and growth (Kreiner & Sheep, 2009, p.32; Maitlis, 2009). Our study has focused on deans' creation of preferred identities yet it is possible, perhaps likely, that leaders employ threats to narrate diverse identities including those that are aspirational but also feared, and sullied. In particular, this study contests the view 'that beneficial consequences only arise when responses eliminate the threat' (Petriglieri, 2011, p.643). Threats are a quotidian feature of working lives and often 'lived with' rather than resolved. Even in retirement threats are rarely fully eradicated (except when lost from memory) and while they cannot intrude on past role identities are always (potentially) damaging to our current preferred identity narratives. The stories we narrate about the self, and the threats and defensive strategies they incorporate, are 'temporally discontinuous' (Linde, 1993, p.25) enabling us to pick and mix actions, events and claimed motives across our life spans (McAdams, et al., 2001).

Further research

This study has a number of limitations that suggest topics and questions for further research. Our data are drawn from UK business school deans, and additional research is required that explores the identity work of leaders based in other organizations (e.g., Medical and Law Schools) and national cultural settings. Deans of North American business schools are

notoriously prone to being fired (Byrne, 2013), can resign abruptly (Byrner, 2018) and suffer health problems (https://www.bizjournals.com/nashville/stories/1999/02/22/editorial2.html)[xi] (but also benefit from secure tenure), and may spin distinctive loss identity stories. Deans appointed for short periods followed by a sabbatical (as is often the case in Taiwan[xii]), may not be able to draw heavily on loss as a resource. This study has reported findings based on research interviews, and field studies of leaders in interactions both at work and at home (with friends and family) would enrich our understanding of how they utilize a discourse of loss in other contexts. Allied research might consider discursive resources other than loss (courage, triumphs, nostalgia etc.) and the different situations and audiences in which these are deployed by leaders to support their tenure.

Our research suggests that deans, whose discursive abilities are well developed, were, Rumpelstiltskin-like, adept in transforming threats into opportunities. Conceivably, not all leaders are equally skilled in the performance of identity work, and further research might examine those who struggle to author adaptive identity stories, and the consequences of this for organizations. Studies of whether, and if so how, other leaders (such as Vice Chancellors), and those in non-academic professions (e.g., heads of law firms, accountancy practices etc.), draw on a discourse of loss, would help establish how widespread the practices we have identified here are. We have focused narrowly on identities and identity work, and not explored how loss narratives patterned actual behaviour, for example by specifying goals and criteria for self-evaluation. Further research could usefully examine the implications of the loss identity narratives leaders tell for their decision making and strategizing. In short, we hope that our study may spur considerable additional work on loss as a discursive resource for leaders and its implications for processes of organizing.

Conclusions

This study has contributed to our understanding of how business school deans draw opportunistically on 'loss' as a resource in their identity work. We have shown how loss narratives mitigate threats and construct preferred identities that bolster leadership claims and reduce the opportunities others have to denigrate leaders by presenting them as, sacrificial figures. Our research has demonstrated that preferred identities are worked on continuously in processes of talk, serve self-meaning and impression management purposes and are forged within relations of power that mean they are not necessarily beneficial to those who fabricate them. Indeed, it is perhaps the industry requirement for deans to wed themselves (unrealistically?) to demanding requirements that they author themselves as research credible, moral and hardworking that in part accounts for their high rate of turnover.

ID	Total Months as a Dean	N of Dean Episodes	Age at First Appointment	Male/ Female	Serving/ Ex*	Promoted*	Retired*	Returned to Ranks*
28	216	3	35	M	Ex	Yes		
12	204	2	40	M	Ex		Yes	
26	204	2	47	F	Ex		Yes	
16	168	3	47	M	Ex		Yes	
20	144	2	47	M	Ex			Yes
17	138	2	43	M	Serving			
14	138	2	46	M	Ex	Yes		
13	132	1	49	F	Ex	Yes		
27	128	3	47	M	Serving			
30	96	2	51	M	Serving			
15	96	1	50	M	Ex			
19	84	2	52	M	Ex		Yes	
23	84	2	48	M	Ex	Yes		
6	68	1	47	M	Ex			Yes
1	66	1	58	M	Serving			
10	60	1	53	M	Ex			Yes
31	48	1	56	F	Serving			
7	46	1	46	F	Ex			Yes
3	36	1	45	M	Ex			Yes
18	36	1	53	M	Ex		Yes	
22	36	2	48	M	Serving			
2	30	1	44	F	Serving			
8	24	1	49	M	Serving			
9	24	1	53	M	Ex	Yes		
24	24	1	47	M	Serving			
29	24	1	47	M	Ex	Yes		
21	18	1	48	M	Serving			
11	14	1	54	F	Serving			
5	14	1	46	M	Serving			
4	12	1	59	M	Ex		Yes	
25	7	1	53	M	Serving			

Table 1. Overview of Deans

Types of Loss	Threats	Preferred Identities
Loss of Researcher Identity 'Can you keep juggling being a credible researcher, securing Research Council and parallel grants, publishing in decent journals and do this day job? No. … at least I found you couldn't do both well… So, yes, that's what I gave up (#27)	**Externally Construed Threat to Researcher Status** 'I was naïve when I took on the Head of School job, I didn't realize that other professors perceived it as some sort of second-rate academic job. "That's it, you're an administrator now, you're not really a scholar like us"' (#7) **Internally Construed Threat to Researcher Status** 'I'm stuck in the middle between sort of being a researcher and that being my identity, and then being dean … so I think that's part of my hesitation with being dean, is that you have to give that up, that part of your identity…you are just the Dean' (#24)	**Assertion of Researcher Identity** '… previously before I was Business School Dean I was quite an active academic in terms of publishing (#14) **Denial of Researcher Identity** 'It [becoming dean] confirmed some things I suspected – that I'm not really into research, in the social sciences anyway' (#18)
Loss of Integrity 'You essentially become duplicitous… big question, research question, I came out of my period of deaning with is: can you lead a large organisation effectively and be honest? And retain your integrity? And I'm not sure, I'm genuinely not sure you can' (#6)	**Externally Construed Threat to Moral Identity** '…I hole down every single time someone thinks I've done a bad thing, some of them do haunt me actually' (#29) **Internally Construed Threat to Moral Identity** '…when you're Dean of the School, you are co-opted on to committees which are, basically committees looking to get rid of people across the University… and you are used then as a pawn in their political game…I never expected that… it's difficult to look at yourself in a mirror because you know you've just made, you know, 4 or 5 people redundant (#4)	**Assertion of Integrity** 'I've always been able to live with myself, I've never done anything in my life that I haven't been able to live with myself, so I'm very pleased about that… I am me. I am me, I really am me' (#11) **Playing a Role** I think you accept the, the need to play certain roles and be certain people … you just play the role' (#21)
Loss of Equanimity ' It was the most unpleasant year of my life by a million miles… it was just this sort of level of challenge then became incessant and unpleasant … that level of pressure was unmanageable. Or it felt unmanageable. And unpleasant…. tremendously psychologically bruising…it just became unpleasant (#28)	**Externally Construed Threat to Identity as Professionally Competent** 'what I had not expected to a degree was this thing about academics to have freedom to undermine and that's where I perhaps got caught out by people who told me they weren't going to do things and I could do what the hell I wanted but I could piss off, and there was nothing that I was going to be able to do about it' (#12) **Internally Construed Threat to Identity as Professionally Competent** 'I'm out of my comfort zone, I'm massively out of my comfort zone… I certainly feel the stress. I kind of refuse to feel beleaguered' (#7)	**Hard Working, Tougher and Wiser** 'I was working 70 hours a week and answering emails on holiday and so forth … I think you've got to be amongst it and work bl**dy hard, er, I used to be at my desk half past seven in the morning, not leave until half past seven at night on a normal office day…it's extremely, extremely hard work' (#19) 'I did learn to be a bit thicker skinned' (#13) 'I think it takes you a while to realise some of the politics around' (#2)

Table 2. Coding Scheme: Types of Loss, Threats, and Preferred Identities

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[i] By 'self' we refer to the totality of an individual's identity narratives.

[ii] Arguably, many deans would benefit from mentoring and life coaching both in negotiating the terms of their deanship (e.g., sabbaticals to mitigate loss of research time) and to cope with the exigencies of the role.

[iii] While mostly titled 'deans' some were formally styled 'department head' or 'director' but these individuals had responsibilities indistinguishable from those whose title was 'dean'.

[iv] One had also led a school outside of the UK and one a corporate training facility.

[v] Interviews were conducted by all three members of the research team, sometimes individually and at other times in pairs.

[vi] Loss of a 'researcher' identity was mentioned by 21 interviewees, loss of 'integrity' by 25 interviewees and loss of 'equanimity' by 29 interviewees. 18 people referred to all three forms of loss, 11 mentioned two types, and 2 deans just one.

[vii] For ex-deans this talk supported their stories of who they were (had been) as a leader.

[viii] All these deans were heads of schools ranked outside of the UK top 5 according to the 2014 Research Excellence Framework exercise.

[ix] While we have analysed the three types of loss separately, conceptually, they are somewhat overlapping categories. For example, loss of a researcher identity interleaves with loss of a professional identity.

[x] Isomorphic pressures on business schools that also impinge on deans are well-documented (Gioia & Corley, 2002; Henninger, 1998).

[xi] Similar stories occur in the UK, if less frequently (Jump, 2015; MacLeod, 2007).

[xii] We thank one of our reviewers for this point.