Constructing professional identity as a new academic: a moral endeavour

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There is an emergent literature on the professional identities of academics working in higher education but little attention has been given to academics new to higher education. Yet, for new academic staff entering higher education, questions arise in relation to their identity and purpose, and the moral and value dimension of identity remains an important, but under explored, element of identity construction. This research draws on the literature on morality and ethics, and data from an interview study, in order to redress the absence of discussion and discourse about the role these latter two concepts play in the identity construction of new academics, in order to provide a fuller understanding of their identity construction. Attention is drawn to important aspects of morality evident in their experiences as they forge an identity. From the research it is clear that becoming an academic is experienced as a cognitive and emotive process, and is a moral endeavour grounded in virtues of honesty, care and compassion.

Keywords: academic identity; new academics; values; ethics; morality

Introduction: changes in academic life and work

There is a growing literature focusing on the identities and experiences of academics in higher education (Barnett and Di Napoli 2008; Nixon 2001), and it has clearly emerged that universities are complex and disparate organisations where different constructions of ‘academic’ coexist (Harris 2005, 425). The transformation of higher education and its institutions has resulted in changes in the nature of academic identity, and there is an increasing emphasis on the importance of the local context in developing an understanding of the position of academic identities (Clegg 2008). However, while academic identity has been researched from a variety of perspectives resulting in greater understanding of the complexity and multiplicity of identities, few studies have been carried out on academics who are relative newcomers to the academic world (Archer 2008a). This article contributes to that understanding by reporting on a study of new lecturers in a large higher education institute in Ireland, and offers insights in particular on the moral or ethical dimension of identity.

Setting the problem in terms of the literature

In terms of explaining the concept of identity, Taylor (2008) draws attention to the work of Hall (2004), who suggests that there are four stages in the historical development of

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the Western concept of identity. The first stage lasted until the mid-seventeenth century, and the influences of Greek philosophy and Christian beliefs are evident. Identities are taken on through shared practices that demonstrate faithful acceptance of given truths. The writings of Descartes challenged this viewpoint and moved us on to a second position, which saw identity as constructed through individual thought and reflection arising from doubts rather than forged by tradition and external unquestioning sources of authority. The third stage drew on the work of Hegel and Freud, and led to an acknowledgement of the role of non-rational processes and of individual traits, beliefs and allegiances. This led to a view of identity as co-constructed. In the fourth stage the influence of postmodern philosophers led to a view of identity as always under construction in contexts that are complex and indeterminate. Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) argue for a clear conceptual clarity of the concept of identity, and from an extensive review of existing literature they concluded that professional identity is an ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences, and it implies both person and context. The attempt to create and maintain identity entails a ‘continuous site of struggle’ (MacLure 1993, 313), and this is located within a given social and cultural space. Thus, identity work is ongoing work that is constituted by history and by the conditions within which we live and work (Taylor 2008). It has been suggested that, because of the changing nature of higher education institutions, those who work in them are presented with many opportunities for the expression and recognition of their identities (Delanty 2008). So, for academics, there is an ongoing process of identity construction and deconstruction in the negotiation of a professional identity in regard to their various roles, and there is considerable emotional and intellectual work involved in this endeavour.

With regard to younger academics, they are more willing to accept ‘that their identities will always be under construction in contexts that are characterised by indeterminacy, partiality and complexity’ (Taylor 2008, 35). The new arrivals have not experienced the relations which characterised former eras, and they are positioned differently to those established within the field, and have various competing interests and identity constructions (Archer 2008b). While younger academics reported experiences of tension and identity conflict, the impact of more traditional discourses on identity construction was manifest, and there was some evidence of them attempting to resist the drive for performativity and adopting critical positions in relation to dominant practices (Archer 2008b). Indeed, the conclusion was reached that younger academics constructed their academic identities similarly to their older colleagues, in that they identified core values of intellectual endeavour, criticality and professionalism (Archer 2008a).

So, for academics, identity is tied up with values because, as Taylor (1989) argues, identity is forged within a moral framework because, in coming to know who you are, questions will arise about what is good or bad and what has importance to you. Thus, identity is tied up with what you are committed to, what you value and what you strive for. Taylor (1989) draws attention to three aspects of morality: obligation to others; fulfilment or meaningfulness; and a range of ideas concerned with dignity, respect and self-esteem. Nixon (2007, 20) argues that to be a good academic ‘one has to go on learning about what it means to be accurate and sincere, attentive and honest, and courageous and compassionate’. He is drawing attention to the virtuous dispositions that inspire and sustain the academic practitioner. In this regard, there is a rich body of literature on virtue ethics, which offers a way of looking at the complex experiences of an academic life.
The idea of a virtue is used in some different ways in the philosophical literature, but is understood by this author in the traditional sense of a virtue being an excellence of character combining a set of qualities, dispositions and capacities that contribute to the overall goodness of a character. MacIntyre (1985), drawing on the work of Aristotle, has written about the virtues that underpin practice and his work has brought a renewed interest in virtue ethics, which focuses on the character of the individual rather than the principles that govern the moral act itself. The moral virtues identified by Aristotle are listed in Table 1.

Nixon (2008) argues that the Aristotelian notion of virtues as dispositions is crucial in establishing a link between goodness and practice, and explores in depth the virtues of truthfulness, respect, authenticity and magnanimity, which are important in terms of academic practice. He argues that academic practice involves the exercise of certain virtuous dispositions, and becoming a good academic has a strong moral dimension and is dependent upon the practice of virtues.

While, previous studies have offered insights into identity construction, the moral or value dimension is an important but under-explored element of identity construction (Kreber 2010). This absence may be interpreted as implying that these kinds of issues are deemed to be less important, valid or worthy of our attention. Yet, as early-career academics pursue their identity projects, they struggle with many issues and demands on their time, and core values are in evidence as they make professional judgements and develop in their role. So, in this article I use a moral lens to examine their construction of academic identity, and explore how early-career academics experience their role and negotiate the realities of contemporary academic life.

### Methodology and methods

Polkinghorne (1988) writes about the importance of having research strategies that can work with the narratives people use to understand the human world. So, in order to explore the experiences of new academics at a large institute of higher education, a narrative approach was taken. Narrative begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals, and is thus appropriate to studying a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals (Clandinin and Connolly 2000; Creswell 2007). The approach is seen as a particularly appropriate way to explore the process of forming professional identities in a new environment (Clandinin 1995; Green and Myatt 2011). The style and method of narrative research are a function of the researcher, who brings his or her epistemological views to the research project, but, however it is carried out, a narrative study focuses on a single individual or a small number of individuals, and all forms of narrative ‘share a fundamental interest in making sense of experience, the interest in constructing and communicating

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 meaning’ (Chase 1995, 1). At the same time it is important to emphasise that lives are not constructed arbitrarily in a contextual vacuum, and biographical work thus reflects locally promoted ways of interpreting experience (Gubrium and Holstein 1995).

This study was undertaken in a higher education institute in Dublin which has functioned effectively as a significant national university-level institution for at least 25 years. It is characterised by a broad range of disciplines and multi-level provision from apprenticeship to doctoral education, with four colleges – science, engineering and built environment; business; applied arts; and tourism. The sample for the study was fourteen early-career academics drawn from four colleges, six disciplines and ten departments. Early-career academics are defined as academics who are in their first three years of lecturing. Each of the fourteen academics participated in a semi-structured interview (60–90 minutes). Informed consent was sought in writing and anonymity was guaranteed, so, in the presentation of findings, names are not the participants’ own names. The interview questions were send to the participants in advance of the interview and the topics/key questions focused on were; their career biography; the context in which they now found themselves, memories of the first few months of lecturing; a typical day as an academic; individual motivations, concerns, challenges and achievements in their professional role. The interviews were audio taped and later transcribed verbatim.

Riessman (2008) has developed a fourfold typology of narrative analysis: thematic narrative analysis, which investigates what is spoken or written rather than how; structural forms of narrative analysis, which focus on how the story is told; dialogic/performative analysis, which examines how talk among speakers is interactively produced and performed as narrative; and visual analysis, in which images are the data to be interpreted alongside the words of the image-makers. In this study, thematic narrative analysis was applied to the data, and analysis was conducted with a focus on the content of narratives to elicit the common themes that emerged from the interviews. This is an established tradition with a long history in qualitative inquiry, but continuing this tradition while also preserving narrative features proved a real challenge. As I sought to identify common thematic elements across research participants, I found it difficult to ‘keep the ‘story’ intact for interpretive purposes’ (Riessman 2008, 74). The concept of paradigmatic analysis developed by Polkinghorne (1988) is based on developing taxonomies of types of stories, characters or settings. In the interviews with the lecturers, there was evidence of a particular type of narrative, which offered interesting insights into the role of morality in identity construction. The narratives of identity were structured around two interconnected themes, values and beliefs, and a desire to support others and to be ‘good’.

In presenting the analysis, it is acknowledged that all of the participants are early-career lecturers in one higher education institution, and thus the story is of a limited number of ‘characters’ in a particular setting. Told within the interview situation, these stories, like all stories, are transactions in which meaning and definitions are offered to an audience, and it must be acknowledged that the telling would have been different if they were told in a different setting.

Values and beliefs

The early-career academics were very aware of the political issues within the organisation, and their decisions were influenced by such realities.
In the past this was primarily recognised as a teaching institution, there is no question about it, but there is a deliberate and very overt focus now on moving towards a research-led institution, and obviously that is to do with university status. Now, I have very much bought into that as well because I am trying to further my career by actually getting a PhD, which I see is very much a move forward to my career and also towards promotion. (James)

Pressure can come in many different forms. Certainly every time I have got up in front of school review boards, not necessarily departmental but certainly faculty and school meetings, one of the very clear priorities there is to deliver world class research, so it is not necessarily a situation where my boss is coming to me saying, hey you have to do research. (Kevin)

Attention is being drawn here to the differential status awarded to teaching and research as promotion is now clearly seen as being linked to research. Young (2006) concluded from research in the UK that promotions are a key way in which research is valued over teaching, and it is interesting to see this now manifest in the experiences of the Irish lecturers.

However, the early-career academics are not just motivated by notions of performative and making the right political move, but their own hopes and aspirations and the values and beliefs underpinning professional work.

For me it is having a natural passion for education and knowledge and attitude of service to students, that is very important to me. And scope to do original thinking and to generate new knowledge and to try out new things because I am in applied science engineering, so more than theoretical things, I have to try things out and see how they are going to work. And I told you it is not something 9:00 to 5:00, and the research element does play a significant role in my idea of an academic’s life. (Leona)

Being an academic is a way of being in the world, and so the dimensions of the role that are most important are teaching, research and service, and this encompasses supporting students and having the opportunity to do original thinking and generating new knowledge. All of the early career academics wanted to teach, research and publish, and the inter-relation of teaching and research was central to their identity. However, finding the time for research was an issue.

Well, with 18 hours [of teaching] a week, it is challenging to pursue research, certainly for the first couple of years, because you are really getting modules up and running and it is challenging. You end up doing quite a bit outside of normal hours, you might do work at home and research background information, and working a little bit on some medical prosthetic development, that work has been going on within the department. (Colm)

The new lecturers in this institution occupy a very different space to some of their peers in universities, as they carry a very high teaching load of eighteen hours, which is the contractual obligation. Teaching is important to the early-career academics, but research, or the production of knowledge, has come to have a central role in the process of identity formation for this group within the institution. However, on a practical level with a heavy teaching load, they are finding it difficult to allocate a space for research and writing in order to develop their scholarly profile. They also drew attention to another important factor which impacts on them:

It is a kind of self competition that I want to keep myself on par with my international colleagues in other European countries, USA and my friends who are in a similar position,
that at the end of the year it is a matter of competition to see how many journals are coming out and conferences are coming out and all these things. (Leona)

So in terms of their identity formation, they are influenced by early-career academics from other institutions and countries, and this is the group against which they are judging their own research output. There is a real desire to achieve in the same way as the peer community of researchers within the discipline, as that group are at a similar stage in their careers.

And also for your own integrity when you go and meet your peers, people who are at the same stage as you in other institutions at conferences or whatever, and sometimes you do feel like there is no point telling them, I had a great class last Wednesday. That would just be the thing, within teaching it is always my hope to be the best that I can do being a teacher, and it is part of my role that I enjoy the most, absolutely the most. And from that point of view teaching roles in this institution suit me. But you would never want to reach a stage where you became disillusioned with your teaching, because you felt it was draining your potential to develop as an academic or to progress. (Clare)

Clearly, for early-career academics there are influences from inside and outside the institution affecting them as they seek to forge an identity that is true to their sense of what being a good academic entails. However, there is real concern evident about their workload and the ability to sustain their interest and motivation to be good at both. There is little doubt that, for the early career academics, the experience of research and teaching is what defines academic life, and they are motivated to develop and support their discipline in terms of both research and teaching.

I wouldn’t consider someone an academic if they are just doing research, their own research. If they are doing research that doesn’t support other postgraduates then I wouldn’t consider those academics as such, they are researchers. Whereas, as an academic you have to have that element of supporting learning. That would be my perspective. (Alan)

The concept of service to others is a defining aspect of being a good academic. For the early-career academics there is a real sense that being an academic is about working with students and encouraging them in their learning.

But I think as academics you should voluntarily take on a bigger responsibility in society because you are afforded something in a kind of collegial institution like that that you don’t have in the private industry. Like you are given the kind of power to be independent as an academic, which isn’t enjoyed by a lot of other people in society, at the same time as you are being handed a room full of students who are, in many cases, really in a good time of their lives, where they are soaking up ideas and finding out how to achieve things in the rest of their lives. It means being a teacher just in the straightforward thing as in teaching this module and supporting the students to come to an understanding of the material. Being a researcher I would always see that as part of my responsibility as an academic. So that is also a part and what does it mean to be a researcher? That is another question but basically you should be trying as a researcher within a team to contribute something to knowledge within a field. (Steven)

In a broad sense he is speaking of the kind of fulfilment which arises from having academic freedom, but he suggests that this can only truly be realised in terms of a sense of duty and responsibility to students, colleagues and society. There is evidence of a desire to contribute to society and, while it is not clear how this might happen, there is
a willingness to serve the wider public interest. This is not about forging tactical alliances with industry, but rather there is a desire to take account of wider issues and concerns and contribute to the greater good of society. Also, he is speaking of the contentment and meaningfulness associated with being an academic, in terms of supporting student learning and researching within a team to contribute to the body of knowledge within a field.

**A desire to support others and to be ‘good’**

There is evidence of a virtuous discourse in the narratives of the new lecturers, which affects the way in which they conceive of the work of a ‘good’ academic and construct their own identity:

There have been times, particularly near the start, where you go into the class and it just doesn’t happen for whatever reason, and I come out and come back here or whatever and I’d be annoyed about myself. First and foremost reflect and say, was it me? And you say, what could I have done differently? What could I have done better? And at the start one or two of the things I was annoyed with myself was perhaps down to rushing the preparation, you know, because starting work in January, delivering a course in the third week in January, it was a bit of a rush. So, you learn lessons from that, you know, maybe do less content and more depth or whatever. You know, the reason that I am obviously still here and want to develop on is that there are more good days than bad days, or even to have a bad lecture and then you move onto the next one and think positive. (James)

There is a real sense in which self-esteem is related to being good as a lecturer and this involves preparation, a consideration of the subject matter and ways of presenting it well to students, and thinking about how to improve. It is really important for him that the preparation is undertaken carefully so that the students can be supported in terms of their learning, and he is annoyed with himself if this does not happen. There is a concern to be ‘good’ as a lecturer and there is integrity evident in the struggle to be better. Cox, La Caze, and Levine (2003) argue that a capacity for reflection and understanding enable one to work towards integrity, and one can see this at work in the narrative from James. The next narrative focuses on the importance of connection with students.

This year I spent the summer and I prepared a set of lectures and as I started delivering the very first lecture that I did this year, it suddenly hit them and I got a discussion. And that was the easiest one hour I had ever done, because it went really quickly and everybody was involved. So I thought, that is what I actually have to do. So I started chopping and changing the lectures so it allows for this discussion to happen among the group. So that happened in November, so that was a good two months into the new year before I hit it. I think it was kind of like Lecture 10 or 9 anyway. (Lucy)

In the first instance I was struck by the way Lucy describes her experience of realising what it is she needs to do as a lecturer and how she describes arriving at this after Lecture 9 or 10, when she ‘hit it’. In Lucy’s story there is a very clear concern to get her students involved with the subject, and she changes her lectures to achieve this and get them involved through discussion, and for her it was ‘the easiest hour I had ever done’, because she had succeeded in developing a pedagogic relationship in which both teacher and student were playing an active part.

As a teacher, I suppose one of the big motivations is engagement and you just know when the class is going right and you can almost see it in their faces. So the engagement is
crucial at all levels. And then the content, I suppose coming from a business background it would annoy me if I missed something, that is just me, you hate to think that you are delivering stuff which is not current, which is not relevant, which has moved on and that is always going to be a big motivator for me to keep myself up to date. And I enjoy doing it, I love to see new stuff coming through with an inquisitive mind, and it is there for the students and you can see the people who will pick it up and run with it. (James)

In talking about his work there is evidence of the cognitive and the emotional, and there is a joy in good teaching, which has to do with engaging the student and presenting material that is current so that the students can then ‘run with it’. It has been suggested that, when teachers are asked about their experiences, their stories reveal that ‘classroom interactions are always relational, teachers and students cannot help but stand in certain relations to each other’ (van Manen 1994, 135). This is very evident in the words of Liam and Ross:

In the very few times I did it, at the very start that was by far the most stressful aspect of the job, knowing that the students were not engaged, but once they are then it is the best job in the world ... I would feel I am in a completely different place now with my lecturing. (Liam)

I do find, you know again this idea of taking time to motivate the students and, even if it is looking at this popular engineering, and looking at things that are of interest to them just to capture them initially and then to start to delve a bit deeper into the technical side of things. Like, to give you an example, there was a guy last week and he was big into motor GP, you know these big high performance motorbikes and he is mad into them but he is doing engineering and you could see like for his project I said, well let’s take an aspect, let’s take the helmet and look at the helmet design. And he was going, well it is designed to move air to through the body and it was designed obviously for impact. So he is into it now and I think he is finding the engineering side fascinating now. (Ross)

Liam talks about delivering material, and for many lecturers at the beginning of their teaching life there is a strong focus on organising the content and getting that right, but he soon realises that this is not enough. Ross mentions the importance of motivating the students and relating to their interests. Filene (2005, 132) puts it very simply when he says that ‘when you teach you enter into a relationship with students’, and Liam and Ross are acknowledging the importance of that relationship, and also the need to engage the students. In each case the concern is to be good as a teacher. Liam is clearly deriving pleasure and satisfaction and this relates not only to the intellectual dimension of teaching but to the emotional, the way he feels as he teaches. These feelings can either enlarge or diminish the exchange between us (Palmer 1998), and the power of the feelings generated when the teaching experience is positive is testimony to the importance of connectedness in the work of a teacher, which Liam and Ross describe.

**Concluding reflections**

Although it would be unwise to generalise from this small narrative study, a number of implications can be drawn if it is considered in the context of current literature on identity. Early-career academics are called on to make choices and exercise judgement in complex and changing circumstances and, as they seek to construct a professional identity, there is a moral purposefulness evident in their thinking and professional practice.
This study has revealed that, as early-career academics pursue their identity projects, they are critically influenced by the institution and their international peers in the discipline. However, the values, virtues and beliefs of the individual have emerged as a significant influence on identity construction. In the narratives the dynamic complexities of unique encounters are evident, and becoming a good academic related to caring for the students, being research active and finding joy and contentment in this work. This research has highlighted the importance of ethics and morality in the thinking and practice of early-career academics, and thus redressed the virtual absence of discussion and discourse about the role of these concepts in the identity formation of academics. A professional life is not without its difficulties, and there is a need for a dialogue about the academic role where the focus is on values and practice not regulations and output. Such a dialogue is important so that the university can be a place in which academic staff can grow personally and professionally, and serve their students and the wider society. From this research it is clear that becoming an academic is experienced as a cognitive and emotive process, and is a moral endeavour grounded in virtues of honesty, care and compassion. Rowland (2006, 117) suggests that ‘higher education needs to write itself a new story based more closely on intellectual and moral values connecting participants with the wider society’. Writing this article has been my attempt to contribute to such a new story.

References
