Exploring character in the new capitalism: a study of mid-level academics' in a British research-intensive university

I use character to examine a group of mid-level academics' accounts of work and career in a British research-intensive university. Highlighting how people draw on good character to justify their approach to work under the pressures of new performance demands, I argue that good character is a central feature of contemporary academic work, in a typically nostalgic form. Furthermore it is widely used to secure professional legitimacy. I highlight the implications of my findings to managers of others' careers in academia and more widely.

Introduction

British higher education has undergone change in recent years, being subjected to commodification (Naidoo, 2003), managerialisation (Prichard, 2000), standardization and some would argue intellectual degradation (Collini, 2012). The growing demand for demonstrable efficiency in all aspects of academic work, has been reported to conflict with what is seen as academics' moral responsibilities to students, colleagues, discipline, self and family/community (see Jump, 2011; Harley et al. 2004; Sparkes, 2007). Some commentators suggest that academics are increasingly complying with performance demands, enticed by its potential rewards (see Clarke and Knights, 2015). Outside academia, the supposed transformation of the workplace and its effects on employees is a significant HRM concern. Of particular interest is a rhetoric which portrays contemporary working life as devoid of any form of fellow feeling, and with little or no concern for colleagues, family or society.

Individuals are seen as firmly embedded in market relations, experiencing 'individuation', fashioning their own identities, and becoming isolated, autonomous and egocentric (e.g. Beck, 1992). Drawing on Tocqueville's notion of individualism, Savickas (2011) argues that people are now compelled to focus on themselves rather than others, particularly if career success is a goal. This modern sense of self provides the freedom for individuals to go where their intelligence and interests take them, but has little to say about a communal sense of being a person. Given that the well-being of people not only relies upon material resources, but also on social dimensions of life (Honneth, 2010; Nussbaum, 2011), it is increasingly important to examine individuals' accounts of contemporary working lives.

In this article I draw on the concept character to examine a group of mid-level academics' accounts of work and career in a research intensive university in Britain. Character is variously referred to as qualities, self, social relations, an ethic, virtues and values. However some aspects of the concept are not in doubt. First, it is tied to community (Savickas, 2011). Second it is observed in practices of self-discipline (McKinlay, 2002), commitment (Sennett, 1998) and adherence to culturally established moral rules (Whitehead, 2005). As a sociological construct, character emphasises the social aspect of the employment relationship; thereby addressing what has been described as the 'missing human' in HRM (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007). Given the contested picture of contemporary academic work in the research intensive university sector in Britain, I argue that it is extremely important to examine how 'good character' plays out in academics' accounts of their career trajectories. In what follows I will first review the literature on character addressing the challenges posed by new capitalism (Sennett, 1998) and then turn to the UK's HE sector: the empirical focus. I highlight four ways in which academics in a British research intensive university mobilised

discourses of good character and career progress in their accounts. Based on my findings I argue that good character is a central feature of contemporary academic work, in a typically nostalgic form. Furthermore it is widely used to secure professional legitimacy. I highlight the implications of my findings to the managers of others' careers in academia and more widely.

Character and individuals' working lives: the story so far

For many scholars, researching individuals' working lives is a question of identity: a person's conception and expression of their own self (Kenny et al. 2011). There are various takes on identity, but from a sociological and/or social psychological view, identity is dynamic and flexible, a matter of individual control and/or negotiation (Burr, 2003) rather than predestined or characterised by fixed criteria. Identity is widely used in occupational research to highlight how individuals make sense of their working lives and occupational choices (Mueller et al. 2008) and/or cope with the exigencies of their roles (Grandy, 2008). In contrast, character, which has comparatively less presence in the organisational studies literature, has a moral and communal orientation, emphasising socially imposed moral credit (see Whitehead, 2005) accorded for adhering to culturally agreed rules of ethical conduct (Mckinlay, 2002). While a few scholarly contributions recognise how identity is shaped by membership of a particular community while also helping to shape that community (see Wenger, 1998), character goes beyond communal orientation to focus intensively on the moral dimension of work assuming relatively fixed ideas of what constitutes moral behaviour.

Character emerged at a time when self was seen as part of a collective. In the Victoria era, a person's character was linked to community, embracing values like honesty, responsibility, respect, fairness, helpfulness and thrift (Savickas, 2011). Communities sought to stamp character on members through circulation of archetypical stories and cultural myths. In organisations, character is taken to reflect morality, humility (Whitehead, 2005), loyalty, and mutuality and commitment (Sennett, 1998), observable in patterns of behaviour which are socially ratified (Mckinlay, 2002). Character has long been central to building a career. In a historical study of Scottish banking, McKinlay (2002) shows how advancement was dependent on employees' diligent conduct, high moral standing and conformity to their organisation's culture. In return for compliance, banks promised a 'career'. That is, security and rewards were available to those with good character. Similarly, in education, Whitehead (2005) shows how in the early twentieth century, teaching applicants were required to provide evidence of good character. Ideal recruits were not women who opted to teach in order to earn a livelihood, but those who felt a 'calling' and had a desire to prepare pupils for life morally as well as intellectually. Writing about early professions, Abbott (1988) argues that some professions gained legitimacy through good character. At least until the seventies the French army corps retained legitimation based on courage, service and personal glory. As professions professionalised formally developing their social structures in examinations, licensing registration and ethic codes, technique became the key source of legitimation (Abbott, 1988).

Character has been largely absent from organization studies. However, in a critical account of working life in new capitalism, Sennett (1998) reintroduced the term, making the contentious point that good character is inconsistent with developing a career in

contemporary organisations. He argued that marks of ethical conduct such as loyalty and delayed gratification have lost value. Instead, work in new capitalism is characterised by excessive flexibility and superficial relationships, highlighted in the popular managerialist exhortation to be a 'good team player'. Drawing on Kunda's (1992) conceptualisation of teamwork as deep acting, he suggests that this norm demands the manipulation of appearances and behaviour without the ethics of self-responsibility which typified 'old capitalism'. In Sennett's view, the conditions of new capitalism threaten to corrode individuals' characters, particularly those aspects which bind people to one another. Mutual loyalties and commitments cannot be sustained in institutions which are constantly breaking apart or continually being redesigned. Carter (1998) likewise maintains that capitalism undermines civility and 'pollutes our souls' because it counsels us to be selfish (see also Savickas, 2011). The systematic practice of market driven behaviours therefore creates a gap between professional incentives and moral responsibility. Furthermore ties outside the workplace are weakened when individuals must work long hours, be constantly on the lookout for new opportunities and move homes to accommodate employment demands (Sennet, 1998; Hochschild, 2012). From this point of view, work profoundly affects how people organise their homes and communities, and who they are as parents and friends.

Hughes (2005) takes issue with the view that good character, in terms of reciprocity, communal orientation, loyalty and non-instrumental ethics, is necessarily being eroded in the new capitalist workplace. He argues instead that it is reinvented, in the guise of emotional intelligence. Highlighting its core skills (e.g. ability to defer gratification and to control and channel one's urges to act), Hughes sees emotional intelligence as a new

version of character, no longer associated with adherence to socially agreed moral rules, but using individual discretion to decide on the appropriateness of actions in particular contexts. In a study of cabin crew, Bolton and Boyd (2003) similarly highlight their respondents' refusal to be objectified, instead using their individual judgement to care for people in the ways they saw fit. We thus have a divided picture. On one hand, character is seen as corroded in the modern organisation. On the other hand, it is redefined in terms of being individual discretion. Notably, both arguments imply the rise of individualism and the collapse of community. However while Sennett perceives this as categorically detrimental, Hughes' position is less deterministic, offering more scope for the exercise of individual agency. In this paper I seek to contribute to this debate through an analysis of how UK academics based in a research intensive-university talk about their working lives and careers. The context is significant as an employment setting in which new capitalism is clearly being articulated. In the following section I explain why.

Academic work in the UK

Historically, academic work has carried a significant moral imperative to contribute to the social good. From an 'entrenched liberal perspective' Delanty (2001) argues that the university is 'a vehicle for the reproduction of culture, while Collini (2012) portrays universities as institutions devoted to deepening human understanding. The purpose of a university is not simply to produce employable graduates, develop new technologies or boost its host country's GDP, but to provide an education which allows individuals to develop moral judgment. However, over the last two decades, academics' working lives have been subject to various managerialist pressures. Techniques of evaluating research output, teaching quality and public/social impact assessments have become normalized

(Clarke et al., 2012; Harley, 2002) leading to pressures to perform. This managerialism rewards individuals who provide the greatest measurable, visible output. Because publication performance is more susceptible to quantified measures than teaching (Lorenz, 2012), it became a basis for state funding. The Research Excellence Framework (REF), previously known as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), measures research performance of universities and uses it as the basis for allocating central research funding. Currently the most significant metric is research outputs, accounting for 65% of the assessment in the most recent exercise. One consequence of the REF is, career reward systems in some universities focusing on publications over teaching (Davies and Peterson, 2005). Although the imposition of a threefold increase in tuition fees has led to a greater emphasis on teaching and student experience (Creighton, 2012), in some universities, teaching has been devalued (Harley et al. 2004). Academics are under pressure to publish their work in top journals which has led to a competitive academic marketplace amongst those who are successful (Jump, 2011). Studies suggest that academics are now more interested in *where* they publish rather than what they publish (Macdonald and Kam, 2007).

At the same time, with cuts in government research funding and an emerging requirement to demonstrate value for money, there is increased emphasis on entrepreneurship and 'impact'. Academics are encouraged to generate funding and provide evidence of the wider impact of their research. Furthermore close connections with business and industry are valued and external accountability is exercised through sophisticated measures (Marginson, 2008). Thus universities' performance is increasingly measured against commercial criteria while at the same time satisfying REF expectations (Gibb et al. 2013).

The growing demand for demonstrable efficiency in all aspects of academic work has been reported to conflict with what is seen as academics' moral responsibilities to students, colleagues, discipline, self and family/community (see Jump, 2011; Harley et al. 2004). Some studies indicate a comparative neglect of teaching and students in favour of research and writing (see Lynch, 2015). This picture of academic work in the research-intensive university system is strikingly similar to Sennett's (1998) provocative descriptions. Therefore the sector is an interesting context today to examine the following research question:

How does good character play out in senior lecturers' accounts of work and career?

Research design

This project sought to better understand senior lecturers' (associate professors) perceptions of career opportunity and constraint in a British research intensive university. The project intended to establish what senior lecturers hoped to achieve career-wise, the challenges they encountered in the process and the aspects of work they enjoyed. Senior lecturers are a particularly useful cohort to study. Having successfully passed through the junior levels, where they received considerable structure, guidance and support, by senior lecturer level this is much less available as individuals are expected to take more responsibility for their own progress. It can therefore be a time that agency comes to the fore as people reflect on their career trajectories thus far and consider their future moves.

Data were gathered through twenty six semi-structured individual interviews with senior lecturers from Business, Humanities, Engineering, Science and Design faculties in a single

research intensive university in Britain. An open invitation was extended across the institution to all senior lecturers to participate. The invitation stated the purpose and scope of the project noted above. Senior lecturers who responded to the invitation welcomed the opportunity to talk about their work and career choices - something they rarely had the opportunity to do, and which was especially pertinent because of the particular challenges noted above. Twenty six individuals responded to the invitation and they were all interviewed. Participants ranged from 33 to 64 years old, the majority was in their forties. Eighteen respondents were male while eight were female. Twenty one academics were British-born while five were categorized by the university as 'international'.

The interviews were undertaken by a post-doctoral research associate who was not a permanent member of academic staff and did not know most of the respondents. To maintain confidentiality, transcripts were fully anonymized before they were sent to the research team who were attached to the case study university at the time of data collection. I recognise the dangers of researching one's own community: being too close to the data to take a considered view (Bell and King, 2010) and/or going native due to being a member of the community under investigation. I have sought to reduce these dangers through continuous interrogation of my findings with a few close colleagues. In interpreting the data, I am aware that I have inevitably given priority to certain features and responses in the research (Watson, 1995) and I am reflexive about this.

Interviewees were asked a series of theme and probe questions about career expectations, available career paths and their feasibility, aspects of work which they found most interesting, opportunities and constraints they perceived to impact on their careers and the

strategies they used to navigate these. The interviews lasted for one hour and were loosely

structured, allowing respondents to raise topics of concern as the conversation progressed.

The interviews were digitally recorded and the transcripts were presented to the

interviewees to read and comment on. The primary data analytical technique was template

analysis (King, 2004) conducted in three stages. First I identified first order descriptive codes

representing the key themes respondents introduced such as teaching, writing references,

personal tutees, PhD students, colleagues, administration, four star journal articles,

research funds, impact, long hours and family. The Nvivo 9 software package was used to

facilitate data coding and to establish frequencies pertaining to themes. The template was

continuously modified in the process of coding, using Hammersley and Atkinson's (1997)

notion of 'progressive focusing'. At the next level of analysis, we moved from first order

descriptive codes to second order conceptual ones. For instance, teaching, writing

references and personal tutees were linked with others to form 'fulfilling responsibilities to

students'. Likewise the code impact was split into developing impact case studies to satisfy

performance demands and making impact for moral purposes. Careful consideration of

second order conceptual themes in conjunction with the literature, led to two third order

aggregate codes: good character and career advancement. Good character was about

fulfilling responsibilities to students, organizational citizenship and using research to help

the wider community. Career advancement privileged satisfying REF requirements,

generating research income and developing impact case studies to satisfy performance

demands. These were seen as essential for progression to full professorship which was the

goal within this theme. I also examined all data which were not associated with a particular

theme and looked out for contrasting and minority views to ensure that the analysis is

based on all of the respondents' voices. I re-read the contents of each theme and to develop

understanding of the individual themes and relationships between them. When I spotted contradictions and/or relationships between codes I further explored them across all the transcripts to understand the apparent inconsistencies. For example, it became evident that respondents constructed good character and career advancement as a tension based on incompatibility of communal and individual interests. I examined this tension further across all the transcripts seeking to move the analysis from description to a conceptual level. I sought to understand how respondents' mobilized understandings of good character and career advancement in their career accounts. Using the concept of discourse as an analytical device for illuminating patterns of meaning making and action, I explored academics' career narratives. A starting point is the proposition that reality is socially constructed and that language is fundamental to this process. I see Watson's (1995) definition of discourse as particularly relevant:

> a connected set of statements, concepts, terms and expressions which constitutes away of talking or writing about a particular issue, thus framing the way in which people understand and respond with respect to that issue … [These statements] function as menus of discursive resources which various social actors draw on in different ways at different times to achieve their particular purposes (1995: 814).

Watson's definition points to a dialectical relationship between discourse and social structure: thus discourse is a practice not only just representing the world but also constructing it, leading towards particular modes of action, and away from others. In this analysis my focus is on the discourses themselves and their interplay. In presenting the data

I have used pseudonyms, avoided naming respondents' departments, and edited where necessary to provide anonymity.

Analysis

In contrast to depictions of career-building as a highly individualistic activity in the literature (Clarke and Knights, 2015), in my data the notion of being a 'good academic' was paramount. For twenty senior lecturers this meant being student centred:

> *We have a moral responsibility towards students: to teach well and to be available. This has always been a central feature of academic work* (Lorna)

As Lorna described a typical working day in the Information sciences school, she was keen to highlight the moral responsibility associated with good teaching which she defined in terms of developing students' capacity to think creatively and critically. Lorna and other interviewees argued that academics have *always* nurtured students thinking through their teaching (see Collini, 2012), providing insights into what they saw as long standing professional norms of academic work.

Twenty-two senior lecturers emphasised the importance of collegiality. Shauntelle from the department of History explains:

You have to support colleagues, come in when people present their research, be available for students – not just think about your own self - have a good character you know.

Shauntelle drew on good character to explain the importance of supporting colleagues by commenting on their research, peer mentoring and sharing information. Several other interviewees similarly explained how academic work has *always* operated on the basis of academics' goodwill to each other. Academics examine PhDs, mentor one another, cover for colleagues who are on study leave and contribute to disciplines as journal editors, reviewers and conference organizers. Although much of this work is not formally mandated, academics have always done it because it is the right, collegial thing to do and it is part of being in a community of scholars. In other words, collegiality is a shared value in their profession.

Eighteen respondents defined a good academic in terms of using their research to serve the wider community. Marcus from sports sciences explains:

It is a moral responsibility to do work important to the community and to get our findings across to them. It is something we have always done and something we should continue to do

While Marcus recognised the fact that internal performance review processes in some universities acknowledge academics' involvement in citizenship activities, he emphasised that he understood public engagement in terms of collective consciousness. He saw this as a

fundamental value of academic work. His excerpt highlights how workplace communities are suffused with values and sentiments drawn from long standing customs.

For fourteen respondents, dependability and loyalty to the organization (Sennet, 1998) were paramount:

> *It takes a certain character of people to run this university – you can't just suddenly leave and let people down, you have to be there to see things through and take responsibility for its outcomes. It is important in this industry to have a sense of commitment to the place you work; otherwise it will be a mess* (Rich)

Rich and others agreed that mobility is helpful to accelerate a career in academia. Apart from access to better opportunities, there was a symbolic dimension to mobility where more than five years in one place was seen as indicating lack of exposure and marketability especially if compared against a more mobile candidate for a position. Furthermore, being seen as 'ready to move' could provide a discursive resource for people to negotiate better working conditions, even promotion. However Rich drew on good character to explain the importance of organisational commitment. In contrast to commentators like Sennet (1998), he saw instrumentality as having potential to collapse the entire institution.

Finally, nineteen respondents specified the importance working in an ethical way which they defined in terms of as adhering to rules of right conduct and practice in the academic profession, and privileging honesty, transparency and fairness.

Taken together the senior lecturers in my sample identified collegiality, student centeredness, public engagement, loyalty and dependability and ethical conduct as integral components of academic work. Some made explicit references to 'character' in their accounts, while others referred to the concept implicitly. However, amongst respondents there was a consensus that hierarchical progress meant, to a greater or lesser extent, leaving communal interests to one side. Senior lecturer Sasha explains the tension between publishing and good teaching:

> *The aim is to be better in research, to publish, even if that affects your teaching and your administrative duties. It's not like you need to be excellent at teaching. As long as you're not bad you can have career progression. But if you're bad at research you're stuck and you don't have career progression. You need to prioritize towards the things that give you more prospect of career progression – and that is research - top journal articles. So the time that you allocate to other things like teaching will become less and the time that you allocate to research will become more.*

According to Sasha, some exceptional individuals are able to sail their way into top journals but the majority of 'average calibre' academics need a lot of time to write to the required standard - time which is difficult to make while also engaging with students and fulfilling administrative duties and other unpaid professional obligations. Conversely, Rave explains how doing good teaching often leads to compromising on research time:

> *You can't put off turning round some assessment and feedback, you can't put off showing up to your lectures you're meant to be giving and tutorials and other things.*

With your research you often can let that slip a bit. So inevitably if you need a safety valve it tends to be things you have flexibility in and often you don't have much flexibility in your admin because somebody's sending you an email saying "Can you do this by tomorrow?" So you do sort of what you have to do, and so inevitably I think if there is any slippage it tends to be in the research area.

In short, respondents constructed a seeming incompatibility between requirements to progress and good character. Given that senior lecturers were at a career stage at which teaching loads and administration responsibilities were high in comparison to early career, and at the same time they were under considerable pressure to publish in order to progress, it could be that they feel this tension particularly acutely. In what follows, I seek to understand how respondents mobilized discourses of career advancement and good character in explaining their responses to this tension, and what I can learn from this maneuvering.

Responding to the tension

Respondents mobilized discourses of career progression and good character in four key ways. Twelve people drew on 'good character' in terms of collective interests, to 'soften' the perceived sense of individualism and self- interest in their accounts of career progress. In Poster's words:

If I go to a conference and someone comes up to me from the [Teaching University of X] and says "blah blah", unfortunately I probably will think to myself "[Teaching University of X]? I don't think it's worth my time". But anyone with a conscience is

> *not going to be a poor teacher. If a student comes to me and says they want some*
>
> *help with something I might say to them "Okay, we'll try and make an appointment"*

Poster started off with explaining how he attempts to manage his time effectively to write research papers. To compensate for the image he might have created of himself as instrumental, he highlighted his commitment to students. Although he carefully managed his boundaries with fellow academics from other institutions who he did not feel a sense of responsibility for, he said that he did not compromise on the quality of teaching and students.

Likewise, in explaining how she does just the 'minimum required' in administrative duties in order to concentrate on her research, Fiona emphasised that her door is always open to colleagues and students:

> *I keep a balance between rejecting and accepting administration jobs. And I do just*
>
> *the minimum required. We can't do everything because we have to write as well. But*
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> *my door is always open to my colleagues and students. I don't do office hours; if I am*
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> *in and you knock on my door I am available for you. It is our duty as educators –*
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> *students should have the luxury to come in and verify their concerns.*

Senior lecturers like Fiona aspired to promotion but also wanted to be good colleagues and teachers. A striking feature of all 12 accounts was that respondents arranged collective responsibilities in a particular, hierarchy of importance. Student centeredness was at the top, followed by responsibility towards one's own colleagues. Administrative tasks and

duties to outside colleagues were seen as least important. Although this data might be seen as confirming Hughes (2005) argument about the reinvention of character to privilege individual discretion, it is notable that respondents continued to closely follow socially prescribed rules of good character which held teaching and concern towards one's immediate colleagues at high esteem, thereby continuing to maintain prevailing, socially ratified definitions of good character in academic work (see Delanty, 2001; Collini, 2012) rather than re-defining the term according to their personal discretion. While these academics could have also prioritized student time due to the importance their institution placed on the National Student Survey (NSS) results, the fact that they repeatedly drew on 'serving the social good' to explain (or rather soften) their approach to work, suggests that it is extremely important to be seen as moral in their work setting. It is notable that this response was more pronounced in the accounts of female respondents where six out of eight female interviewees attempted to soften a typically careerist orientation by highlighting their good character in terms of student centeredness. Given that women are expected to be relational (Tyler and Cohen, 2010), these respondents may have felt the imperative to position themselves as such.

A second response, expressed by six of the older academics, was to draw on good character to explain their lack of performance in research. In Celeste's words:

> *The more student-centered you are, the more emails you're going to get. I was answering emails at half twelve last night because the course work's being handed in today - but then it's providing a service. It's good to be able to go that extra mile, but that's probably why I've not got as much research output – because I go the extra*

mile with students. some people are much better at managing their boundaries and will say no or they won't show their face at things, or they won't be the ones that people will turn to if they need somebody to help out at the last minute, or they won't be the ones who turn up at open days and show students round. They won't be the ones emailing students over the weekend. But if we all stopped doing that it would be in a terrible mess

Celeste drew a sharp distinction between herself and others who show less concern towards colleagues and students. While they protected their boundaries to create space for research, she was much more responsive to external demands, and in doing so sacrificed a strong research profile. She felt that her generosity keeps her department from descending into disorder. Similarly, Adam presented his prioritization of teaching over writing four star research papers as a considered choice:

If you focus completely on research, target particular journals or you know, find people to collaborate with, then you can advance, but it's very restrictive. The thing that gets people promoted is not being collegiate, is not looking after students. For me, I couldn't sleep at night if I didn't care for students and didn't do my best to teach them properly to the detriment of pursuing four star research papers that no one will ever read.

Notably, Adam also said that he was not a great writer and generating four star publications was not something he excelled in: *Writing papers – I am not that good at. So there is no point of focusing on it'.* Thus he seemed to position himself as student centered to justify his lack of research output.

A third response was constructing good character and performance demands as compatible and mutually enabling, signifiers of one's position as a consummate academic. Acutely conscious of the tension between new research demands and wider moral responsibilities (in particular good teaching), these individuals explained their research focus in terms of impact and public engagement. Marcus who does research on disabled athletes explains:

For me research is about wandering around the spinal hospital speaking with nurses, speaking with disabled people or going to spinal hospitals … I think's fundamental - to take our research to the community - and far too many academics don't do that or, alternatively, they look at it in relation to the tick-box exercise of impact or being able to get another sample or whatever. I just think its part of our moral duty to do that.

Marcus explicitly acknowledges the fact that 'impact' is rewarded in career terms, but makes the point that he does not look at it as a tick box exercise. Although recognizing that some people use impact to promote their own interests, in his view this is not inevitable.

Interestingly, Ben drew a distinction between research he does to tick boxes and research he does out of moral responsibility. In his view it is possible to do research that serves the interests of the wider community *and* research that ticks the boxes:

I've put in big grants and got a few big grants that I think are okay, but hey, they're not great. I don't think it's great research, even research that really matters, but that

plays the game. I get my small grants to do what I think is impactful and valuable

research.

In contrast to Ben, Shauntelle spoke about impact in solely moral terms, emphasizing that she does 'good work' through her research:

I'm very involved with a number of sort of feminist organizations in India and that kind of thing and for me from a kind of moral standpoint it's very important for me to still engage with that. It takes a lot of time – I do it without sleeping really.

To further highlight the point that she serves collective interests through her research, Shauntelle explained that she sacrifices on sleep for the sake of her research. Indeed other respondents similarly stressed their long hours and there were no significant gendered patterns in people's responses. When interviewees were asked about home-work dynamics, most of them were keen to emphasise that commitment to collective interests inevitably led to them spending much less time on their personal lives. Indeed the data seemed to vividly illustrate the paradoxical consequences of the practice of good character. By taking work home to fulfil their moral duties, academics ended up compromising on being a good parent and/or partner. However, one might wonder if these individuals felt an imperative to position themselves as working very long hours and sacrificing family time for work. Because the study was led by insiders, our respondents may have felt the need to exaggerate their workloads and commitment to work. I have no basis on which to corroborate or challenge people's accounts of their working days and can only assume the truthfulness of their stories. However, what is more interesting is the ubiquity of such claims in respondents'

accounts. Respondents were keen to tell us how hard they worked, and seemed to attach a moral virtue to such endeavor. What impressed me most about these claims is that they underline many respondents' desire to present themselves not as ambitious career actors, but as good citizens: people who used their expertise for the betterment of society.

A fourth response from three young research superstars, who were well-known for their speedy progress, was excusing their lack of good character (in terms of student time) by highlighting the collective benefits of their research focus. These respondents made the point that their four star publications increased the ratings of the university, thus benefiting the university as well as themselves. In Sasha's words:

> *This is a research intensive university and we are expected to prioritize good publications. This is what increases the ratings. If the ratings are not good, students wont come to us. Obviously time spent on other activities will be less but this is what we are supposed to do in this environment and we are just doing our job.*

Sasha explained that in the current, austere financial climate, high REF scores is one of the main ways in which universities can secure funding. As she saw it, focusing on high quality publications compromised interacting with students or ensuring the quality of their experience. However she was able to contribute to the university's reputation. Thus Sasha tried to make a point that focusing on performance demands not only yielded individual benefits but also collective benefits especially to the organization. It is notable that the three respondents who positioned themselves in this manner were international academics who had very little awareness of the history of British academia or its long standing values.

Furthermore, at the time of the research they had just received accelerated promotions on the basis of four star journal articles. Thus they may have felt the need to justify their position.

Discussion

In this article, I drew on 'character' as a discursive and analytical resource to examine a group of mid-level academics' accounts of work and career in a British research-intensive university: a context we argued operates in the conditions of new capitalism. Based on my findings I make three contributions. First I show how character plays out in contemporary academic work settings. Unlike critics who maintain that work in new capitalism has been stripped of moral awareness altogether (Sennet, 1998), my data reveals collective agreement about what constitutes good character, although used flexibly by incumbents. Here there is an intriguing difference between this research and that of Hughes (2005). Although as Hughes claims, there was considerable diversity and discretion in the ways in which people practically engaged with these imperatives, in my data there was an overarching consensus about what constitutes good academic work and workers. The great majority of respondents uniformly drew on socially defined and historically inscribed moral rules in describing the purpose and nature of their occupation, and to rationalise and justify their actions. Thus in this analysis character is pitched at the nexus of structure and agency. While Hughes offers 'reinvention' of character, my research suggests a more nostalgic, 'residual' (Williams, 1977) view, situated in the present but infused with ideas from the past.

In early bureaucracies character was a powerful form of career capital (McKinlay, 2002; Savickas, 2011), directly impacting on employees' upward advancement through their

organizations. In the contemporary context of our research, this is no longer the case. The requirement to prioritise journal articles eclipsed other responsibilities, most notably commitments to students. However, the incorporation of impact measures to the university's promotion structures offered opportunities for academics to demonstrate their moral worth *and* get promoted. My findings thus presents a divided snapshot of work in a new capitalist workplace, a context in which deeply held, socially ratified notions of good character are at once compromised by and consistent with the rules for career advancement. Raymond William's notion of residual culture is useful lens to understand this coexistence. He conceives residual culture as 'experiences, meanings and values which cannot be verified or cannot be expressed in the terms of the dominant culture' (ibid. 1973: 10) but is rooted in a former social existence. In British academia, a residual culture privileging good character existed alongside the dominant culture privileging publications and funding. Williams argued that the dominant culture perpetually seeks to incorporate the residual. Indeed many universities attempt to recognise traditional values such as collegiality in their promotion scripts, although the emphasis on publications often overcomes this focus. We need longitudinal research to further explore whether the residual can eventually change the way in which the dominant expresses itself.

Second, I show how academics respond to the tension between changing performance demands and longstanding professional values. Respondents discursively maneuvered around the variables causing tension. Some senior lecturers used good character in terms of student centeredness and collegiality to offset too much focus on performance demands, or to justify too little. Others pulled performance demands and good character together, representing them as compatible and mutually reinforcing. Through this synthesis they

justified their career focus on impact and public engagement. A minority justified their lack of good character through the organisational benefits of their individualised career focus. The approach adopted was shaped by the resources one could claim access to (e.g. competency in publishing), gender role expectations and cultural exposure to British academia. I argue that justification is the means by which academics reconcile the dissonance between new performance demands and professional values. While I do not claim this to be a novel finding, these findings nevertheless provide a rich picture that helps advance thinking about how people carry on in a changing workplace which challenges their communal self (see Savickas, 2011; Carter, 1998). I show that people attempt to achieve a sense of coherence by manipulating discourses around the variables which cause tension.

Third, I show that good character is a significant source of legitimacy in contemporary academic work. The great majority of senior lecturers in the sample did not claim legitimacy through cutting edge research or strategic managerialist incentives, even though it was rewarded in the university's career structures. Instead most respondents emphasised their good character in traditional terms (Mckinlay, 2002). Writing about early professions, Abbott (1988) argues that some professions gain legitimacy through values rather than technique. At least until the seventies the French army corps retained legitimation based on courage, service and personal glory. The move from character to technique as a source of legitimation came as professions professionalised formally developing their social structures in examinations, licensing registration and ethic codes (Abbott, 1988). My findings show that in academic work, culturally constructed notions of good character are still a significant source of professional legitimation, and these notions are used flexibly by respondents. I propose that this is a feature of the higher education industry. Academia, since its inception,

was characterised by its service to the larger social good (Collini, 2012) and thus sources of legitimacy are inextricably linked to the profession's original values such as student centeredness. Through these findings, I therefore contextualise professional legitimacy. By using character as an analytical and discursive resource to analyse individuals' accounts, one is able to illuminate the powerful influence of long standing professional norms on legitimacy.

Conclusion, implications and directions for future research

In this article I used character to examine a group of academics' accounts of their working lives. As an analytical resource, character illuminates the influence of moral values and longstanding cultural norms on individuals' meaning making of work and career, Organisations may be impacted by new competitive pressures, but these do not wipe out fundamental values altogether. Rather they may coexist in tension. Thus character goes beyond identity (see Wenger, 1998) to illuminate traditions, cultural norms and relatively fixed ideas of moral behaviour. In designing career paths, change interventions and other similar initiatives, it is vital for managers of others' careers to be mindful of the fact that most individuals seek material esteem while also dovetailing commitments and concern about things that matter to them. Furthermore being seen as working in socially ratified ways is extremely important to people. Managers should therefore not create situations which force people to make what they see as moral compromises. This is not only disturbing for people's sense of self but also for their social image.

With respect to a future research agenda, further work could valuably focus on other sectors and hierarchical levels which involve varied degrees of autonomy and managerial

control. For example, in the education field, studies into further education or into the statutory sectors, all of which have been heavily influenced by new capitalist agendas but where people enjoy far less personal discretion, might afford some very different insights into the moral dimensions of work in contemporary conditions. Scholars might likewise find it useful to compare and contrast traditional occupations and professions (e.g. medicine and law) which like academia were traditionally seen as having a strong, underpinning moral purpose with those (e.g. management consultancy) that emerged in the wake of and are closely associated with new capitalism.

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Table 1: Profiles of senior lecturers

NAME	GENDER	AGE	DISCIPLINE	Status
1. Adam	Male	45	Business	British
2. Fiona	Female	38	Psychology	British
3. Kevin	Male	54	Business	British
4. Linda	Female	37	Geography	British

5. Lorna	Female	54	Information Science	British
6. Marlon	Male	42	Engineering	British
7. Nick	Male	56	Design	British
8. Ricardo	Male	34	Business	International
9. Roy	Male	41	Engineering	British
10. Sasha	Female	33	Business	International
11. Shauntelle	Female	38	History	International
12. Terrence	Male	39	Transport studies	British
13. Catherine	Female	59	Engineering	British
14. Celeste	Female	46	Business	British
15. Joseph	Male	48	Psychology	British
16. Erick	Male	45	Geography	British
17. Janice	Female	41	Engineering	British
18. Pontin	Male	55	Engineering	British
19. Poster	Male	48	Psychology	British
20. Ben	Male	38	Sport sciences	British
21. Jonjo	Male	64	Political sciences	British
22. Marcus	Male	40	Transport studies	British
23. Randy	Male	34	International	British

			relations	
24. Asim	Male	40	Engineering	International
25. Danny	Male	37	Sociology	International
26. Rave	Male	39	Design	British