Moral Identity Work in Senior Business Managers

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Moral identity work in senior business managers

by

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Abstract

This thesis adopts a social constructionist epistemology and a narrative analysis research method to explore the moral identity work of senior managers in UK for-profit businesses. Analysis of thirty semi-structured interview transcripts was carried out using the Nvivo data analysis software package, guided by Gioia et al's (2013) systematic approach to qualitative data analysis. The study identifies one overarching theme – that of *the loneliness of seniority*, which underpins the moral identity work of participants. Participants articulate the loneliness of seniority with recourse to three main tactics – describing intense pressure to deliver against business objectives, expressing the weight of expectation that they perceive from many stakeholders, and asserting that they feel caught between those above and below them in their organisational hierarchies. Two further themes are elaborated. In the first – *reaffirming themselves as essentially moral* - participants assert that they have a moral core, with recourse to nostalgia for childhood. In the second - *becoming and being moral managers* - they assert their roles as moral champions by characterising their organisations as systems that threaten to thwart their moral agendas, and which they need to resist. These findings contribute to understanding in the under-researched area of individual moral identity within a business context, as well as offering a fresh perspective to the broader field of business ethics research. The research makes contributions to theory in several areas, notably to the theories of nostalgia and of stigma management in identity work, and to the theory of resistance as an identity work stratagem. It also contributes to practice with the findings that feelings of isolation persist beyond middle management, and that moral issues in the workplace are experienced in a remarkably similar way in individuals from different business functions and sectors.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This research is a narrative inquiry focusing on moral identity in senior business managers. Through the analysis of their narrative accounts, it examines the way that a range of senior business managers working in for-profit business organisations in the UK construct and perform their moral identities. In doing so, this research offers a fresh perspective on, and approach to, the established field of business ethics research.

1.1 Background

The background to this study is a long history of high profile scandals related to irresponsible and unethical behaviour in the business world, which have often attracted significant negative media attention (Barkemeyer et al, 2010). Recent examples incorporate a range of issues including environmental fraud with the Volkswagen emissions testing affair (Nunes and Park, 2016), financial impropriety with the Toshiba financial reporting scandal (Verschoor, 2015) and health and safety violations with catastrophic consequences as exemplified by the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh (Begum and Solaiman, 2016). Many of these well-documented scandals have been blamed upon the behaviour of business practitioners and as a result 'scholars are reflecting on, and seeking new avenues for, ethics research aimed at understanding why business leaders and employees continue to behave in unethical ways' (Elsass et al, 2016, p220). As such, the individual ethical behaviour of business managers is under sustained scrutiny.

Aside from the issue of press censure, the central role that business organisations play in the functioning of modern life, through their contribution to job and wealth creation, means that proper conduct in a business context is a critical legal and ethical issue, and one that has potential to impact upon us all. One effect of globalisation is that business organisations are increasingly extending their focus beyond their own activities, and engaging with broader social and political activities more traditionally associated with government (Scherer, Palazzo and Matten, 2009). Often, this may be an unintended consequence of businesses simply taking over the provision of services that were traditionally the remit of government organisations (Crane and Matten, 2005). Nevertheless, as the distinction between government and business becomes more blurred, and the role of business organisations in society continues to evolve, understanding more

about morality in business practitioners is an issue that ought to be of interest to a wide range of stakeholders.

Studies to date have considered business ethics from a number of perspectives including the ethical decision-making process of individual practitioners (Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe, 2008), the influence of different stakeholders on business ethics (Ma, 2009), and the connection between ethical behaviour and shareholder value (Orlitzky et al, 2003). More recently, broader behavioural ethics approaches have been considered within a business context, including ideas related to moral motivation and its connection to moral or immoral action (Treviño et al, 2006). With its focus on the individual moral identity construction of business practitioners, this research explores this individual-level factor within an organisational context, and in this way contributes to understanding of the moral motivation of business practitioners.

1.2 What is moral identity?

Aquino and Reed (2002) define moral identity as 'a self-conception organised around a set of moral traits' (p1424). Hardy and Carlo (2011, p212) assert that moral identity '… generally refers to the degree to which being a moral person is important to an individual's identity'. Shao et al (2008) argue that these subtly different definitions can be combined because 'both emphasize the importance of the moral self as determining the regulatory potency of moral identity, and both rely on the desire for self-consistency as providing the primary motivational impetus for moral action.' (p519). In asserting this, Shao et al acknowledge the self-regulatory functioning of moral identity often argued for by moral identity scholars, where departing from moral ideals is believed to provoke sufficient dissonance in individuals to influence, and ultimately to change, their behaviour. For the purposes of this study, then, moral identity is defined as those elements of an individual's sense of self which are related to moral characteristics, and which can work to influence that individual's moral behaviour.

1.3 Research questions

The moral motivation of individual practitioners is highly relevant to the study of ethics in a business organisational context. Many business decisions involve choosing between options that can be perceived as right or wrong (Aquino and Freeman, 2009), and there is also often a tension between doing what is morally right and what is profitable, since business goals may conflict with doing the 'right' thing, if the moral action is not the profitable one. As Jackall (1988) puts it, 'What is right in the corporation is not what is right

in a man's home or in his church. What is right in the corporation is what the guy above you wants from you. That's what morality is in the corporation' (p4). So business environments are 'fraught with conflict between what is right for others and what is best for oneself' (Aquino and Freeman, 2009, p389). The way that individual practitioners develop, hone and manage their ethical behaviours in the distinctive and unique context of a business organisation is the broad area of interest of this research, and the study examines this by elucidating the way that they construct their moral identities. As such, this thesis considers the following research questions:

- What do their narrative accounts of workplace experiences tell us about the ways in which senior managers in UK for-profit businesses discursively construct and perform their moral identities?
- How do senior managers draw on internal and external resources as they construct and perform their moral identities?
- How does the way that senior managers experience and depict organisational contextual factors, such as their position in the hierarchy, shape their discursive construction of their moral senses of self?

1.4 The gap in the literature

The case for moral identity being different from other elements of identity has been made (Blasi, 1984) and empirically demonstrated (e.g., Power, 2004). The connection between moral motivation and action has also been empirically demonstrated (e.g., Bolton and Reed, 2004). The concept of individual moral identity offers a fresh way of approaching business ethics research (Shao et al, 2008) which to date has tended to focus on ethical decision-making, stakeholder analysis, and the impact of corporate social responsibility initiatives. As Clegg et al (2007) note, moral dilemmas are, by their nature, complex and difficult to negotiate and, as a consequence, making morally good choices is neither easy nor straightforward. Recognising this complexity is, they argue, 'critical to understanding the lived reality of ethics in organisations' (p109). Ethics in an organisational context is often typified as a code of conduct that must be adhered to and the perspective underlying this approach has, they argue, extended to business ethics research which has tended to assume 'that the ethical distinction between right and wrong can be codified and then applied in order to ascertain whether certain actions or behaviours are deemed ethical or unethical' (Clegg et al, 2007, p109). Clegg et al espouse an approach that focuses on ethics as practice as a way of elucidating the lived ethical experiences of business practitioners, an area that they argue has generally been overlooked in business ethics research.

The perspective adopted in most scholarship investigating moral identity has been positivistic, which has inevitably driven a search for generalisable findings and demonstrable causal links. Much research has therefore focused upon giving an account of what moral identity is, on the development of moral identity in a psychological sense, and on the measurement of it (Hardy and Carlo, 2011). This approach has tended to ignore the individual voice, focusing instead on the description, development and measurement of an essential or fixed set of traits and characteristics.

The constructionist approach adopted in the majority of identity work literature, on the other hand, views identity as discursively constructed. This perspective acknowledges the role of interaction in the construction of self, and sees identity as *becoming* rather than *being*, and somewhat fluid rather than fixed. Investigating moral identity construction from this perspective allows for possibilities that the positivistic stance has hitherto not permitted. These include the idea that identity may be influenced by contextual factors and external discourses as well as by interactions with others. Although moral aspects of identity have been considered (e.g. Clarke et al, 2009), the identity work literature has thus far not tended to focus explicitly on the concept of moral identity.

Shao et al (2008) argue that much research remains to be done if we are to understand moral identity in an organisational context. They also assert that understanding more about the way that business practitioners construct and make sense of moral issues in the workplace could potentially significantly advance our understanding of the area of unethical behaviour in a business context. The research perspective offered by the identity work literature clearly has much to offer such research, and so bringing together these two bodies of work addresses a gap in the literature, and offers the possibility of contributing to business ethics scholarship in a distinct way. Given the link between moral identity and behaviour asserted in the moral identity literature, exploring the way that business practitioners develop and perform their own moral sense of self would appear to offer a new and different way to approach this complex area of enquiry (Weaver, 2006; Stets and Carter, 2012).

This study, then, addresses a gap in the literature by delivering knowledge into the way that senior business managers develop and perform their moral identities. It does this in a way which the existing moral identity literature has so far not been able to do, due to its positivistic epistemological stance, and in a way that the identity stream of literature has so far not done, since while scholars in the identity work stream of literature have

contemplated some moral facets of identity (e.g., Holt, 2006; Clarke et al, 2009; Corlett and McInnes, 2013), they have not yet considered in any depth the way that moral identity per se is constructed and performed in individuals. What results from this inquiry is therefore an account of moral identity construction which has not previously been articulated.

1.5 Morals versus ethics

The close relationship between the terms 'morals' and 'ethics' is evidenced by the definitions given for each in the Oxford dictionary of English. Morals are defined as 'principles of right and wrong' and ethics as 'relating to moral principles or the branch of knowledge dealing with these'. These definitions are sometimes interpreted to mean that morals are more abstract and individual than ethics, which are often characterised as shared principles. Ethics, for example, are sometimes seen as a subset of morality, when a code of ethics is established to ensure that a body of individuals adhere to agreed standards. Similarly, morality can be seen as a subset of ethics where ethics is used in a broad philosophical sense to ponder questions related to the way that individuals should live their lives. But often, the terms are used as synonyms and, as such, an ethical issue 'just is a moral issue' (Honderich, 2005, p271). This is the way that the terms 'morals' and 'ethics', 'morality' and 'ethical' are viewed and used throughout this thesis – as concerned with what is right and wrong, and distinguishing between the two in the context of business organisations.

1.6 Structure of this thesis

Following this introduction, this thesis is organised into six further chapters. A literature review is followed by a methodology chapter, three chapters focused on findings and discussion and a conclusions chapter. A brief outline of each chapter now follows, after which the broad contributions to knowledge and practice of the thesis are summarised.

In the literature review which follows this introduction chapter, academic literature focusing on moral identity, identity work and middle management are contemplated and a conceptual framework rooted in these three bodies of work is advanced as a lens through which the moral identities of business managers can be studied. The review identifies that literature focusing on moral identity has delivered a number of insights, including the idea that reflective processes may be at work as it develops (Atkins et al, 2004), that situational factors may influence its development (Power, 2004) and that it can be constantly remodelled (Hart, 2005). Although research in a number of contexts has shown a clear link between moral identity and moral behaviour (e.g. Stets and Carter, 2011; Xu and Ma,

2015), little work to date in this area has focused upon business organisations and, as noted above, the stance adopted by moral identity scholars has meant very little focus on the way that moral identity is constructed and performed by individuals.

The chapter goes on to consider in detail identity work scholarship, which considers the ways in which individuals develop, hone and enact their senses of self. Identity work research generally adopts a social constructionist stance, and has to date offered a number of key insights into identity development and performance which have relevance for a study into moral identity. These include the notion that role and role expectations can influence identity work (e.g., Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Creed et al, 2010; Ibarra, 1999), the idea that identity threats can provoke identity work (e.g., Ashforth et al, 2007; Toyoki and Brown, 2014), the role of performance and dialogue in identity work (e.g., Beech, 2008; Hardy et al, 2000), and the contention that social identities can impact upon identity work (e.g., Watson, 2008; Gill, 2013). Research focusing on middle managers and the way that they experience hierarchical issues as they attempt to secure their identities is also considered in this review, and ideas related to the isolation and pressure that these individuals experience (e.g., Sims, 2003; Harding et al, 2014) and the identity work that this provokes (e.g., Hay, 2014; Ibarra, 1999) are explored. The literature review brings together these three areas of scholarship to propose, and justify, a new way of examining moral identity, adopting a social constructionist standpoint, and drawing on ideas emerging from research in the identity work and middle management fields of study. It argues that adopting this lens allows for more nuanced questions around the way that individuals develop and hone their moral senses of self to be considered, questions that the positivistic epistemological stance of moral identity research to date has prevented it asking.

The methodology chapter which follows gives a full account of the methods used to carry out this research. The study adopts a social constructionist perspective, which asserts that meaning is made in, and through, social interaction (Berger and Luckmann, 1971). This approach is based upon the contention that there is no one 'reality', but that individuals may construct meaning in different ways. The notion that moral identity is, like other personal identities, constructed discursively, through interaction with others (Gergen, 1998), underpins the study. Although the construction of an individual's sense of self seems likely to be an inherently individual and personal endeavour, the social constructionist perspective accounts for the role of the social in the process. In this viewpoint, language is not simply a transparent medium through which we convey meaning to one another – it is constitutive of social life. It makes things happen and brings social worlds into being

(Wetherell et al, 2001). The chapter goes on to justify the choice of narrative analysis, in which participants' stories are gathered, analysed and re-presented in pursuit of meaning, as a method. It points to the central role of the researcher in interpretive research of this kind, because meaning is co-constructed discursively, through talk and dialogue. This choice of research method asserts the idea, as espoused by Bruner (2004), that narrative is culturally shaped – essentially, the way we tell our life stories is shaped by culture, and the stories themselves and the way that we tell them can in turn influence our lives. MacIntyre (1981) argues that narrative accounts can go beyond causal explanations, and can deliver an understanding of the sense of actions. In this way, narratives can deliver an understanding of why individuals behave the way that they do. The focus of this study is current senior business practitioners working in for-profit business organisations across a range of sectors in the UK, and the rationale for choosing senior managers – broadly that they would have significant professional experience and would therefore be more likely to have encountered moral issues in the workplace - is explained. The chapter goes on to detail the way that the sample of participants was achieved, and the approach to data analysis, in particular the way that the researcher moved between data and theory throughout the process (Gioia et al, 2013). The chapter concludes with a data structure which identifies the themes emerging from analysis of the data.

Findings are presented in three chapters. Each chapter begins with an in-depth analysis of the account of one participant, and is followed by a detailed exploration of the themes emerging from the account with recourse to the narratives of other participants. A more thorough interpretation of the stories and emergent themes, in the light of literature relating to identity work and construction, follows. Finally, theoretical implications of the findings are presented in an extended discussion towards the end of each findings chapter.

The first findings chapter focuses upon the loneliness of seniority, and explores participants' presentations of their lives as senior managers. With recourse to three main themes from their accounts – that they feel intense pressure to deliver against business objectives, that they feel the weight of expectation from many varied stakeholders, and that they often feel caught between those above and below them in the organisational hierarchy – the chapter explores the loneliness that participants depict, and argues that this depiction underpins and enables much of their moral identity work. In making this argument, it draws on notions related to performative identity work (e.g., Down and Reveley, 2009) and the construction of a preferred identity (e.g., Charmaz. 1995).

The second findings chapter examines the tendency observed in many participants' accounts to reaffirm a moral core, an assertion that they evidence with recourse to three main tactics – arguing that they were brought up to be moral, contending that they are unable to tolerate unethical behaviour, and claiming that they simply know the difference between right and wrong because of something within them. This unshakeable belief in an essentially moral self is explored in the light of identity work related to stigma management (e.g., Toyoki and Brown, 2014; Brown and Coupland, 2015) and to the role of nostalgia in the construction of an individual's sense of self (Bardon et al, 2015).

The third findings chapter examines the way that participants endeavour to become and to be moral managers. They do this with recourse to three tactics – asserting that they need to set the moral tone within their organisations, expressing a tension between being good and being competent, and characterising their organisations as systems that work against them, and which they need to resist, as they endeavour to behave in a moral way. The chapter argues that participants identify and appropriate the elite role of moral leadership (Gill, 2013), often by adopting 'not-me' positions (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) and through defensive othering (Ezzell, 2009) where they draw on descriptions of stereotypical 'others' to present themselves as the exception to them.

In the concluding chapter, the key findings of the research are summarised, and contributions to theory and practice are set out. The research contributes to the broad area of business ethics research through the adoption of a new lens to investigate the established concept of moral identity, and to the identity work area of research with a focus on under-researched moral facets of identity. The study also contributes to theory related to nostalgia in identity work, to the theory of stigma management, and to theory related to resistance as an identity work stratagem. Empirically, this work demonstrates that functional group (e.g., finance, marketing) does not appear to make a difference to the way that participants experience moral issues in the workplace. It also indicates that feelings of loneliness and isolation persist beyond middle management, which contributes to understanding of the lived experiences of senior managers. The limitations of the research are articulated and, as the chapter closes, connections to wider debates are discussed and possible future research directions are identified.

Chapter 2

A conceptual framework rooted in three streams of literature

2.1 Introduction

This review contemplates academic literature focusing on individual morality and identity in an organisational context. It proposes a conceptual framework rooted in three existing bodies of scholarship – those focusing on moral identity (section 2.2), identity work (section 2.3) and middle management (section 2.4) - as a lens through which the moral identity construction of senior business managers can be examined.

The thesis argues that the body of work known as moral identity literature has generally adopted a positivist epistemological stance, and that while this has resulted in a compelling argument for the uniqueness of moral identity versus other identities, it has given rise to much deliberation around the accuracy of describing, accounting for and gauging moral identity, with little attention being paid to more nuanced questions around moral identity construction.

The broader identity work literature offers an alternative social constructionist frame and a range of concepts which resonate with the study of moral identity development in business practitioners. The moral dimension of identity has rarely been the explicit focus of this literature. This body of work does not focus overtly on the influence of seniority within the organisational structure on identity construction, which given the hierarchical nature of so many business organisations, and the likelihood of increased engagement with ethical issues as an individual progresses through the ranks, is a potentially noteworthy gap.

The added perspective of the body of literature investigating middle managers' identities provides some insight into organisational and hierarchical factors which may have an effect on the way that these managers construct and perform their professional and moral senses of self. Although the focus is on individuals at lower levels in the hierarchy, this body of work explores, among other things, the way that managers experience their positions between senior and junior colleagues and the impact that this has on their identity work. In doing so, it advances ideas which are directly relevant to the moral identity work of business managers at more senior levels within their organisations.

Bringing these three bodies of literature together offers a conceptual framework with which to examine in depth the way that senior business leaders develop and perform their

moral identities in the context of their positions, near to the top of their organisations' hierarchies. It allows for the concept of moral identity, to date only really investigated from the positivist standpoint, to be probed from the post-structural perspective prevalent in the identity work and middle management literature. This should lead to the uncovering of new understandings around the way that moral identities develop, as focus extends beyond essentialist views of identity, and towards a notion of identity as situated, fluid and discursively constructed.

Although moral identity construction of some groups has been explored (e.g., Fitzmaurice, 2013; Deeb-Sossa, 2007; Karlsson et al, 2013) very little work has focused upon moral identity in a business organisational context. Indeed, in their review of moral identity research, Shao et al (2008) note that 'much work remains if we are to gain a full understanding of moral identity in organisational contexts' (p534). As such, a study that seeks to explore moral identity in this way and in this context would appear to be both timely and relevant.

2.2 Moral Identity Literature

2.2.1 Introduction to moral identity literature

Aquino and Reed (2002) define moral identity as 'a self-conception organised around a set of moral traits' (p1424). This definition rests on a conception of identity as central to an individual's being, and underpins the assertion espoused by a number of moral identity scholars that identity can work to control the behaviour of individuals. On this account, moral identity is conceptualised by scholars in the tradition reviewed in this section as a mechanism embedded within an individual, which works to regulate their moral behaviour. (e.g., Blasi, 1984; Hart, 2005).

The literature focusing specifically upon moral identity tends to adopt a positivistic epistemological stance. This perspective rests upon the ontological viewpoint that objective realities exist independently of the researcher, and await discovery. The purpose of positivistic research is to uncover these objective truths (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002) and that aim has underpinned the agenda for most, if not all, moral identity research to date. In this respect, the approach taken to moral identity research is generally very different to that taken in the identity work strand of literature, which tends to adopt an interpretivist stance. The interpretivist stance, exemplified in a social constructionist epistemology such as that adopted in this study, asserts the central role of the researcher in the co-creation of meaning (Guba and Lincoln, 1982). The moral identity work reviewed here has its roots in a

fundamentally different world view, therefore, than that adopted for the research project, and the body of research is reviewed with this in mind.

The broad area of moral motivation has attracted the attention of researchers seeking to deliver insights into the behaviour of business practitioners in the face of morally-charged issues. For example, investigating the link between intended and actual moral conduct, Weber and Gillespie (1998) found that practitioners often report that their actual behaviour diverges from their intended behaviour. In seeking to explain divergence of this kind, some researchers including Bergman (2004) and Lapsley and Narvaez (2004) have argued that moral reasoning may not precede moral action, which may in fact be the result of unconscious or automatic processes. Haidt (2001), for example, argues for a social intuitionist model of moral judgement, in which he asserts that moral intuitions are supported by post-hoc reasoning processes through which the individual makes sense of their feelings and actions. While acknowledging the possibility that some moral intuitions are instinctive and automatic, Treviño et al (2006) among others point to Haidt's (2001) assertion that early life experiences are important in the development of an individual's intuitions, and argue that intuitions related to workplace situations are unlikely to be rooted in childhood events. They argue that this makes Haidt's model unsatisfactory as an explanation for intuitions related to organisational issues and situations. This objection has provoked further consideration by Shao et al (2008), discussed later in this review, who consider that while it may not be appropriate for all situations, the social intuitionist thesis may have a part to play in explaining moral behaviour in specific circumstances.

The search for a connection between moral motivation and action has, in part, led a number of business ethics scholars to move their focus to theories of identity-based motivation, in an effort to elucidate ethical behaviour in an organisational context. One strand of work in this area has focused upon investigating the links between behaviour, feelings and thoughts and an individual's sense of self. For example, Bolton and Reed (2004) have empirically shown that judgements that are congruent with an individual's identity tend to be more enduring than those which are not. Broader identity theories have formed the basis for much of this research, notably Tajfel's (1981) social identity theory and Hitlin's (2003) personal identity theory.

Tajfel's 'minimal group' studies of the early 1970s, in which he demonstrated that allocating individuals to groups on the basis of random and irrelevant criteria nonetheless produced bias in respondents in favour of their own groups, led him to formulate his social

identity theory, in which he challenged the prevailing view of group dynamics. Hitherto, many thinkers had subscribed to the view that groups formed and persisted because the members were united against some external phenomenon or against other groups. While not denying the importance of so-called 'outgroup' attitudes and behaviour, Tajfel argues for the idea that cohesion can also be driven by individuals seeking to fit in to social groups – essentially 'in-group' behaviour. Tajfel sees this process of integration as a vital part of the development of a 'social identity' – essentially the elements of an individual's conception of self that they derive from their knowledge of membership of social groups.

Hitlin (2003), however, argues that Tajfel's account of identity does not sufficiently explain what is at the core of an individual's identity and advances the notion that identity is built on values - 'enduring beliefs that certain patterns of behaviour or end states are preferable to others' (Hitlin, 2003, p120). It is commitment to these core values that is central to what he terms our personal identity. In support of his position, Hitlin (2003) argues that other thinkers such as Rokeach and Schwartz have shown core values to be stable in individuals over time. Individuals will, he suggests, view situations through the lens of their core values, and this will impact on the decisions they take, and the positions they adopt. Our core values will influence the very situations that we elect to involve ourselves in, because our value structures will cause us to engage in situations which will allow us to enact the values that we see as central to our core identity – those most important to us. As such, Hitlin advances the view that values underlie individuals' attachments to group situations. Harré et al (1999) advance the view that positions may be more useful in understanding the ways in which individuals negotiate their identities. They argue that positions relate to rights and duties to act, and can therefore be fluid, dynamic and constantly renegotiated.

A number of theorists (e.g., Blasi 1980, 1999; Aquino and Reed, 2002; Bergman, 2004) have considered in more depth the connection between an individual's sense of self and their moral behaviour, and have advanced the view that moral motivation is inextricably linked with identity (Treviño et al, 2006). It is worth noting that, to date, the vast majority of scholarship in this area has adopted a positivist perspective, which implies an emphasis on hard data, with the aim of uncovering objective truths which can be generalised to wider populations. For this reason, the focus has tended to be upon describing and measuring moral identity, on identifying antecedents to it and on finding causal links between moral identity and behaviour. Conversely, little research in this area to date has considered the way that individuals construct and enact their moral senses of self. Also, while the notion of a moral identity is not new, its application within business organisation research is

relatively scant. The few studies that have been carried out with in an organisational context suggest that moral identity is positively related to moral outcomes, and negatively related to unethical behaviours in organisational settings (Shao et al, 2008).

2.2.2 Moral identity as different from other identities

Given the focus of this study on moral elements of identity, it is worth considering why moral identity should be seen as distinctive, and different from other identities that an individual may have. Blasi (2004) advances the view that moral ideals, which he likens to ideals of beauty and truth, are special insofar as they are not notions that people tend to distort in order to fit with their own wishes or desires. For him, these ideals are unique in 'transcending individual self-interests' (p336) because encountering one of them provokes in individuals a strong aversion to distorting them in order to serve their own interests. In this way, he asserts that moral ideals are distinctive.

Power (2004) concurs that moral ideals are different, supporting this claim with empirical evidence to demonstrate that while individuals are able to 'discount', or relegate the importance of, most goals, they find it more difficult to do this with moral goals. Examining the link between self-esteem and moral development, he notes that many writers have linked the two by arguing that a basis for self-esteem can often be the approval of others, and that approval judgments are often linked to social norms which themselves often embody the moral values of society. Power argues that it is the fact that the agent sees himself as morally competent rather than the social approval of others that leads to feelings of self-esteem. An individual can have high levels of self-esteem while being successful or competent to varying degrees depending upon the domain or area they are considering, but this depends upon them being able to discount the importance of some of the domains – those in which they are less successful or competent.

Power invokes an earlier empirical study (Makogon, Power and Khmelkov, 2003, in Power, 2004) in which respondents were presented with hypothetical scenarios in which they repeatedly failed to achieve a number of different goals. The goals were academic, sports-related, popularity-related and moral. Respondents' willingness to discount the importance of the goals increased with the number of failures in all but the moral goal, which the majority of respondents was not willing to discount in importance. Power uses this finding to evidence his assertion that while individuals can discount the importance of a range of domains, they do not routinely tend to discount the importance of moral domains. This, he argues, makes moral domains different from other domains, because moral demands are

less easy to set aside compared to other demands. Essentially, moral demands are different insofar as individuals do not discount the significance they attach to them if they experience failure in relation to them. This research indicates that moral goals are viewed differently from other goals, but it does not offer an in-depth account of why this might be. This may be a function of the underpinning epistemological perspective the study adopted, which would not easily permit such questions to be answered. It is also worth noting that moral goals and not moral identities were studied.

Aquino and Reed (2002) offer a view of moral elements of identity as rooted in, and evidenced by, specific measurable personality traits, asserting that moral identity is distinctive by virtue of the traits that it encompasses in individuals and of the importance that individuals attach to those traits. Again, the positivistic stance adopted by this study means that the reasons for the divergence are not probed. So, while research to date indicates that moral identity is distinctive, and that is likely to impact upon moral behaviour, it does not offer insight into why this might be. From the social constructionist stance prevalent in identity work scholarship, the question of whether moral facets of identity are distinctive is perhaps less important because this standpoint views identity as fluid and ever-changing.

2.2.3 How previous research has explored the moral aspects of identity

Much moral identity scholarship is underpinned by social psychology theories. Research to date in this area has encompassed several strands, which are summarised below. Building on broader theories of identity (e.g., Tajfel's (1981) social identity theory and Hitlin's (2003) personal identity theory), there is a body of research that has sought to give an account of what moral identity is (e.g., Blasi, 1984; Aquino and Reed, 2002; Haidt, 2001). A second group of studies has researched influences on moral identity (e.g., Power, 2004; Weaver, 2006; Stets & Carter, 2011). A third strand has attempted to explain how the moral identity of an individual develops (Atkins et al, 2004; Hart, 2005). A fourth area of focus has been the investigation of links between moral identity and behaviour (e.g., Atkins et al, 2004; Hart, 2005). The construction of moral elements of identity of a small number of non-business-related groups (e.g., Fitzmaurice, 2013) has also been studied.

2.2.3 (i) Accounts of the nature of moral identity

Accounts of moral identity have adopted two main perspectives: the character perspective and the social-cognitive perspective (Shao et al, 2008). Blasi (1984) offers a character perspective on moral identity, although he argues that the self is more than simply a set of

character traits. The notion of identity that he subscribes to is organised, the characteristics are ranked, and some characteristics and ideals are core to the individual's identity while others are peripheral. It is these central aspects that are essential, that the individual could not conceive of being without, that define their sense of self. Blasi (1984) asserts that the way we behave (our explicit self) needs to be consistent with the concept of self (our implicit self) that we hold. Individuals act to remain faithful to their identity, and so having made specific ideals central to their sense of self, they act to reinforce that identity, experiencing dissonance when their actions do not meet with their expectations. Blasi argues here for a rational and deliberate process at work – a self-regulating feedback system in which the individual works to reinforce their sense of self, adjusting their behaviour in response to external feedback. The sources of that feedback, and the way that the individual processes it are unclear in Blasi's account, and he is silent on what the defensive strategies that alleviate the discomfort of self-inconsistency may be. Nevertheless, the idea of individual agency at work, with an individual making a specific desire their will, in the form of second-order volitions, is not new, having notably been advanced by Frankfurt (1971) in his philosophical account of personhood.

Aquino and Reed (2002) are proponents of the social-cognitive perspective on moral identity. This draws on Tajfel's (1981) social identity theory insofar as it asserts that moral identity 'can be a basis for social identification that people use to construct their self-definitions' (Aquino and Reed, 2002, p1423). This approach sees moral identity as a collection of values, traits and goals which are central to an individual's perception of self. It also sees an individual's moral identity as one of a number of identities that they may enact or express, depending upon circumstances. This approach thus asserts the importance of the influence of contextual factors on the identity that an individual chooses to activate at any time and it is in acknowledging the role of situational influences that the social-cognitive approach diverges most from the character approach espoused by Blasi. Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model of moral reasoning also argues for the importance of social and cultural influences in intuitive moral judgements which are then rationalised post-hoc.

Advocates of the social-cognitive approach to moral identity argue that Blasi's character approach fails to account for individuals for whom moral ideals are not central to their sense of self, and that it also ignores the other identities that an individual may hold and the impact of external situational factors on the way that individuals enact their identities. The social-cognitive approach itself is criticised for over-emphasising the impact of

situational factors to the extent that it fails to account for individuals who behave morally in the face of significant external pressure not to. Shao et al (2008) consider that these two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive and could be combined, with recourse to a temporal element which would distinguish between everyday (i.e., often automatic) morality, for which the social-cognitive approach is seen as the best explanation, and foresight (i.e., deliberate, considered and reasoned) morality, for which the character approach is the best.

The self-regulating dimension of both accounts of moral identity, in which divergence between an individual's actual conduct and their expected conduct is claimed to provoke dissonance and drive behaviour change, has inspired other theorists. Stryker and Burke (2000) argue that individuals are located on a morality continuum – it's not a case of being moral or not being moral, but rather of how moral we are on this scale, an assertion for which Stets and Carter (2011, 2012) offer empirical evidence. Stryker and Burke (2000) also invoke a version of identity theory to argue that we act to confirm the position we inhabit on the morality continuum. Essentially this amounts to a self-regulating feedback system, much like Blasi's (1980, 1999). Monroe (2001) also argues for a self-regulating system, explaining the way that individuals attempt to modify their behaviour when a 'non-trivial gap' (p498) emerges between their perceived self and their behaviour. Individuals become aware of this gap by reading feedback from others – she terms this 'reflected appraisal'. She accounts for the role of emotion in this process by asserting that it is the emotional response to the continued feedback (which either endorses the identity or else signals divergence) which creates the force to drive behaviour. Stets and Carter's (2012) research also focuses upon the verification and non-verification of an individual's perceived moral identity, via feedback from others. As such, the notion of a self-regulating feedback process that influences an individual's moral behaviour features in the work of several scholars in this area.

Although they offer slightly different viewpoints, the character perspective and the social-cognitive perspective have in common an essential notion of moral identity, insofar as both approach moral identity as a 'given' or something fixed that individuals have within them, which is central to their sense of self. The essentialist doctrine is underpinned by the belief that entities - individuals in this case - possess a set of characteristics that makes them what they are. In the case of moral identity, it can sometimes be characterised as a moral schema, or mental model of morality through which individuals make sense of moral issues. This approach differs significantly from the social constructionist perspective,

offered by the identity work literature and considered later in this chapter, that behaviour may itself be constitutive of identity rather than the other way around. Social constructionists argue for identity construction as fluid, ongoing, and shaped by discourse and interaction. The positivist underpinning of most moral identity literature, with its emphasis on the discovery of generalisable objective truths, would not allow for such a possibility, and this exemplifies the fundamental epistemological difference between these two bodies of work. This issue is addressed in more detail in the methodology chapter.

2.2.3 (ii) External influences on moral identity

Power (2004) addresses the role of community in developing a sense of the moral self, arguing that moral obligations are shared phenomena, because individuals do not tend to feel a sense of obligation in a vacuum but usually in relation to someone else. Power cites Durkheim's (1925 [1893]) work on collective conscience, which postulates that individuals derive their moral norms and values from the society in which they participate. Power argues that being a member of a just community can be instrumental in the development of an individual's moral self. He argues that this requires the individual to identify with the group on a number of levels. Firstly they recognise that they are group members and need to abide by its rules. Secondly they engage more by encouraging other members to abide by the norms of the group. Finally, they may even take an active role in developing and embedding new norms and rules within the group.

Stets and Carter (2011) assert that individuals may see themselves in many different ways – essentially that they have a range of identities - and that situational cues and other outside influences may guide which of these identities is enacted in any given situation. Multiple identities may therefore interact with each other, and with situational factors, to impact upon ethical behaviour and moral decision-making. Although Stets and Carter's study aims to quantify these effects, its focus on identity as influenced by external factors resonates with the social constructionist perspective which would assert the importance of context in identity construction. Weaver (2006) considers organisational factors that may impact upon an individual's moral identity, and asserts that organisational contexts that offer individuals opportunities to behave in a moral way will encourage those individuals to make moral ideals central to their sense of self. Essentially, acting morally can help individuals to develop a positive moral identity. He asserts that 'the more organisations provide resources and opportunities for exercising moral agency, the more self-important the moral identities of organisational members becomes' (p351). For Weaver, the organisation's culture in general, and leaders' behaviour in particular, are important in

creating an environment conducive to moral behaviour. Empirical studies in non-business settings have also indicated that schools and religious practices have a role to play in the moral sensitisation of young people (Atkins et al, 2004, Hart, 2005). Although their aim is primarily to establish causal links, the evidence in these studies indicating that an individual's moral identity can be influenced by their context resonates with identity work literature (reviewed later) and indicates an area for further investigation. Examining the *way* that these contextual factors work to influence individual identity development and behaviour would be an area of particular interest to this study.

2.2.3 (iii) Moral identity development

Work to date on the way that moral identity develops has tended to contribute to the social psychology literature and has thus focused upon identifying measurable causal links. It has delivered a number of key findings. Atkins et al (2004) propose a model of moral identity development that rests upon three main pillars: moral judgements, self-understanding and social opportunities. In judging an action to have moral worth, they assert that individuals often feel an obligation to act thus, and that they usually perceive the action to be universally obligatory. The self-understanding element of the model requires an individual to have moral goals as central to their sense of self, such that they feel guilt and discomfort if they act contrary to these goals. Social interaction offers individuals the opportunity to 'observe, experiment with, and receive support for the enactment of moral action' (Atkins et al, 2004, p67). Atkins et al assert that moral identity development is strongly influenced by an individual's position within the overall structure of society, and that although family is an important factor, wider social influences also impact, such as schools, social clubs and sports organisations and neighbourhood. As such, this work resonates with Tajfel's (1981) conception of a social identity.

Hart (2005) agrees that identity evolves through life, that an individual's sense of self is constantly reviewed and remodelled, and that the elements at the core of it are strongly influenced by relationships and other social influences. The theoretical model espoused by Atkins et al (2004) submits a view of the moral self as embedded in the social, constantly evolving and connected to moral action. It acknowledges the potential influence of others and of situational factors. In asserting the role of reflection, it also argues for an element of rational thought to the process of moral identity development.

A small number of empirical studies has sought to link moral identity with behaviour, generally testing the hypothesis that individuals that score highly for moral identity will tend to behave in a more ethical or moral way, and vice versa.

Stets and Carter (2011) offer empirical support for their hypothesised link between moral identity and moral behaviour, demonstrating that in self-reported data on moral behaviour as well as in a simulated laboratory test in which individuals were given the opportunity to cheat without fear of detection, those individuals that scored highly for moral identity were significantly less likely to report unethical behaviour or to cheat. The higher the moral identity, the less reported unethical behaviour and cheating they observed. Xu and Ma (2015) also provide empirical support for the connection between moral identity and ethical behaviour, pointing to the 'crucial role of moral identity in inhibiting dishonest behaviour' (p381). This study, on Chinese university students and white-collar workers, found evidence to suggest that for individuals with a high moral identity ethical behaviour is likely to be an automatic response. The researchers assert that this is because the moral schemas in these individuals are more easily accessible, reducing the likelihood of them needing to engage in significant cognitive reasoning prior to acting. Further, their research suggests that external stimuli can serve as a trigger to an individual's moral schema, since simple reminders of moral conduct (through the use of a story related to honest behaviour) appear to have increased moral conduct.

Also considering the relationship between moral identity and moral behaviour, Aquino and Reed (2002) provide empirical evidence to demonstrate that students for whom moral traits are important, and who are arguably therefore high in moral identity, are more likely to describe themselves in moral terms, to report that they engage in volunteering activities, and actually to engage in moral behaviour by donating food to the needy. Empirical work by Aquino and Becker (2005) has linked moral identity with moral action in a business context, when the researchers observed that, in a moral environment, those with high moral identity were more likely to use neutralisation strategies, such as minimising or denying a lie to reduce the perceived effect of their own non-moral behaviour, than those with low moral identity.

In a study focusing upon postgraduate business students, Gu and Neesham (2014) examined the effects of a traditional rule-based ethical teaching programme versus the effects of a programme that combined rule-based and moral identity-based teaching, using

a simple self-reflection task in which participants were required to consider and write about themselves in relation to moral traits. They found that students who participated in the programme incorporating identity-based teaching showed higher levels of ethical decision-making than those who did not. However, although this study compared groups receiving rule-based teaching with groups receiving combined rule-based and moral identity based teaching, it did not include a group that received moral identity based teaching alone. Further, as acknowledged by the researchers themselves, the study had no way of establishing longevity of these effects. It is perhaps also worth noting that this study focused not upon the moral identity of individuals, but on a task related to reflecting on moral traits.

Given the asserted link between moral identity and moral behaviour (e.g., Stets and Carter, 2011; Xu and Ma, 2015) it seems likely that understanding more about individual practitioners, and in particular about the way that they construct their own professional moral identities, could offer a new way of thinking about moral conduct in business organisations.

2.2.3 (v) Construction of moral identity

A limited amount of empirical work has tackled moral aspects of identity in individuals in non-business organisation environments and some of this work has considered the way that moral elements of identity are constructed. These studies differ from those discussed above in 'development of moral identity' because they adopt a social constructionist standpoint, and see identity as fluid, and identity construction as ongoing. Doane (2002) argues for a socially-mediated process of moral identity development in nurses and in particular for the role of interaction and the impact of context on the way that participants enact their moral identities. Fitzmaurice (2013) considers the professional identity construction of early stage academics, with some focus on moral elements of their identities, and concludes that these individuals are strongly influenced in their development of their professional identities by both their institutions and their peers. Fitzmaurice characterises the process of identity construction in this context as an individual undertaking which is also shaped by the values and beliefs of the individual. Deeb-Sossa (2007) uses an intersectional lens to examine the moral identity construction of healthcare workers, and asserts that her participants draw on cultural resources as they develop their sense of moral self. This view says that individuals not only live and work within a culture – they actively appropriate elements of the culture to shape their perspective and behaviour. The construction of the moral identity of the healthcare

workers appears to be a collective effort rather than an individual endeavour, and one that is embedded in and drawn from the cultural context in which they find themselves. Karlsson et al (2013) make a similar assertion with their study into the identity positions of good parents, noting that as parents narrate their experiences of selecting preschool nurseries for their children, they arrive at distinctions between right and wrong choices by drawing on culturally available discourses. Making the right choice of nursery becomes for these parents a moral issue, related to doing the right thing for their children and being seen to actively engage in a selection process. While these studies evidence the adoption of a qualitative approach for the study of moral identity, they also demonstrate that the body of empirical scholarship that examines the construction of moral identity from a social constructionist perspective remains very small.

2.2.4 Summary of moral identity literature to date

Theoretical and empirical studies in this area to date make claims as to why moral identity is different from other identities, and advance a number of useful insights into the nature and development of moral identity. These include the notion that development of a moral identity is, at least partly, based upon reflective processes (Atkins et al, 2004; Blasi, 1984), the idea of identity as constantly reviewed and remodelled (Hart, 2005), the role that social interaction may play in the way that an individual develops their moral sense of self and the notion that engaging in moral behaviour may influence moral identity of individuals (Weaver, 2006). The possible role of situational factors such as organisation context (Power, 2004) in influencing moral identity may also have relevance for organisational settings. Research indicating that individuals who score highly for moral identity will tend to make more ethical decisions and be less likely to cheat (Stets and Carter, 2011) and that ethical decision-making improves after educational interventions that focus upon moral identity (Gu and Neesham, 2014) is also potentially interesting insofar as it establishes a link between moral identity and moral behaviour.

However, while the notion of moral identity potentially offers a fresh approach to understanding ethical behaviour in a business context, through the study of an individual-level factor within the context of an organisational environment, the epistemological stance underpinning the majority of research in this area so far has tended to restrict its focus. So while much work has been done on antecedents to moral identity, measurement of it and the demonstration of causal links between moral identity and behaviour, scholarship in this area to date has largely ignored more nuanced questions around the way that individuals develop and hone their moral senses of self. This is perhaps

unsurprising given a research area with positivist roots and an emphasis on uncovering objective generalisable truths. But it does beg the question of whether adopting a different epistemological stance could change the way that researchers approach the topic, generating new and fresh foci, and allowing it to move beyond deliberations about the accuracy of describing, accounting for and gauging moral identity, and towards delivering insight into how it is constructed and performed in individuals over time, and within different environments and circumstances.

Identity is, for many researchers, a social construct co-created in social interaction. On this account, a social constructionist epistemology is a more appropriate stance from which to examine the way in which identity is constructed, performed and reconstituted. This is because it rejects the view of the fixed essential self prevalent in moral identity work to date, prioritising instead a more processual approach which considers the *way* that individuals become as much as the way that they *are*. This is a founding principle of many broader identity studies, and particularly of the identity work strand of literature, which sees knowledge as produced in social exchange, and which acknowledges the relationship between individual and context as well as the active role of the researcher in the construction of reality.

Adopting the social constructionist stance prevalent in identity work studies for an investigation into moral identity may therefore offer a fresh perspective on this established research area, and the prospect of new understandings and insights that have not been possible, and are not possible, with inquiry conducted from the objectivist viewpoint.

2.3 Identity work literature

2.3.1 Introduction to identity work literature

Identity work is defined by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) as 'people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence or distinctiveness' (p1165). According to Brown (2017) 'the phrase identity work … denotes the many ways in which people create, adapt, signify, claim and reject identities from available resources' (p298). Identity work can be done in response to instability in the environment and may be prompted or intensified by crisis. In a fundamental difference with most moral identity research, the emphasis of most identity work scholarship is on *becoming* rather than *being*. Thus, from the perspective of identity work scholars, identities are not seen as completed achievements, but rather as ongoing works-in-progress (Brown, 2017). Context is important, and some scholars argue that the

more unstable the context, the more identity work will ensue. Stress and critical events can also arguably provoke intensified identity work. So, self-doubt and organisational stress can be seen as precursors of identity work. Identity work often happens in interaction, with individuals seeking to craft a sense of who they are and where they belong. In so doing they draw on external cultural resources as well as internal ones such as memories. Brown (2015) observes that while identity work has often tended to be used as a descriptive category, it has potential to deliver as an analytical tool because of its focus on agentic activity. Essentially, putting the spotlight on 'identities-in-action' (p33) which occur at different levels within an organisation (individual, organisational and societal) ought to allow for detailed analysis of processes within the organisations.

Identity work is one strand of literature within the 'vast, heterogeneous and fragmented' (Miscenko and Day, 2016, p216) identity literature. Understanding how this strand of scholarship relates to other strands in the broader field of identity inquiry has provoked researchers to attempt to map the area. In their heuristic framework designed to facilitate understanding of identity research, Corlett et al (2017) discern three registers of identity scholarship, based upon three key aspects of the research: the theoretical tradition it espouses, the level of identity (e.g., individual, organisational, societal) upon which it focuses and the methodologies and theoretical assumptions that it adopts. This framework helps to locate identity work scholarship within the broader field of identity research. On this account, identity work scholarship tends towards the interpretivist and critical traditions, tends to have an individual level focus, and tends to view identity as fluid, contextualised and fragmented. The framework offers a view of identity work scholarship as one part of a broad and varied landscape, connected to, and overlapping with, other parts yet distinctive in its own way.

Alvesson et al (2008) have also situated identity work scholarship within the broader identity research field, identifying three distinct areas of identity scholarship. Each area adopts a different philosophical approach and a different theoretical perspective. Technical/functionalist identity research focuses on cause and effect, usually drawing on social identity theory (e,g., Tajfel, 1981), and adopts a positivist stance. Emancipatory identity research considers power relations, often by focusing on discursive regimes, and adopts a critical stance. Practical–hermeneutic identity research investigates the way that individuals construct their identities, often drawing on identity work theory to do this, and usually adopts an interpretivist stance. Reflecting on reasons to undertake identity studies in an organisational context, Alvesson et al (2008) assert that whereas for technical

approaches the aim may be to find solutions to problems, and for emancipatory approaches it may be to uncover problems related to organisational irrationalities, for practical researchers it is usually to understand organisations and those who work in them better. This study adopts an interpretivist lens as it seeks to deliver understanding about a specific aspect of senior managers' identity work within the context of their organisations, and so in line with Alvesson et al's (2008) categorisation, it falls into the practical-hermeneutic category, as does the majority of the literature which is reviewed below.

Reflecting on identity work scholarship in the particular context of organisations, Brown (2017) distinguishes five approaches to identity work and organisational identification processes. Expressing the notion that individuals draw on their membership of groups as they construct and enact their senses of self, he argues that recognising these five distinct approaches helps to elucidate the variety of identity work strategies that individuals in organisations adopt. Brown's five approaches to identity work are discursive, dramaturgical, symbolical, socio-cognitive and psychodynamic. Although these approaches have some overlap, each implies a slightly different perspective on the way that individuals do their identity work within the context of their organisations, which can both constrain and enable the process. The discursive approach, which implies that language use and practice is central to identity work, and the dramaturgical approach, which focuses upon performed selves, are most pertinent to the present study, given that it explores identity construction through the narrative accounts of the participants.

Research in the area of identity work in organisations to date has elicited a range of ideas, many of which focus on discursive processes and dramaturgical elements. Some of these ideas have particular relevance to the study of moral identity in an organisational context. For the purposes of this review, these ideas are broken down into four broad strands. The first focuses upon roles and role expectations and the way that individuals draw on them in doing their identity work. The second strand considers individuals' responses to identity threats, stigmatised identities and identity insecurities, and the implications that these responses have for individual identity work. The third strand contemplates the role of performance and interaction in identity work, and the last examines social identities and identity work.

2.3.2 Roles and role expectations in identity work

One strand of identity work scholarship within organisations focuses upon the way that an individual's role or perceived role within the organisation interacts with and influences the

development of their sense of self. Some of this work has focused upon the way that role transitions provoke identity work as individuals endeavour to adapt and fit in (e.g., Ibarra, 1999). Other studies have considered the expectations that individuals have of their own roles, and the expectations they feel from others as they negotiate their roles (e.g., Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). The notion that roles can be both appropriated and ascribed, and that the latter may even constitute the imposition of identity on individuals (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) has also been examined, as has the idea that role acts as a boundary object to facilitate understanding between different social domains (Simpson and Carroll, 2008). Identity work related to role within the organisation has been conceptualised as a survival tactic (Collinson, 2003), a way of bringing about organisational change (Creed et al, 2010) and a means by which individuals try out possible alternative identities (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010). The influence of broader discourses upon role and role expectations has also provided a focus for scholarship in this area (e.g., Clarke et al, 2009) as has the idea that their narrative repertoires develop as individuals experience role transition (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010).

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) argue that literature in this area has a tendency to consider a limited element of identity – namely the way that belonging to groups or being in organisations informs identity. They assert that identity is an ongoing endeavour shaped by what they term 'discursive forces' (p1165). Due to the fragmented, unstable and ever-changing nature of business organisations, identity work in individuals working within them is ongoing. These scholars consider the balance between discourse, role and other external forces, and argue that identity work in such a context is thus provoked by the dominant discourses within the organisation and the expectations of others, which can create a tension with individuals' own inclinations. This tension can sometimes activate an 'anti-identity' where individuals reject dominant discourses and sometimes elements of organisational identities as they construct their own sense of self.

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) consider the way that people embrace or reject roles, or negotiate them. They identify dominant discourses within an organisation which 'imprint on the working life and identity situation' of the employees (p1172). Within this multi-discursive context, the way that a manager does identity work is explored. The subject draws on organisational discourses and role expectations of the job to construct her professional sense of self. Tensions are evidenced between her own feelings about elements of the job, and the expectations of others of the elements that are important. For example she sees 'janitorial' jobs as not really for her (negative or anti-identity), whereas

others regard them as critical. This tension causes the subject frustration. The authors argue that 'successful identity work increases coherence and may act as a buffer against a threateningly diverse and ambiguous external world' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p1187). They essentially argue for identity construction in an organisational context as a struggle involving dominant discourses, role expectations and narrative self-identities. Pressure to be a certain way can impact. The narrative construction of self can align with these dominant discourses (or vice versa) but can also be at odds with them.

While some identity scholars argue that managerial identities are fluid and changeable (e.g., Brown and Coupland, 2015; Beech, 2008), others see them as relatively stable and coherent (e.g., Dutton et al, 1994; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Clarke et al (2009) challenge the notion that managerial identities are either relatively fluid or relatively coherent, arguing that 'managers' identity narratives may incorporate contrasting positions or antagonisms' (p324). Drawing on the idea that business managers are exposed to a wide range of competing discourses, they argue that this is what can lead to them incorporating antagonistic ideas into their sense of identity. The availability of competing discourses means that socialisation into one is unlikely to be complete, and resistance to discursive regimes is likely. Drawing on available discourses exhorting them to be professional and unemotional, for example, managers nevertheless acknowledge their emotional and unprofessional sides. This could be a response to the fact that they are human as well as professional managers, and a response to the complex and often contradictory environment in which they practise, and do their identity work, which is ongoing.

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) consider the influence that organisational environments and practices may exert on the sense of self of employees, and assert that organisational controls and processes can produce discourses that interact with, and even regulate, the identity work of individuals in organisations. These authors assert the central importance of discourse in the process of identity construction. Some discourses may induce more intense identity work because they provoke feelings of inconsistency or scepticism. An example of this is contradictory identity regulation, where individuals are supposedly constructed in one way, but find that expectations position them differently. The discourses generated within organisations which position individuals may relate to the employee, the actions that they engage in, their social relations or their context, and they may confirm identity or be disruptive, provoking identity work. Individuals may be more or less resistant to them. The discourses may include direct definition of the person, as in a

statement of what they are (middle manager), reference to others (as incompetent, for example), motives (e.g., we don't come to work for the money,) morals and values, knowledge and skills (e.g., education, professional affiliation), group membership (us and them), hierarchies, rules of engagement (e.g., how to be a team player) and context identification (giving the individual a located role). These discourses may emanate from management, from culturally accepted 'norms' or from resistance to either of these within the organisation, and the plurality of discourses available means that management-driven control of identity may be only temporary or partial.

Creed et al's (2010) study into LGBT ministers in the protestant church concludes that their participants' identity work has impacted on both the individuals and on their organisations and has helped to 'resolve the institutional contradictions that marginalize them' (p1337). As such, this study supports the view that identity work can be a two-way process in which individuals draw on and contribute to organisational narratives. This identity work involves role claiming and enactment as the participants seek to embody the identities that they construct, using available cultural resources. Creed et al (2010) identify three micro processes at work. Firstly, individuals internalize institutional contradictions between dominant discourses and their own sense of self. They undertake identity work to reconcile their identities with these dominant discourses – this work essentially allows them to reject prevalent ideas of incompatibility. Finally they role claim, often seeking to embody the role they claim and use it to become agents of change. Encountering institutional contradictions between their own sense of self and the way their roles are perceived (in this case the idea that LGBT individuals are incompatible with the role of minister) triggers identity work to reconcile these identity contradictions. This in turn enables role appropriation – role embodiment - which can work to challenge institutionally accepted norms and initiate change. These individuals draw on culturally available resources including role models, dominant discourses and traditions in doing their identity work.

Simpson and Carroll (2008) argue for a conception of role as a boundary object – essentially an object that can simultaneously belong to several social worlds and that can thus act to enable communication between these worlds. On this view, role is seen as 'an intermediary that facilitates the ongoing, social construction of identity' (p43) – a bridge between individuals in the social construction of identity which enables meaning-making. This puts role firmly into the relational domain, where it can be negotiated, claimed and examined by different actors. Whereas role does not of itself constitute identity, it is something that can facilitate the process of identity construction. Simpson and Carroll's (2008) empirical

work explores the way that individuals in organisations experience the malleability of their roles as they engage with their own perceptions of their roles and the perceptions that others have of them. The identity work that this provokes can involve them experimenting with different roles, which the authors argue indicates a link between the conception of role as a boundary object and identity construction. This contention resonates with Ibarra and Petriglieri's (2010) work on identity work and play, in which they assert that when faced with transition into a new role, for example, individuals experiment with 'provisional selves' (p17). Whereas the purpose of identity work is to confirm an existing identity, identity play is about 'the crafting and provisional trial of immature (i.e., as yet unelaborated) possible selves' (p13). Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) advance the idea that the narrative repertoires used by individuals develop as they transition into new roles, a process that involves internal evaluation (by the individuals themselves, as they assess whether or not their narratives resonate with their desired identity) and external validation (by others as they express approval).

Ashforth (2000) argues that the development of an individual's global identity, which may comprise values, beliefs and ways of thinking and feeling, is ongoing but that they also adopt role identities along the way, and that more highly valued role identities are more likely to be incorporated into the global identity. The more overlap there is between a role identity and an individual's global identity, the more valued it is likely to be. He argues thus for 'ongoing reciprocal influence between the global identity and specific role identities' (p42).

According to Collinson (2003), while organisations can effectively 'produce people' (p541) by conferring identities on them, their increasingly intrusive monitoring and surveillance systems – the Foucauldian 'gaze' - can provoke insecurity as employees find themselves under pressure to be a certain way. Faced with the requirement to adopt an organisationally-prescribed identity, they adopt survival tactics as they do their identity work. These include constructing conformist selves, often subjugating their own identities in favour of those imposed, constructing dramaturgical selves in order to present themselves in a favourable light to others, and constructing resistant selves, by working against, or attempting to undermine, organisational systems. These survival tactics can work to help individuals to construct an alternative, and perhaps more positive identity to that imposed by the organisation.

Exploring identity construction with recourse to notions of role and the way that it can shape the process resonates with a study such as this one, which shines a spotlight on a specific group of individuals in senior management positions. Role, for this group of participants, is likely to be central to their authority and legitimacy as senior leaders, and thus an important element of their individual senses of self. Their roles within their organisations necessarily position them versus others, and are likely to provoke, in others as well as in themselves, expectations of behaviour and of performance. Their role undoubtedly mediates interactions between the individual and organisational environmental factors and practices. Since role can confer status as well as generate expectations of conduct, exploring its part in moral identity construction in this context and in these individuals has the potential to deliver insight into the way that hierarchical factors shape their moral senses of self.

2.3.3 Responses to identity threats, stigmatised identities and identity insecurities

A second broad strand of scholarship in this area has examined the way that individuals undertake identity work in response to perceived challenges to their senses of self, and often in order to mitigate them, perhaps in pursuit of stability. Identity threats may arise in a variety of ways. Discourses that designate professions or organisations as tainted, for example, can impact upon the sense of self of individuals working within them (e.g., Ashforth et al, 2007). Members of stigmatised groups inevitably find themselves positioned in a particular way by others and this can provoke identity work as they attempt to deal with the implications for their own senses of self (Toyoki and Brown, 2014; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Ezzell, 2009). Within organisations, perceived associations with positions or people can trigger identity work as individuals struggle to define themselves independently (Costas and Fleming, 2009). Feelings of insecurity, self-doubt and fragility, as individuals struggle to live up to their own ideals and the expectations of others, can also give rise to identity work as those involved strive for stability (Knights and Clarke, 2014). Here again, the part that discourses play in the identity work of individuals who are marginalised or who experience fundamental challenges to the way that they see themselves (e.g., Mallett and Wapshott, 2015; Brown and Coupland, 2015) is examined.

The identity work of individuals who are somehow stigmatized or tainted is central to the research of Ashforth et al (2007), which has its roots in understanding the way that people who do work that is generally considered to be 'dirty', in a physical, social or moral sense, deal with the taint their occupation inflicts on them. Drawing on Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999, 2002, in Ashforth et al, 2007) ideas around normalisation, a tactic through which

workers attempt to counter the taint of their work, this study asserts that individuals re-frame their work to make it more socially acceptable, and engage in social weighting, whereby they differentiate between types of outsiders by supporting those who support them, condemning those who condemn them, and comparing themselves favourably with those they consider to be inferior to themselves. The study focuses on manager-level individuals in a range of occupations seen as physically, socially or morally tainted. These authors find that the participants adopt a range of normalizing tactics when talking about their work, including reframing tainted work to make it seem more acceptable, engaging in social weighting by closing ranks against detractors, confronting perceptions in an attempt to refute them, and adopting a range of defensive tactics with the aim of distancing themselves from the taint. These defensive tactics include avoiding their work, either physically or in interaction when discussing it with others, adopting gallows humour when talking about it, using social comparison to pick out others who they perceive to be in a worse situation than they are, and distancing themselves from the role.

Toyoki and Brown's (2014) study into the way that prisoners discursively deal with their stigmatized identities reveals similar strategies, notably participants aligning themselves with respectable and well-thought of social roles, and constructing themselves as 'good' people, as a way of reframing their situation and '...in authoring accounts of their selves to enact and affirm the meaningfulness of their lives' (p732). Ashforth et al (2007) identify limits to the potential normalizing effects of these tactics and strategies, however, noting that their manager participants often seemed to simultaneously identify and dis-identify with their work, provoking ambivalence towards their occupational identities.

This is an idea considered in more depth by Costas and Fleming (2009) who focus on employees rather than managers, but who advance the view that these individuals discursively construct identities for themselves that they see as more 'authentic' as a way of distancing themselves from the domination of their managers and the identities that are constructed for them, and even imposed upon them, in the work place. The authentic imagined self is a way of distinguishing themselves from the fake corporate identity. This is a phenomenon the authors term 'dis-identification'. This research considers instances where dis-identification fails, because the individual concerned becomes aware that their 'narrated imaginary of authenticity' (p359) is unattainable. They realise that it is increasingly difficult to see where the false corporate self ends and the real self begins, eventually recognising that who they are is not their imagined authentic self, but the alien corporate self. This realisation – termed 'self-alienation' - is accompanied by feelings of loss

and disappointment as they come to see that they have become someone that they did not wish to be.

Knights and Clarke (2014) contend that a range of challenges to business school academics' senses of self can provoke three categories of insecurity in their identity work. Idealised expectations that they feel they are not living up to can incite imposter insecurity, while the need to be recognised and valued, and the idea that they may not be, can drive aspirant insecurity. Worries about their work being sufficiently meaningful, amplified by the increasing requirement to conform to audits and assessments related to their performance, can trigger existential insecurity. Knights and Clarke thus contend that identity and insecurity are 'interdependent phenomena' (p26) and that this can render identities 'fragile and precarious' (p27).

Brown and Coupland (2015) contribute to this body of work with an empirical study into the way that rugby players manage threats to their professional identities as elite sportsmen. Faced with discursive identity threats related to brief careers, the possibility of injury and the implications of performance inconsistency, these individuals engaged in identity work by appropriating these threats and drawing on them to construct desired identities. Thus, faced with narratives related to the brevity of playing careers, players' identity work focused upon their current success as becoming and being elite players. Discourses articulating the threat of injury provoked identity work to construct themselves as tough and resilient in the face of this possibility. Threats to consistency of performance and consequent loss of their place on the team triggered identity work to construct themselves as part of an heroic winning team of the future. By appropriating and using the threats to their identity in this way, these sports players are expressing agency and quelling their own anxiety. They are also responding to their environment, which is founded on discipline exerted by the club management with which they are required to comply. As such, power relations are also at work as the players construct themselves as idealised masculine elite athletes in response to identity threats, while at the same time subordinating themselves to the will of the team management. Ezzell (2009) also draws on elite athletes to advance the idea of 'defensive othering' as a response to identity threats. In this study, female rugby players faced with homophobic and sexist identity challenges casting them as masculine and butch did not resist and reject the stigma, but instead attempted to distance themselves from it by presenting themselves as the exceptions to the stereotype. As Ezzell notes, this response arguably reinforces the stigma, as individuals do not dispute it, but rather seek to differentiate and distance themselves from it.

Mallett and Wapshott (2015) advance the notion of narrative resource poverty to explain why marginalised groups struggle to overcome discriminatory discourses, which are developed and legitimised over time. Through ongoing repetition these discourses 'become sedimented and taken-for-granted' (p29). These deeply embedded discourses are utilised by individuals in their own identity work, where they can constrain the identities that these individuals perceive as available to them, and they can also influence the way that people assess the identity positions of others. In this way '…marginalised and excluded individuals lack the (re)sources with which to find new ways of securing legitimacy, support and affirmation' (p29).

Focusing on workplace bullying and the implications it has for the identity work of those on the receiving end of the bullying, Lutgen-Sandvik (2008) identifies the processual nature of the intensive identity work which incorporates three distinct phases. In the pre-bullying stage, participants become aware of the threat to their identity, and identity work involves attempts to re-establish the equilibrium and to confirm their perceptions that bullying is happening. During bullying, identity work is undertaken to overcome the stigma the individual experiences. After bullying, identity work aims to heal and reaffirm the individual's identity. Lutgen-Sandvik asserts thus that the different phases of this remedial identity work may have different goals, that these goals are often consciously chosen, and that the identity work itself, conducted as it is in the very public environment of a business organisation, can be exhausting and debilitating.

As a group, business managers have often been on the receiving end of media reports condemning their behaviour as unethical and immoral, a phenomenon that shows no signs of abating (Barkemeyer et al, 2010; Elsass et al, 2016). Dominant discourses – prevalent and often accepted ways of talking about things – can also work to cast them as disreputable. That these discourses are widely available means that senior business managers are likely to be aware of them, and likely to feel threatened and stigmatised by them. Exploring their responses, through their narrative accounts, to these feelings may well elicit insights into the way that they approach and manage the stigma of the discourses and thus into the way that they construct their moral senses of self.

2.3.4 The role of interaction and performance in identity work

Like other strands, this line of identity work research is founded in the contention that individuals construct their identities discursively. This can be done in interaction with others, but also introspectively through self-narration, both of which are considered in this

section. The need in either case for an individual to craft convincing dramaturgical performances, for themselves as well as for others, is a key tenet of much research in this section. The way that dialogue is employed to make meaning and thus, by individuals engaged in identity work, to associate or dissociate themselves with positions, others or status is one focus of research (Beech, 2008; Cunliffe, 2001). The way that discourses both inform and emanate from these interactions is also considered (Hardy et al, 2000; Cunliffe, 2001). The interplay between introspection and interaction, in terms of validating identity work is a further focus (Bardon et al, 2015) as is the role of the 'other' (Ybema et al, 2009; Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004). The role of performance in identity construction is also probed by scholars drawing on the ideas of Goffman (Down and Reveley, 2009) and Butler (Laine et al, 2016).

Beech (2008) invokes Cunliffe's (2001) notion of managers as authors of organisational discourses and thus realities, asserting that 'identity is a process that is both the outcome of, and the input to, dialogue' (p54). Arguing for the role of dialogue in meaning construction in identity work, he asserts that the utterances of others and contextual discourses can provoke dialogue as individuals respond to these stimuli, maybe by agreeing with and assimilating them, or perhaps by disagreeing with and rejecting them. The stimulus and response can provoke an extended dialogue in which identity constructions may be developed through identity work. So, identity work entails drawing on these forms and responding to them as a way of making meaning. Cunliffe herself (2001) asserts that organisational discourses emerge in relational activities, and that the rhetorical practices and ways of talking of managers can impact and influence the ways of talking of others as well as wider 'common sense' discourses within the organisation. She says that these managers do their identity work in dialogue with others, and that in doing so they may develop and employ linguistic practices and tools which then go on to shape wider understandings. In this way, Cunliffe asserts that managers are co-authoring not only their own sense of self, but the broader and more widely available organisational discourses. They may do this through use of metaphor, language choice, the kind of language that they employ and the way that they talk – what Cunliffe terms 'rhetorical-responsive practice'.

Cunliffe's (2001) work offers the notion that while organisational narratives inform the personal, the process may also occur in reverse, and that individual identity work may inform organisational narratives. This is an idea supported by Hardy et al (2000) who assert that individuals engaging in discourse are both drawing from and contributing to organisational discourses. In dialogue, individuals construct and propound discourses which

become available to others. Subject positions are important in the way that individuals are able to influence discourses. Some subject positions may 'warrant voice' (p1242) in a way that others may not. These authors talk of the interplay between broader discourses, individual utterances and consequential practices which can, they argue, change the environment and the organisation. Drawing on the notion of internal legitimacy, which is conferred by those within the organisation, Brown and Toyoki (2013) also consider the way that individual level discourses impact on broader understandings, asserting that the identity work of those incarcerated can work to affirm and contest the institutional legitimacy of their prison. They argue thus for individual identity work as 'discursive activity that constructs organisations as legitimate or illegitimate' (p876).

The idea that identity work involves both self-reflection and interaction with others is also advanced by Bardon et al (2015), in a study into identity construction in corporate alumni networks. In this study, participants utilise a range of stratagems, including nostalgia, reproduction and validation, in internal reflections to craft their identities as alumni of an organisation. With nostalgia, they narrate appreciation of past experiences, which they work to reproduce in their current roles. External validation of their alumnus identity as elite and desirable is achieved through the social recognition of those around them in interaction – essentially in dialogue. Bardon et al argue that in this way, participants incorporate elements of their past professional experience into their identity work. This resonates somewhat with Gabriel's (1993) account of nostalgia in identity work as an attempt to reconcile oneself with the present. Gabriel also sees nostalgia as selective and often idealised, and characterises it as a social phenomenon which has the potential to unite people if they share common past experiences. Brown and Humphreys (2006) also argue for the role of 'nostalgic reminiscences' (p231) related to place as a resource for individual identity work, which they argue is conducted within discursive regimes, and through which individuals can arrive at shared understandings.

Ybema et al (2009) observe that discursive approaches to identity construction focus upon the way that identities are co-constructed in dialogue and discourse, and staged in performances. They argue for the central role of self-other talk in this process, essentially through discursive positioning, in which individuals draw on comparisons between themselves and others in their identity work. This positioning is often founded upon 'oversimplification and distortion in definitions of sameness and otherness' (p307) which can amplify the differences. Ainsworth and Hardy (2004) also note the role of linguistically

constructed polar opposites which individuals use to position others not only as different, but often as inferior.

Drawing on Goffman's (1959) work, Down and Reveley (2009) argue that a combination of 'dramaturgical interaction' (p381) and self-narration is used by individuals as they do their identity work. Essentially, people use face to face interactions to perform and confirm the idealised identities that they construct for themselves in self-narration. These successful performances themselves are re-absorbed by the individuals to then become part of their narrated self-identity. This process occurs when alternative, often more established identity resources, such as organisational discourses, cease to be decisive in matters of self-identity construction for these individuals. Down and Reveley characterise such circumstances as 'mixed and banal managerial discourses' that can lead to 'discursive confusion' (p397). Thus, an individual may perform their idealised managerial identity in front of a group of subordinates, and then draw on that successful performance to bolster their personal sense of self as a successful and professional manager. The reactions of the audience are critical to the affirmation of the performed identity in these interactions, and positive reactions allow the individual to confirm and legitimise their idealised identity.

Laine et al (2016) also argue for a performative view of identity construction which is grounded in the simultaneous submission to, and mastery of, dominant discourses. On Butler's (1997) view, subjects are discursively produced through reiteration of discourses. Continual reiteration of the discourses constitutes submission to them, but also requires mastery of them. Butler argues that this process also offers the opportunity for individuals to subvert the discourses, by re-appropriating or re-designating the terms. In line with Butler's thesis, Laine et al argue that the process of mastery and submission is derived from individuals' desire for the approbation of others. They assert that 'the unattainability of the ideal causes anxiety' (p512) which provokes individuals' attempts to master, and ultimately to subvert, discourses related to the ideal. Although Laine et al (2016) investigate the strategist identity, these ideas clearly resonate with a study into moral identity construction.

This research study seeks to understand how senior business managers draw on internal and external resources as they construct and perform their moral senses of self, and a focus upon interactional and dramaturgical elements of their identity work has resonance with this aim. Exploring the way that they present their interactions with others, and unpicking their performances within the research interviews themselves, offers a way of

approaching and analysing the performed elements of the participants' identity construction. The inherently social nature of a business organisation suggests that interaction is key to the way that these individuals see themselves. This tranche of identity work scholarship clearly has potential to elucidate moral identity work in this group.

2.3.5 Social identities and identity work

This strand of identity work research has its roots in Tajfel's (1981) social identity theory, and focuses on the parts of an individual's conception of self that they derive from their knowledge of membership of social groups. Tajfel argues that meaning is created through social comparison among groups, and thus emphasises the role of the different social groups that an individual belongs to in constructing their own conception of the self. On this account, occupational and organisational identities can feature in, and impact upon, the identity work of individuals working within them. Research in this area considers the different social identities available to individuals and the way that they incorporate these identities into their senses of self (Watson, 2008) as well as the provenance of the narratives that may influence this process (Watson and Watson, 2012). The idea that an individual's identity work can itself influence the social identities that they draw on (Gill, 2013) is considered, as is the notion explored by Kreiner et al (2006) that attachment to one social identity, especially an occupational one, may inhibit individuals from revealing other elements of their identities which could be seen by others as inconsistent with it. Sluss and Ashforth (2007) take social identity theory as a starting point but move beyond it to assert the role of self-conceptions borne of relationships as central to individual identity work in organisational settings.

Watson (2008) uses ethnographic, autobiographical and interview data to explore the way that managers understand themselves within the complex setting of an organisation, where there may be certain expectations placed upon them by others. This study draws on Mills' (1959) ideas on the sociological imagination – the awareness of the relationship between personal experience and external context or society. Watson talks of the fluid rather than fixed and enduring nature of individuals' sense of self in a work context and distinguishes between external and internal identities, arguing that whenever identity work is done, it has an external as well as internal focus. This echoes Goffman's (1959) work on the presentation of self, and the idea that individuals are often performing for others, but more than this, Watson argues that our identity work takes account of the imagined other who may or may not ever encounter us or our work. Thus Watson seeks to link internal

identities to the external discourses that may have influenced them with recourse to what he calls social identities – public personas embedded in discourses.

Watson moves beyond what he sees as the traditional view of a dominant discourse that influences an individual's sense of self, to a more complex model where a range of discourses lead to the availability of a range of social identities. Through identity work, individuals incorporate or appropriate elements of these social identities. Watson characterises this work as individuals striving to develop a coherent sense of self while struggling to accept the range of social identities that may be available to them. The work is situated in the ways they try to articulate their sense of self, and in the way that identities are allocated to them in the organisational context. Social identities are thus seen as external cultural phenomena which can become inputs to internal self-identities. Self-identity is the individual's own unique view of who they are while social identities are 'cultural, discursive or institutional notions of who or what any individual might be' (Watson, 2008, p131). Watson identifies five types of social identity: social-category social identities such as class or gender, formal-role social identities such as occupation, local-organizational social identities (e.g., a Starbucks barrista, an Oxford professor), local-personal social identities such as the life and soul of the office, and cultural-stereotype social identities (e.g., 'boring' accountant, 'good' parent). An individual does not 'have' these identities, but rather incorporates elements of them into their own sense of self.

Gill's (2013) investigation into the identity work of management consultants draws on the work of Watson (2008) and finds that 'an individual's identity work can influence, within limits, the social identities that they draw on' (p22). This study focuses on the discursive creation of an elite social identity - that of management consultant for a prestigious firm, where advancement depends upon social as well as professional achievements and goals. The research found that while participants in the study worked together to construct and maintain the shared social identity of elite consultants, this identity work also provoked significant status anxiety in them, as they contemplated the fragile nature of their position and the pressure they felt to maintain it. This anxiety was often driven by dissonance provoked by a perceived difference in the way they were supposed to be versus the way they felt they actually were.

According to Watson and Watson (2012), individuals draw on linguistic repertoires (ways of describing things) in narratives to do their identity work – i.e., to develop their own distinct sense of self. They do this work in the context in which they find themselves, and draw on

external cultural resources in doing so, as well as on internal resources such as memories or desires. Individuals live their lives within society as a whole, but also within other contexts such as family, organisations, clubs, networks and communities. Watson and Watson advance the notion of the negotiation of order – the way that individuals understand the order of social units. In their 'multilevel model of social life' (p699) they identify three levels of societal life – broad societal level, intermediate level (e.g., organisations, families) and individual level. Individuals may draw on 'narratives from different levels of social reality' (Watson and Watson, 2012, p690) as they make sense of the world around them and do identity work. Identity work thus occurs at the individual level, but with recourse to narratives from societal and intermediate levels. Much empirical research to date on identity has focused on societal narratives and those at the individual level, and this has ignored the mediating influence of the organisational or family level which contributes to a negotiation of order. These authors argue that individuals will see themselves as different people depending upon the circumstances in which they find themselves. Their different worlds colliding may lead to anxiety and tension which may provoke identity work.

Sluss and Ashforth (2007) argue that a social identity-driven view of personal identity in an organisational context can tend to ignore relational elements of interaction within organisations. This is because it focuses on the appeal of the collective identity while, they say, ignoring the interpersonal aspects of identities in organisations. These authors explore instead a relational approach which they contend moves beyond the traditional social identity approach, and asserts that interdependence can impact upon identity construction of individuals within organisations. On this account, self-conceptions borne of relationships are considered central to identity work. In a similar vein, Ashforth et al (2016) argue for personal identification in identity work within organisations, where individuals may identify with others who are known to them but with whom they may not have a direct personal relationship, and internalise the qualities that they admire in those people. Personal identification can work to address threats, to enhance an individual's own sense of self or to address an individual's need for belonging.

Kreiner et al (2006) advance the idea that attachment to some social identities, such as occupations, can result in individuals experiencing identity demands – essentially pressure to be a certain way, in line with expectations that the social identity provokes. These identity demands impact upon individuals' inclinations to reveal to others elements of themselves which may be seen as inconsistent. The study identifies a range of tactics that

individuals adopt in the face of such a situation. These include differentiating tactics, which are adopted to try to separate personal identity from social identity, and integration or blending tactics which are intended to bring them together.

This research explores the identity work of individuals within the unique and distinctive context of business organisations, and for this reason, this strand of identity work scholarship is directly relevant to it. Considering their moral identity work in the light of, for example, socially available identities that they may be drawing on or cultural resources that surround them has potential to elucidate the processes that these managers experience. The role that others may play in these processes, and the possible interplay of social and self-identities, could also be relevant to the understanding of moral identity construction in this group.

2.3.6 The identity work literature and moral identities

As already noted, little work has been done to investigate moral identities within organisational settings (Shao et al, 2008). The small number of studies investigating moral identity construction (see 'construction of moral identity' above) do not overtly adopt an identity work lens. This means that they do not share the identity work conception of identity as a fluid concept, nor do they view it as an ongoing endeavour. The identity work strand of scholarship itself addresses a number of themes which appear to have resonance for the study of moral identities, and although so far this work does not extend to a study of the construction of moral identity in an organisational context, moral aspects of identity have not been entirely neglected in this literature.

Clarke et al (2009) consider the way that antagonistic discourses shape managers' moral senses of self. They advance the view that seemingly incompatible discursive resources can allow managers to address moral elements of their identities. Presenting themselves as, for example, driven by concern for their businesses *and* driven by their concern for others may allow individuals room to manoeuvre, and thus to present themselves as commercially astute to one audience, but as morally good to another. In an empirical study Kornberger and Brown (2007) observe that ethical discourses circulating within an organisation are drawn on by individuals within it as they do their identity work, and used to construct and present themselves as morally good people. Although the discourses emanate from the top layers of management, the participants' compliance in perpetuating the discourses is evident. Kornberger and Brown argue that this demonstrates individuals' participation in, rather than dominance by, the ethical discourses. Holt (2006) challenges MacIntyre's

(1981) view of the rational, instrumental and amoral manager to argue that the development of moral character is a vital part of good management practice. He argues that the development in managers of phronesis – the ability to discern how to behave in a morally good way, as well as when and how to encourage others to do the same – is the key to becoming a morally good manager. Holt contends that managers can achieve this through the use of rhetorical practices, which implies that through the expression of morally good ideas and their interactions with others, managers can come to embody and enact morally good selves, and encourage others to do the same. In a study into the moral identity construction of managers, Corlett and McInnes (2013) observe rhetorical and performative identity work, and a tendency for individuals to test out and close down alternative identity positions in the pursuit of their ideal moral selves.

While these studies do not all seek to investigate moral identity in managers *per se*, they do evidence an engagement with moral facets of identity in these individuals, and they do appear to challenge dominant views of senior managers as unprincipled, unethical agents who are unconcerned with morality and focused only upon delivering business success (Clarke et al, 2009). They also touch upon relational and interactional factors as central to the construction and enactment of the moral self, which resonates with much of the identity work literature reviewed above.

2.3.7 Summary of identity work literature to date

The social constructionist perspective prevalent in identity work scholarship has had clear implications for the scope and nature of research that has been undertaken. Focusing as it does on inducing ideas from semi-structured qualitative data, with a strong emphasis on the role of social interaction in the process of identity construction, this body of work has delivered a range of findings that have contributed to understanding of the way that individuals develop their senses of self. Much of this work has contributed to understanding around the way that a range of contextual factors impact on the identity construction processes of individual practitioners in an organisational context.

Notions around the way that roles and role expectations impact on identity work have included the assertion that identity construction in an organisational context is a struggle involving dominant discourses, role expectations and narrative self-identities. The narrative construction of self can align with prevalent dominant discourses but can also be at odds with them (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Organisational controls and processes can produce discourses that interact with, and even regulate, the identity work of individuals as

they enact their roles in organisations (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) and sometimes identity work involves role claiming and enactment (Creed et al's, 2010). The way that role transitions influence identity work (Ibarra, 1999) and the notion of role as a boundary object, facilitating understanding between domains (Simpson and Carroll, 2008), have also contributed to understanding of an individual's position in identity work. Identity work as a response to identity threats is considered in various groups, including managers in so-called dirty work occupations (Ashforth et al, 2007), employees (Costas and Fleming, 2009) prisoners (Toyoki and Brown, 2014), rugby players (Brown and Coupland, 2015) and bullying victims (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). A range of strategies and responses is identified, including reframing (Toyoki and Brown, 2014), and dis-identification (Costas and Fleming, 2009). Mallet and Wapshott (2015) advance the notion of narrative resource poverty to explain why marginalised groups struggle to overcome discriminatory discourses, which are developed and legitimised over time. The role of performance and dialogue in the construction and enactment of self provides a further focus for identity work scholarship (Beech, 2008; Cunliffe, 2001; Hardy et al, 2000). Goffman's (1959) work on performance provides an underpinning for the assertion that a combination of drama, interaction and self-narration allows individuals to legitimise their ideal identities (Down and Reveley, 2009; Bardon et al, 2015) and Butler's (1990, 1993, 1997, in Laine et al, 2016) ideas underpin Laine et al's (2016) work on the simultaneous submission to, and mastery of, discourses which they claim features in performative identity work. Dominant discourses lead to the availability of a range of socially available identities, elements of which individuals incorporate or appropriate into their own senses of self through identity work (Watson, 2008). This is a theme picked up by others including Gill (2015), Sluss and Ashforth (2007) and Ashforth et al (2016) who all argue in some form or another for the role of socially available identities as a resource used by individuals in organisations as they seek to construct their own identities. As noted above, a small number of studies has picked up on moral facets of managerial identities (Clarke et al, 2009; Kornberger and Brown, 2007; Corlett and McInnes, 2013) and has started to consider the relevance of these facets to the professional identities of senior managers.

Identity work scholarship in an organisational context has delivered much insight into the development and enactment of professional and work-related identities in individuals, and this is in turn has been key to explaining broader processes at work within organisations (Brown, 2015). The broader identity work field therefore has much to offer to the study of moral identity, in terms of understanding of the way in which individuals develop their

moral senses of self, and the impact that contextual factors may have on this process. Its epistemological location is one reason for this. The social constructionist frame that predominates in identity work research treats identities as 'fragmented and fractured, multiply-constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions, and in a constant process of change and transformation' (Harding et al, 2014, p1216). This allows for many more possibilities than the positivist essentialist view of the moral self. The importance of context asserted by the social constructionist position also allows for the exploration of individual moral identity as situated and constructed within the organisational environment. In particular, research focusing on dominant discourses, identity threats and role expectations as they impact on identity work may resonate with a study investigating individuals wrestling with their moral senses of self.

The epistemological stance of, and concepts from, the identity work literature clearly have considerable potential to extend knowledge in the moral identity area of scholarship. In addition to this, one particular contextual issue which may be of special relevance to the individuals under study is that of their position within the organisational hierarchy, and this is now considered in a little more detail. As senior practitioners, these individuals occupy a unique position within their organisations, and it is possible that the distinctive circumstances they find themselves operating within impacts the way that they develop their senses of self. For this reason, the additional focus offered by another body of work – that which contemplates the roles, experiences and contributions of middle managers – is now briefly considered. Studies in this area offer an insight into the organisational contextual factors related to hierarchy which impact upon middle level managers, but in so doing, they highlight issues which may be equally relevant to the study of managers at more senior levels within the hierarchy.

2.4 Hierarchical issues: The middle manager literature

As noted earlier, this relatively small body of work offers some insight into issues related to individuals' positions within the hierarchy of their organisations which has resonance for a study into the moral identity work of senior business managers, and for this reason it features in this review.

Literature focusing on middle management can be broken down into three areas, focusing on the things they ought to do, the things they actually do, and the context within which they operate (Harding et al, 2014) and it is this last area which has most resonance for a

study into the moral identity construction of business leaders. A small number of studies has described in detail the specific circumstances that middle managers often find themselves in, sandwiched between their superiors and their subordinates. According to Sims (2003, p1195), for example, middle managers experience '… the peculiar loneliness precariousness and vulnerability' of their positions, as senior managers 'trample unaware' on them and junior staff 'view them with scepticism or hostility'. Middle managers are under pressure from those beneath them in the hierarchy as well as from those above them. Their accounts and stories are accessible to those above and below them, and through these accounts they need to inspire the trust and confidence of all. Nevertheless the nature of their position in the hierarchy, and of their relationships with others, means that they stand to have these stories ignored, dismissed or disparaged by their bosses, and mocked by their subordinates.

Thomas and Linstead (2002) identify a range of strategies that middle managers adopt while trying to secure their identities in these problematic circumstances. Feelings of pressure and insecurity provoke the managers to draw on specific discourses to construct their identities. These discourses are seen as a way of legitimising their status, and they are often related to expertise, professionalism, performance and commitment. In this way, with recourse to these discourses, the managers attempt to address the tensions that they face every day and to secure their professional identities. Harding et al (2014) also note the ambiguous position that middle managers find themselves in, which they characterise as a 'buffer between senior managers and staff' (p1215), tyrannized by those above them and often feeling powerless to act in the way that they believe they should. This unique position between senior and junior colleagues causes them to 'move between contradictory subject positions' (p1213), constructing themselves as both controllers and controlled. Ford and Collinson (2011) note that although middle managers arguably have more flexibility and discretion over their working hours than their subordinates, in practice the pressure that they find themselves under from above coupled with the expectation on them to manage those below them means that they are likely to elect to work longer hours and thus often to compromise their work-life balance.

Hay (2014) points to the role of emotions – specifically guilt anxiety and frustration - in the identity work of early career executives as they struggle to 'become managers' (p514). She argues that individuals' personal self-understandings and socially available manager identities can diverge, provoking anxiety when the individuals feel pressure to live up to high expectations. Discourses, through which they access these socially available identities,

invariably construct managers as in control, and in possession of the skills and expertise to assure the success of the organisation. Those new to managerial roles feel pressure to hit the ground running and to be able to perform at the expected level immediately. They worry that they cannot live up to these expectations, and the angst remains even in experienced middle managers who struggle to match their sense of self to the socially available identity of competent professional. While struggling to manage their own sense of self, these managers are also struggling to exert influence over others within their organisations as well as to be seen to perform by their superiors, and this can lead to significant emotional labour as they work to present and maintain a façade of control and professionalism that is in keeping with the expectations of others. Thus, the identity work that they undertake is done in stressful circumstances.

Ibarra's (1999) work focuses strongly on the idea of a façade or persona which new managers adopt because they feel the need to present themselves as competent fully formed managers before they are confident that they actually fulfil the requirements of the role. Essentially they seek to convey to others the image of a competent manager, in the hope that others will attribute to them the competencies inherent in the persona. Ibarra describes participants who are '… highly cognizant of the need to command credibility with their clients long before they actually understood and felt competent in their new roles' (p772). The individuals in the study experiment with different possible selves as they work to identify the right one. There is evidence of influence from role models as well as a focus on their own skills and characteristics, as the managers try out different provisional selves. Goffman's (1959) work on the self as performed resonates here, as Ibarra offers a view of junior managers testing different identities, receiving feedback from others through their reactions to these identities, and honing their senses of self through these performances and interactions.

So, academic work focusing on junior and middle level managers' identity formation offers a view of these individuals as caught in challenging circumstances, invariably related to their position within their organisational hierarchy. Acquiring the job title of manager is, for many, only the first step in an extended process of becoming a manager, and they often feel that they lack the skills, competence and knowledge for the role. At the same time they feel the weight of expectation, from themselves and those around them, to live up to the title. This can provoke feelings of intense anxiety, and the adoption of a façade or persona, or even the trying out of several different façades, as they attempt to *become* a manager and live up to their job title.

While research evidences these pressures and challenges, however, it is unclear why the difficulties related to such a position should be seen as the unique preserve of *middle* managers. Unless they are at the very top of their organisation, all managers will surely experience the tension of being caught between pressure from above and expectation from below. Many will have been promoted out of their comfort zone and out of the realm of their skill and knowledge, and will have experienced the unease that this provokes as they, and others, expect them to demonstrate immediate competence and poise. This is perhaps exacerbated by the likelihood that, as they rise through the ranks, they require different skills to be successful than they needed while they were working at lower levels in the hierarchy. Arguably, the only difference between senior and middle managers in this respect is likely to be the ever-decreasing number of peers with whom to share the burden as they rise through the ranks. The sense of loneliness and pressure may only increase with seniority, as individuals find themselves called upon to set the moral tone of the business as well as to lead effectively.

The requirement to make, and be seen to make, ethically sound judgements is considered by many as integral to successful leadership – indeed Weber (1965 [1919]) contemplates the way that those in positions of responsibility are required to balance the ethics of their own convictions with the ethics of responsibility towards others. Although his thesis focuses on the experiences of professional politicians, the predicament of the professional statesman in the face of seemingly irreconcilable conflicts between their own convictions and their responsibilities towards others resonates strongly with the dilemmas that many senior managers experience. Weber characterises tension derived from ethical demands on the individual and on their conduct, and in an evaluation of the piece, Starr (1999) argues that this distinction applies in other areas of life, talking of 'human life as fundamentally, pervasively and permanently characterised by conflicts of value pluralism'. Thus, arguably, individuals in many different positions of power are required to balance their ethics of conviction with an ethic of responsibility towards others. This is perhaps another way of approaching the ethical identity struggles of business managers whose moral identity work is done in an uncomfortable place, where they must take account of the pressures of those above as well as their own ideals and values and the likely outcomes of their decisions.

The work of Sims (2001), Harding et al (2014) and others around the isolation, pressure and tensions that middle managers experience as they do their identity work, and the emotional labour that this provokes (Hay, 2014), offers an additional perspective to consider in a study examining moral identity work in senior practitioners. Ibarra's (1999)

ideas on the role of façades, drawing as they do on Goffman's (1959) work, could also contribute to the exploration and understanding of moral identity construction by these individuals. The parallels between the isolation of management and the loneliness of those in public office, as characterised by Weber (1965 [1919]) and Starr (1999), and the tensions provoked by potentially irreconcilable ethical demands related to convictions and responsibilities offer further insight into the circumstances in which managers find themselves, circumstances 'characterised by struggle' with a 'tragic dimension' (Starr, 1999).

2.5 Conclusions

The notion of moral identity offers a new way of approaching and investigating the moral behaviour of individuals in an organisational setting and arguably a fresh lens through which business ethics can be empirically studied. Given that business scandals continue to emerge (Elsass et al, 2016) and that media interest in them shows no sign of abating (Barkemeyer et al, 2010) this is a relevant and topical area of focus in the current climate. However, work so far in this area has not yet tackled in any meaningful way the construction of moral identity in individuals within business organisations. This is perhaps because moral identity has, so far, tended to be examined from a positivist perspective, which has led to a significant body of work devoted to describing, measuring and gauging it, but very little on examining the way that it is constructed.

The introduction of an alternative epistemological standpoint – that of social constructionism - may provide the inspiration and impetus for researchers to move beyond these functionalist considerations and towards inquiry aimed at uncovering new understandings about the way that individuals construct their moral identities. The identity work literature offers a range of ideas, and an epistemological stance, appropriate for this task, but itself lacks a significant focus on contextual hierarchical factors which may impact on the way that individual managers experience their positions. These hierarchical and contextual factors are considered in more detail in literature focused upon middle manager identities.

Bringing together these three bodies of work – moral identity literature, identity work literature and elements of literature devoted to the study of the middle manager - offers a conceptual framework appropriate for an investigation such as this, which seeks to elucidate moral identity construction in senior business managers. No study has yet been identified which focuses upon identity work in senior leaders in organisations, nor has any

work on this group been identified within the moral identity literature. Given the expectation that senior managers are the 'controllers' (Harding et al, 2014, p1232) of the organisation, expected to set the moral tone and strategy, and often susceptible to legislative censure in the event of failings, this is perhaps surprising.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This study is a narrative inquiry. It adopts a social constructionist epistemology, qualitative methodology and narrative-discursive analysis method to investigate the moral identity construction of senior business managers working in UK for-profit business organisations. The focus is on personal narratives generated by participants in one-to-one interviews with the researcher. This methodology chapter offers a justification for the epistemological stance, and a full account of the narrative-discursive method adopted. It justifies the use of purposive sampling to access the thirty participants, all senior practitioners, and it explains the way that the data collection was carried out, in three phases of in-depth interviews interspersed with pauses for reflection and theory engagement. A full account is given of the inductive analytical approach initially adopted to draw out themes from the data. The initial codes generated were aggregated into second and third-order themes through iterative engagement with theory and this resulted in the identification of one overarching theoretical construct, related to the lonely and alienated context in which these participants often do their moral identity work. Two further constructs were developed, related to the identity work strategies that the participants use as they construct their professional moral senses of self.

3.2 Research perspective

This research investigates the way that senior business managers construct their moral sense of self, and the impact that this has on the way that they understand and approach ethical issues in the workplace. To do this, the study adopted a social constructionist perspective, which asserts that meaning is made in, and through, social interaction (Berger and Luckmann, 1971). This approach is based upon the contention that there is no one 'reality', but that individuals may construct meaning in different ways. Knowledge is, for social constructionists, constructed and not simply discovered. In this respect, this epistemological stance differs fundamentally from the positivist stance, which asserts that objective truths await discovery (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002). The social constructionist approach thus acknowledges the integral role of the researcher in the process of socially constructed reality and meaning. So, the notion that professional moral identity is, like

other personal identities, constructed discursively, through interaction with others (Gergen, 1998), underpins the study.

3.2.1 Why social constructionist epistemology?

The study seeks to deliver rich insights into how and why individuals construct the identities that they do. The research does not seek to give an account of what moral identity is, but rather to understand the processes at work as individuals develop and hone their moral senses of self, and the implications this may have for the way that they respond to moral issues. This is something that may vary significantly depending upon the individual and their context. The social constructionist perspective is an appropriate underpinning for this research because it allows for a plausible version of reality, rather than a definitive account (Bryman, 2008) to be uncovered.

The social constructionist approach is underpinned by the notion that meaning is constructed through social interaction, and that individuals construct meaning and therefore reality in different ways. This perspective is exemplified by the writing of Berger and Luckmann (1971) who argue for the central role of social interaction in the development of individuals' understanding of what is real and meaningful. For Berger and Luckmann, individuals 'share a common sense' about reality (p3) which they co-create through face-to-face interaction. This perspective acknowledges the individual differences that are manifest in the way that people see their world, each other and their place in their surroundings. It also recognises the role and impact of context and culture in the process of meaning making. This has implications for the way that the research is carried out. Firstly, it views the researcher not as a dispassionate observer but as an integral part of what is being observed (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002) and therefore as a co-creator of understanding and knowledge. Secondly, it aims to increase understanding of the phenomena under investigation through the induction of new ideas and perspectives from rich data. As such, it takes account of multiple perspectives. Research conducted from the social constructionist position does not seek to demonstrate causality in a statistically reliable way, but rather to develop and extend theoretical concepts and ideas (Pratt, 2009).

Social constructionism crucially posits the central role of language in the creation of knowledge. Experiences can be retained in an individual's consciousness, through sedimentation, where they build up over time. They then coalesce or congeal as recollections which the individual can access and use to make sense of their lives. Through language, these sedimentations are objectified. Common experiences can be

intersubjectively sedimented with the use of language as the means by which these experiences are objectified, shared and eventually transmitted to others. Language thus becomes key to the way in which experiences and meanings can be stored and passed on (Berger and Luckmann, 1971).

Although the construction of an individual's sense of self seems likely to be an inherently individual and personal endeavour, the social constructionist perspective accounts for the role of the social in the process. Gergen (1998) contends that identity construction is a social venture, achieved through social interchange. We position ourselves in relation to others and articulate this positioning through interactions with others. Through interactions with others we identify social realities (Berger and Luckmann, 1971) and thus we come to know the things we see as real and meaningful. Bauman (1993) advances the postmodern viewpoint which is closely allied with the social constructionist epistemology, and which asserts the importance of dialogue, interaction and power relationships in making meaning. This viewpoint acknowledges the importance of context in the social construction of reality and knowledge. In viewing the process as a social one, the social constructionist perspective also acknowledges the fundamental role of discourse in the creating of reality, since it is through talk that individuals interact and make meaning. Language is seen as the means to build reality. In this viewpoint, language is not simply a transparent medium through which we convey meaning to one another – it is constitutive of social life. It makes things happen and brings social worlds into being (Wetherell et al, 2001).

As such, the social constructionist approach is appropriate for a study that seeks to shed light on the way that individuals see themselves in the essentially social setting of a business organisation, allowing for the possibility that the same individual may have a contrasting and even conflicting sense of self within other environments. It also allows for the idea that similar context and environmental factors may nevertheless produce different effects in different individuals. So exploring the way that individuals arrive at their own moral sense of self from a social constructionist perspective allows for multiple responses, each of which depends upon the individual and their experiences, feelings, thoughts and interactions with others (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002).

3.2.2 Social constructionism versus positivism and relativism

Social constructionism entails an interpretive methodology (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002). This means that it is rooted in the notion that reality is accessed through constructions such

as language which must be interpreted by a researcher. This central tenet contradicts the positivist stance, prevalent in the natural sciences, which asserts the existence of an external objective reality that awaits discovery.

Social constructionist research differs from positivist research in a number of ways. Whereas positivist research requires the researcher to be independent, social constructionist research acknowledges the role of the researcher. The aim of constructionist research is to generate understanding rather than to quantify and identify causality. It typically relies on small samples and aims to generalise to a theory rather than using large samples with the objective of delivering statistically reliable correlations, as is usually the case with positivist research. It does not set out to gather data in order to test hypotheses, but rather to induce ideas from the data that it elicits (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002).

Social constructionism is sometimes seen as open to charges of relativism because it is pluralistic and acknowledges multiple realities, and because it asserts the construction of reality rather than the existence of an external objective truth. The relativist doctrine argues for multiple interpretations of the truth, which may be culturally or contextually driven. Facts depend upon the individual observing them. Radical relativism may assert that 'all truths and related claims are equally correct' (Proctor, 1998, p359) which on its flip side arguably leads to a nihilistic position, that nothing at all is knowable. Thus relativism in its pure form is open to charges of infinite possible interpretations of reality, and can be seen to imply that anything goes (Proctor, 1998). Milder forms of relativism may simply submit that all knowledge is context-bound, but that there are finite truths. Relativism is problematic because the idea that individual viewpoints differ is an obvious but inadequate basis for enquiry, given that contradictory views cannot all be true. To counter charges of relativism, social constructionists point to the idea that they observe socially constructed realities, and not simply individual perspectives or viewpoints (Proctor, 1998).

3.2.3 The role of the researcher

The research approach adopted, as outlined above, is an interpretivist one. This means that it accepts that the researcher and the social world impact on each other (Ritchie et al, 2003) and therefore that 'facts and values are not distinct and findings are inevitably influenced by the researcher's perspective and values' (p17). Thus, the researcher takes an active part in the research, exploring the experiences of the participants by interacting with them, and co-creating meaning with them. Effectively, the researcher acts as an instrument

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of data collection, analysis and interpretation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). While this may give the researcher the opportunity to develop a strong connection with the participants, which itself may help to elicit rich data and which may be effective in encouraging participants to speak openly about sensitive issues such as morals, for example, it is important for the researcher to acknowledge the possibility of their own values influencing the process (Greenbank, 2003). It is impractical to suggest that a researcher can entirely set aside their own values, however a reflexive approach can help to mitigate adverse effects, as the researcher acknowledges that their values may well influence the way that they gather and interpret data. Keeping brief notes about the interviews, and about how the researcher felt after each one, was one reflexive practice that was adopted. The aim was to identify any potential effects that the researcher's values may have had on the interview. These brief notes were attached to the transcripts of the interviews in Nvivo (the data analysis software package used) to keep them available during data analysis.

3.3 Research methods

The research methodology was qualitative, and the research method was narrative analysis. Narrative research focuses upon the stories that individuals use to describe their experiences and actions (Polkinghorne, 1995). This kind of inquiry generates stories in the form of accounts, usually of 'actions events and happenings' (Polkinghorne, 1995, p6). Analysis can focus on the content of the stories, or the meaning, or both. The aim is to re-present the stories in order to help make sense of complexities of human life. As noted above, the social constructionist epistemology asserts the central role of talk and language in the co-creation of meaning through social interaction, and so the choice of narrative analysis as a research method is in keeping with this stance. Thirty semi structured interviews were conducted with UK-based senior managers in for-profit business organisations, with the main aim of eliciting their personal narrative accounts of ethical issues and dilemmas that they have experienced in the course of their professional lives. The research sought to elucidate the process by which they construct their moral senses of self.

Participants were asked to narrate accounts of their professional moral and ethical experiences in one-to-one interviews with the researcher. Asking them to talk about ethical dilemmas that they had experienced was a way of encouraging the participants to think about, and articulate, the way that they had approached the issues in a real-life situation. The objective was to elicit free narratives, which are accounts given in the participants' own words, using only open-ended questions from the interviewer and with minimal

prompting. Asking participants in narrative interviews to provide an account of an event or situation in their own words, at their own pace and without interruption has been found to be a productive way of eliciting a free narrative (Fisher, 1995). Under these circumstances it was important to be aware of the possibility of the participant guessing at what the interviewer knew and did not know, as well as about what the interviewer wanted to hear. Given that moral conduct in a professional context may be a sensitive topic, and that the narrative accounts may have had potentially embarrassing or negative connotations for the participant, this was a real possibility, and it demonstrates the potential influence that the interviewer can have on the interview process and on the data elicited. As Bauer (1996) puts it, 'The better people are informed about events the richer narratives are likely to be, which is desirable; however, better informed people are likely to have a higher stake in the events and hence communicate strategically and disguise their 'true' relevance structures' (p12).

3.3.1 Narrative research
3.3.1 (i) What is narrative research?
Narrative research involves gathering people's stories, analysing them and re-presenting them in the pursuit of making meaning (Polkinghorne, 1995). It is sometimes conceptualised as sewing or knitting together fragments, or as a journey that takes different twists and turns in the pursuit of insight (Fraser, 2004). Narrative research is not objective and as such the role of the researcher is central and should be acknowledged. Ideas emerging from narrative research are presented tentatively. Thick and rich descriptions are often used as narrative researchers seek to persuade rather than to prove, and offer a perspective on the world rather than to deliver widely generalisable findings as with positivist approaches.

Interviews are commonly used in narrative research, and a conversational style of interview is often favoured as a way of eliciting ideas which may ordinarily not be accessed. The semi-structured interview is a way of allowing for differences among participants. The researcher can be flexible in the way that they approach each participant. The aim is not to cross-examine, but rather to elicit their stories, thoughts and ideas. Application of a rigid set of questions is not the objective – the idea is rather to encourage and to listen to the narrative accounts of the subject. Data may appear disorganised and chaotic and this may impact on the way that the researcher chooses to analyse it, however '…narrative analysis is not meant to be governed by formulas or recipes' (Fraser, 2004, p186).

Narratives have a central role to play in research on ethics and identity, because although a narrative account ostensibly focuses upon one moment in time, it is 'embedded in a wider narrative' (Rudd, 2007, p64) and as such it reflects where the individual has come from, and where they are headed. MacIntyre (1981) argues that narrative accounts can go beyond causal explanations, and can deliver an understanding of the *sense* of actions. In this way, narratives can deliver an understanding of why individuals behave the way that they do. As already noted, narrative analysis focuses upon the way that people make sense of their world (Bryman, 2008). As such, Bryman (2008) argues that narrative analysis is appropriate for business and management research, because it allows differing interpretations of organisational life to be uncovered, and because it 'draws attention to the role and significance of language in constructing organisational realities' (p559).

3.3.1 (ii) Why is narrative research appropriate for this study?

Narrative analysis is especially relevant for studies into identity because 'narrative and self are inseparable' (Ochs and Capps, 1996, p20) since it is in narrating past experiences that we give voice to them, and it is in experiencing things that we give them meaning. So narrative both comes from, and contributes to, our experiences, which in turn develop our understanding of our own place in the world. In this sense, narratives are an individual's impression of reality as they perceive it, from their unique standpoint, which Ochs and Capps refer to as 'versions of reality' (p21). Narratives also have a temporal facet, insofar as the individual narrating is usually recounting a past event, in the present, but with an eye on the future. Often individuals relate accounts of the past in order to help them to deal with present or future concerns. Sometimes, for example, narrated accounts of past events may be invoked by individuals trying to understand or explain the divergence between reality and expectation. Indeed, Cohler (1982, p207) refers to personal narratives as 'the most internally consistent interpretation of presently understood past, experienced present and anticipated future'. MacIntyre (1981) asserts that because we live out our narratives, that is how we come to understand our own lives and therefore how we understand others. We live our stories before we narrate them. So it is through narrative accounts that individuals express their understanding of events and experiences (Mishler, 1986). Mishler notes that other more mainstream interview methods tend to ignore or even suppress stories, as interviewers seek to keep their participants focused on their specific questions, and try to avoid going off track, whereas a narrative approach allows the participants the time and space to tell their stories without interruption. Narrative

accounts, then, offer participants the opportunity to 'give meaning to and express their understanding of their experiences' (Mishler, 1986, p75).

This choice of research method asserts the idea, as espoused by Bruner (2004), that narrative is culturally shaped – essentially, the way we tell our life stories is shaped by culture, and the stories themselves and the way that we tell them can in turn influence our lives. Bruner (2008) considers the way that storytelling can encourage people to reflect on possibilities that they would otherwise never have considered. So, we can tell stories in an autobiographical sense, as we construct meaning around our lives, and we can use stories as a way of accessing other possibilities – what he terms 'a kind of multi perspectivalism' (Bruner, 2008, p289). On this account stories are effectively reconstructions of events in the past, told to another individual for a purpose. The circumstances of the telling of the story may well shape which stories are told and the way that the stories are presented.

Mishler (1986) contends that narrative research has the potential to deliver for a diverse range of research disciplines. Analysis tends to focus upon three main elements or linguistic functions of the accounts - the textual or syntactic elements, the ideation or referential meanings of what is said, and the role relationships between the speakers. These foci themselves emphasise different approaches to discourse theory, which implies that they adopt different perspectives on, and employ different narrative-analytic methods to, the talk they are examining (Mishler, 1986). A focus on the textual or syntactic presupposes that narratives characterise normative relationships and meanings. A focus on ideation assumes that narratives express cultural themes, values and beliefs. A focus on role relationships presumes that narratives show how individuals work, often with others, to attribute meaning to events in their lives.

3.3.1 (iii) What kind of narratives?

This study focuses upon personal narratives, which are defined and analysed in many different ways (Riessman, 2012). They can refer to lengthy autobiographical life stories, interview exchanges between interviewer and interviewee, and brief stories told in response to specific questions. This study uses narratives from interview exchanges, including the stories that participants tell about their workplace experiences of moral issues. Bell (2009) defines narrative as 'a sequence of ordered events that are connected in a meaningful way for a particular audience in order to make sense of the world or people's experience in it' (p8) and argues that this is what distinguishes narratives from other interview discourses. Gergen (1998) identifies functional features of narrative accounts that contribute to their potential to 'generate a sense of coherence and direction in life

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events' (p102). These include the establishment of a valued goal or end point, the selection of events relevant to the end point, the ordering of events and the stability of identity throughout the account. He talks also of the potential of narrative accounts to 'reflect and create cultural values' (p107) and he argues for the role of narratives in revealing the categories, or concepts of the person, through which identity is discursively created. In arguing for identity as discursively achieved, Gergen also asserts the role of emotions and emotional performances in the process. Essentially, for Gergen, it is through narratives that individuals generate their identity and affirm their values.

3.3.1 (iv) How does this study approach narrative analysis?

Bruner (1985) distinguishes between paradigmatic and narrative cognition, on the basis that the former focuses on classifying items, and is concerned therefore with what makes them members of categories, whereas the latter seeks to understand human action and thus focuses upon what makes things different. Polkinghorne (1995) draws on these distinctions to identify two kinds of narrative inquiry – *analysis of narratives* and *narrative analysis*. In the first, commonalities across stories are identified, resulting in the identification of categories, and of relationships between categories, whereas with the second, data is synthesised rather than separated into its constituent parts, and the result is a storied account that offers explanation for what is observed. Both kinds of narrative inquiry as defined by Polkinghorne utilise diachronic data, which contains 'temporal information about the sequence of events' as well as 'the effect the events had on subsequent happenings' (Polkinghorne, 1995, p12). These data can be life stories, but also accounts of events and reminiscences. Synchronic data, which can also be used in qualitative research, lacks this historical and developmental quality, and tends to take the form of categorical answers to direct questions posed by a researcher seeking, for example, to elicit opinions or information.

This study falls into what Polkinghorne (1995) would describe as *narrative analysis* for several reasons. Firstly, the data collected were clearly diachronic, because they were focused upon events and happenings as recounted by the participants in their accounts. The accounts thus had a temporal element, as participants looked back to recall their experiences, and a connection to other events, as they reflected on the fall-out of these happenings. The accounts generally took the form of a series of stories which had connections to other events which they often shaped in some way. Secondly, the analysis sought to unite the data from a number of participants, and draw from it a storied account of what these individuals experience in the course of their everyday lives facing up to moral

issues in the workplace, rather than to categorise elements and identify relationships. Thirdly, the researcher identified clear boundaries for the study – what Polkinghorne (1995) calls a 'bounded system'. Polkinghorne asserts that a bounded system can be defined as a context or a specific period of time or phase, which defines the focus of study. In this case, the boundaries were identified as the moral experiences of senior managers within the context of UK for-profit businesses. The study sought to demonstrate what was distinctive about, and characteristic of, this particular area of focus, and to deliver understanding about the complexities related to it. The analysis worked to bring together parts of the accounts and stories and to link them in order to deliver a plot or storyline, with which the researcher sought to explain how the group under study construct and perform their moral selves.

This study assumes that speakers are positioned by others as well as by themselves, and thus that identity can be both claimed and conferred (Taylor and Littleton, 2006). This approach implies an 'expanded, discursive and narrative focus ...to explore the possibilities and constraints which speakers bring to an encounter from their previous identity work' (Taylor and Littleton, 2006, p25). The structuring of an individual's account as detailed in their references to the past, their focus on the future, their memories and the way that their story develops is of interest in this approach. It considers the discursive resources available to individuals as they do their identity work, as well as the way that broader and more prevalent understandings within society can enable and constrain it. Discursive resources are seen here as 'the accumulated ideas, images, associations and so on which make up the wider social and cultural context of our lives' (Taylor, 2006). As such, the study assumes that talk is constitutive of reality – that meaning is made in talk and in interaction, and it acknowledges the role of context as both constraining and enabling this process.

The study examines narratives, including stories told by participants and responses to interviewer comments and questions, in one-off semi-structured research interviews. This means that the interviewer met only once with each participant, and that although an interview guide including a range of possible questions was established in advance, the interview process was flexible (Bryman, 2008). Such an approach does not seek to identify and analyse one single life story, but rather to examine segments of talk which have a connection to the subject under investigation, and which seem to offer explanation and insight as well as description. These relatively broad criteria allow for a range of narratives to be identified and analysed. The concern in analysis is on how the stories are told, and on what they accomplish, as much as on what they are about, and thus the focus is not only

on content of their talk, but also on action, as evidenced by the way the participants tell the stories, and by what the stories are designed to do (Marais, 2015). This focus implies a consideration in analysis on, for example, the performative aspects of the talk (Goffman, 1959) and on the discursive actions that are contained within the talk (Gergen and Gergen, 2006).

There is precedent for the use of narrative methods in the study of identity. Empirical studies have considered the narrative construction of moral identity in a small number of groups including healthcare workers (Deeb-Sossa, 2007) and academics (Fitzmaurice, 2013), and the broader field of identity research offers a number of studies that have investigated identity construction through discourse, narrative and storytelling. For example, in a study into identity positions of good parenting using narrative analysis, Karlsson et al (2013) identifies culturally available discourses from the distinctions that participants make between good and bad parenting practices in their narrative accounts of pre-school selection. In a study into the construction of the social entrepreneurial identity, Jones et al (2008) note that classifications used by individuals to categorise different entities also serve as a means by which those individuals construct their own identities. These examples demonstrate that this choice of research method has the potential to account for individual differences, and for the effects of context on the construction of identity in a social setting.

3.4. Sampling strategy

The focus of this study was current business practitioners working at a senior level in UK based for-profit business organisations. The research focused upon senior managers across a range of sectors, organisations and functional roles. The sampling method selected was non-probability purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling. Purposive sampling involves the researcher deliberately selecting participants who are relevant to the research question. Snowball sampling is a technique whereby the researcher connects with an initial group of relevant participants, and then uses these individuals to recruit others (Bryman, 2008). So, the researcher made contact with an initial group of relevant participants and then encouraged these participants to introduce her to further participants.

3.4.1 Why a range of sectors and professions?

Focusing on a range of business sectors allowed for an exploration of possible patterns related to these sectors. It also avoided potentially challenging access issues which, had they been encountered with the choice of only one organisation or sector, may have

jeopardised the study. Focusing on a range of business sectors also allowed for a wide range of ethical issues to be explored, given that different industries and professions attach different priorities to the ethical issues with which they have to contend. Anecdotal evidence when identifying and recruiting participants suggested that many business managers move between business sectors during the course of their careers, and analysis of the professional backgrounds of the final participants supported this. Of thirty participants, twenty five had changed business sector over the course of their career. Most of these twenty five had changed sector more than once. The changes in sector were, in many cases, from and to fundamentally different sectors. It would therefore have been extremely challenging and time-consuming to identify sufficient numbers of senior managers who had spent their whole professional lives in one business sector.

Targeting one profession, such as finance directors, would potentially have allowed for a more in-depth exploration of a narrower range of issues, for example related to financial conduct. However, it may also have risked narrowing the field of enquiry excessively, leading to a failure to elicit enough data to address the research questions. Throughout the data collection phase, analysis was undertaken to track the breadth and depth of data that was being elicited. This involved transcribing the data as it was gathered, and identifying the major themes emerging from the transcripts, to ascertain whether new or existing ideas were being uncovered.

3.4.2 Why senior managers?

The rationale for choosing senior managers was that they should have significant professional experience and should therefore be more likely to have encountered moral issues in the workplace. Research suggests that work experience impacts upon individuals' approach to ethical dilemmas, specifically affecting their analysis of the situational factors related to them, and their understanding of the effects of ethical decisions (Pimentel et al, 2010). Using students or junior managers thus reduces the likelihood that participants will have had significant exposure to real morally-charged issues, and this potentially increases the likelihood of responses based upon normative ideas rather than personal experience.

3.4.3 Accessing the sample

Non-probability sampling is appropriate for qualitative research of this kind, which adopts a social constructionist perspective and seeks to deliver rich insights rather than statistically reliable generalisations about a defined population. While the aim of probability sampling is to achieve a statistically similar sample to the population under study, in order that

hypotheses can be tested on, and predictions made about, the population, this is not the case with purposive sampling, where participants are selected on the basis that they possess specific features or characteristics of the group under study. When probability sampling methods, such as simple random sampling, stratified random sampling and systematic random sampling, are used, although the participants are selected at random, their probability of selection is known. This is not the case with non-probability methods, where the aim is not to select a statistically similar sample but rather to reflect the desired characteristics of the population. Thus, unlike probability sampling, the chance of any member of the population of the study being selected is unknown. However, the fact that the sample seeks to reflect specific characteristics of the population makes non-probability sampling suited to qualitative research studies (Ritchie et al, 2003).

Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling which aims to sample participants 'in a strategic way, so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed' (Bryman, 2008, p415). In this case, it involved identifying and selecting participants in line with specific characteristics, a technique which is known as criterion sampling. Criterion sampling should not be confused with convenience sampling, in which participants are selected simply by virtue of being easily available to the researcher. In the case of criterion sampling, the participants are selected because they meet a predetermined criterion or number of criteria, and are thus judged to be relevant cases of the population under study. It is vital that the researcher is clear about the actual criteria that are used to identify potential participants or cases (Bryman, 2008). Snowball sampling, where participants are used to recruit further participants, is also a type of purposive sampling. It is often deployed in cases where accessing the sample presents problems, for instance where no obvious sampling frame is available from which to select, or if the participants are likely to be difficult to find and approach.

This study sought to access senior business practitioners, both men and women, in UK-based for-profit businesses. It did not set out to achieve a predetermined number of men versus women, although attention was paid to possible gender differences in analysis. It did not set out to reflect a specific ethnic mix in the sample. The main criteria by which participants were selected were that they should be currently or recently (within the past three months) working in a UK-based for-profit business organisation, and that their current or most recent title should include 'Director' or 'Head of'. Since no complete sampling frame is readily available for this population, and given the likelihood that these senior managers may be reluctant to participate due to time constraints or to the sensitive

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nature of the topic (Thomas, 1993), the professional network of the researcher, who is a former business practitioner, was used as a starting point to identify a number of participants. Willing participants were then asked to provide introductions to additional participants. Twelve participants came from the direct current network of the researcher, a further five were former colleagues with whom the researcher made contact, and the remaining thirteen were introduced by direct contacts. The majority of participants were initially contacted using the LinkedIn social network. In all cases, personal direct approaches were made by the researcher to the participants, to reduce the likelihood of self-selection bias, where participants agree or decline to participate because they have a particular position on the topic under study, given that the research focused upon morality (Brand and Slater, 2003). In addition to this, and as discussed below, one pilot interview was carried out prior to finalisation of the study, to ascertain the likely difficulty of engaging a senior manager in open discussion about the sensitive topic under investigation. It is perhaps also worth noting that participants were not selected on the basis of any association with unethical behaviours or business scandals in their professional lives.

The personal interview request was also adopted to try to encourage members of this often elusive group to consider participating. Gaining access can be tough because, as Thomas (1993, p81) puts it, 'Business elites are quite good at insulating themselves from unwanted disturbance'. In all cases, potential participants were given a brief written description by email of the project (see appendix A), along with a personalised written message (see appendix B) explaining why they had been approached. The aim of the personalised message was to give these executives a compelling rationale as to why they in particular should participate, and this rationale was always related to their expertise, experience and level of seniority (Thomas, 1993). A strong emphasis was put upon confidentiality and anonymity (see ethics below) and they were all sent an electronic copy of the consent form which they would be required to sign at the interview in advance, for their perusal. The form gave details of steps that would be taken to ensure full compliance with data protection legislation.

All interviews were carried out at a time and location identified by the participants. By offering clear reasons to participate related to their professional experience and expertise, by guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality, and by fitting in with their personal schedules and time constraints, the interviewer sought to mitigate several potential problems related to accessing these senior practitioners. In the event, only three of the

managers who were approached declined to participate. A table detailing the sample

accessed is available below in table 1.

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Table 1: Sample accessed

No	Date	Participant	Job Title	Sector	Age
1	30-Apr-15	M1	Head of Real Estate Finance	Banking	40-55
2	09-Oct-15	M2	Marketing Director	Manufacturing (Horticulture)	40-55
3	10-Oct-15	M3	Managing Director	IT Systems	40-55
4	13-Oct-15	M4 ('Oliver')	Finance Director	Manufacturing (Garden Equipment)	40-55
5	07-Nov-15	M5	Finance Director	Food (Manufacture & Retail)	40-55
6	19-Nov-15	M6	Head of Projects	Wholesaler	40-55
7	20-Nov-15	F1	Legal Director	Global Logistics	40-55
8	29-Nov-15	M7	Finance Director	Global Resourcing (Equipment Leasing)	40-55
9	04-Dec-15	F2	Head of Valuation	Commercial Real Estate	40-55
10	04-Dec-15	F3	Head of Organisational Development	Property Management	40-55
11	26-Jan-16	M8	Commercial Director	Software Services	40-55
12	02-Mar-16	F4	HR Director	Banking	25-39
13	18-Apr-16	M10	Associate Director	Professional Technical Services	25-39
14	21-Mar-16	F5	Finance Director	Retail (Clothing)	40-55
15	22-Apr-16	M11	Finance Director	Logistics Solutions	40-55
16	27-Apr-16	M13 ('Daniel')	Managing Director	Business Services	40-55
17	25-Apr-16	M12	Head of Operations	Banking	40-55
18	14-Apr-16	M9	Commercial Director - International	Food & beverages	40-55
19	04-May-16	M14	Chief Executive	Telecommunications	40-55
20	12-Jul-16	M15 ('Will')	Managing Director	Marketing services	40-55
21	15-Jul-16	M16	Business development Director	Manufacturing	40-55
22	04-Oct-16	F6	Managing Director	Childcare	40-55
23	27-Jul-16	M17	Divisional Director	Financial services	40-55
24	02-Sep-16	M18	Head of Commercial Operations	Media & Information	40-55
25	09-Sep-16	M19	Managing Director	Software Services	40-55
26	16-Sep-16	M20	Finance Director	Media & information	40-55
27	13-Sep-16	F7	Managing Director	Media & Information	40-55
28	12-Sep-16	F8	Managing Director	Agriculture	40-55
29	13-Sep-16	F9	Head of Intelligence	Media & Information	25-39
30	20-Sep-16	F10	Associate Director	Cyber security	55+

3.4.4 Sample size and saturation

Since this was a qualitative study that did not seek to deliver generalisable results, but rather to deliver richness of information, the aim was to achieve a sample of sufficient size to capture a range of experiences and sufficient depth of data without becoming repetitious, while also providing answers to the research questions. This raises the concept of sample saturation, which in this context means that data should continue to be collected until nothing new is being generated – 'the point at which there are fewer surprises and there are no more emergent patterns in the data' (Gaskell, 2000, in O'Reilly and Parker, p192). The actual sample size that this implied was difficult to predict in advance of data collection. It is also worth noting that the point of saturation itself can be very difficult to pinpoint, and that some themes may have scope for generating potentially limitless data (O'Reilly and Parker, 2013). In the face of these challenges, transparency is required in dissemination, to provide full details about the sample, the way that it was accessed and how saturation was assessed.

At the outset, it was anticipated that around thirty interviews would be required to achieve saturation. Although there is no universal agreement on sample size for qualitative research studies, thirty participants is in line with Warren's (2001) assertion that 'to have a non-ethnographic qualitative interview study published, the minimum number of interviews seems to fall in the range twenty to thirty'. The overall aim was to deliver rich insights, supported by the data, to underpin responses to the research questions.

3.5. Data collection

Given the challenges of demonstrating saturation, and of keeping track of when and how it would be achieved, the data collection was carried out in three distinct phases, interspersed with data analysis phases, as shown below (figure 1). At the end of each phase, the researcher paused for several weeks to transcribe the interviews where time allowed, and to reflect on the data being collected. The aim was to keep track of the ideas and feelings being expressed, and to consider the emergence of new themes. This was intended to allow for the interviews in subsequent data collection phases to reflect adjustments in emphasis based on these assessments (see 'Data and theory: symbiotic interplay' below).

	2015								2016											
	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Phase 0: One pilot interview	█																			
Securing access		█	█	█	█	█														
Phase 1: Nine interviews						█	█	█												
Analysis									█	█										
Phase 2: Nine interviews											█	█								
Analysis													█	█						
Phase 3: Eleven interviews															█	█	█			
Analysis																		█	█	█

3.5.1 The interviews

All thirty interviews were carried out by the researcher and all were audio recorded. All participants were asked to give written consent for their interviews to be recorded. It was explained to them that this would allow for the interviewer to focus completely on the interview without the need to take detailed notes, and that it would allow for accurate recall of the detail of the interview in subsequent analysis. This would ensure that the researcher could make maximum use of the interview data, which was important given that the participants had given up their time to take part. All participants readily agreed to the interview being recorded, and no participants raised any objections to this.

The only information about the study that the participants received in advance of the interview was the information sheet (shown in appendix A) in which they were told that the study would examine morality in a business context, and that the interviews would focus on 'the ways in which senior business managers make sense of the ethical issues that they encounter in the course of their professional lives'. They therefore came into the interviews knowing that the broad topic would be issues of morality and ethics in their professional lives, but they received no further briefing than that.

A discussion guide was established in advance of the data collection phases (see appendix C), and this was available to the researcher during all interviews. However, the objective was to encourage the participants to talk about their experiences and so all interviews began with an open-ended question encouraging them to talk about their professional lives. This was a successful approach and, as a result, the vast majority of discussions were completely participant led, with the researcher needing to ask few direct questions. The discussion guide often served more as an aide-memoire towards the end of the interviews than for a running order to be slavishly followed. As such, the researcher generally used it to check that all areas on it had had been covered during the interview. It was used to prompt additional questions if an area had not been covered.

A PhD colloquium workshop during the second phase of data collection, in which difficulties with encouraging participants to talk about their experiences were being discussed, elicited guidance from an experienced identity scholar who was facilitating the discussion. He suggested that asking participants to think about the different phases of their professional lives as if they were the unfolding chapters of a book in the first instance may help them to focus and encourage them to talk about their ethical experiences. This approach was implemented in all subsequent interviews and proved to be an extremely effective way of encouraging the participants to narrate their accounts freely and in detail from the start of the interviews. This approach is outlined in Creed et al (2010).

Interviews lasted an average of forty five minutes. Participants all, without exception, demonstrated a willingness to discuss moral issues in the workplace freely.

3.5.2 Data and theory: symbiotic interplay

This phased approach to data collection also guided the researcher's engagement with academic theory during the data collection phase. The theory the researcher considered during these pauses had an influence on subsequent data collection. A diverse range of theory had been considered prior to the start of data collection, including moral theory, identity theory and positioning theory, narratives and narrative analysis. This early reading also led to the identification of moral identity as a key concept in the study. As themes emerged, during the analysis and reflection pauses between data collection phases, they guided the ongoing reading of the researcher, which led to the identification of additional concepts ideas and theories relevant to the study. The way that the researcher moved back and forth between data and theory throughout the data collection phases is shown in figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Symbiotic interplay of data and theory

DATA

THEORY

| IDENTITY THEORY | Hitlin, 2003 |
| | Harré et al, 1999 |

MAY 2015

PILOT INTERVIEW

MORAL IDENTITY	Blasi, 1999
	Haidt, 2001
NARRATIVES & IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION	Bruner, 2004
	Gergen, 1998

Groups
The social

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY	Tajfel, 1981
	Tajfel & Turner, 1986
SOCIAL INTERACTION	Berger & Luckman, 1971

OCT TO DEC 2015

9 INTERVIEWS

| PERFORMANCE | Goffman, 1959 |
| | Goffman, 1974 |

Bad to be good
What I am not
Performing roles

| FRAMING | Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003 |
| IDENTITY WORK | Alvesson & Willmot, 2002 |

MAR & APR 2016

9 INTERVIEWS

| ETHICS OF OFFICE | Weber, 1965 |
| IDENTITY WORK IN INTERACTION | Beech, 2008 |

Societal discourses
Negative identity work
Alienation

| DISCOURSE & DISCURSIVE RESOURCES | Clarke et al, 2009 |
| | Cunliffe, 2001 |

JUL TO SEP 2016

11 INTERVIEWS

	Toyoki & Brown, 2014
STIGMATISED IDENTITY	Ashforth et al, 2007
IDENTITY THREATS	Costas & Fleming, 2009
	Brown & Coupland, 2015
MIDDLE MANAGEMENT LITERATURE	Sims, 2003
	Harding et al, 2014

Moral core
Defending
Hierarchies

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A reading of the transcript of the pilot interview identified the emergent themes of groups and the social. His account indicated that group membership was important to this participant both as a manager and as a member. He talked in particular about his team as his 'tribe', and about feeling that he did not always fit in to peer groups. This inspired reading around social identity theory, in particular to the work of Tajfel (1981) and Tajfel and Turner (1986). These theories had been briefly considered before, as precursors to theories of moral identity advanced by Blasi (1999) and Haidt (2001). Following the pilot interview, they offered insight into the need that some individuals have to belong to groups, and the way that they may use stereotyping to define groups to which they do not belong. This reading of theory led to an additional question related to stereotypes being included in the discussion guide. The work of Berger and Luckman (1971) on the social construction of reality was revisited after the pilot interview. This re-reading served to strengthen the researcher's conviction that the social constructionist perspective was appropriate as an underpinning to the study, because it allows for identity being influenced by environment and context, and performed in interaction with others. This participant's construction and performance of his sense of self was noticeably influenced by his circumstances.

During the second pause, following nine further interviews, three key themes emerged from early readings of the transcripts which provoked additional engagement with theory. The first was the notion expressed by some participants that they had to do apparently unethical things in order to be ethical practitioners. Goffman's work on framing (1974) offered a theoretical perspective to help elucidate this, with his idea of a schema of interpretation, or set of filters, through which individuals make sense of their circumstances. This idea of a frame, or way of looking at things, was something that influenced subsequent data collection, when participants were asked if they had ever done something they felt was unethical, but that they had considered the right thing to do. It also became evident in this phase that participants were sometimes more able to express what they were not, than to articulate what they were. It seemed that constructing their moral senses of self was, for some, a struggle, influenced by their own expectations and those of others. Some clearly felt pressure to behave in specific ways and wrestled with the implications of this for their own senses of self. The identity work literature was key to early examination of this emergent theme. In particular, Sveningsson and Alvesson's (2003) work on anti-identities, and Alvesson and Willmot's (2002) paper on contradictory identity work offered theoretical concepts relevant to these early findings. The data also pointed

the researcher back to the idea, briefly considered in earlier reading, of performed identities as espoused by Goffman (1959), and especially of the notion that individuals may perform their identities for themselves as well as others.

Following nine further interviews during March and April 2016, the researcher paused to return to the identity work literature in the light of the emergent observation that a significant proportion of the identity work undertaken by the participants was negative. Participants appeared to be responding to broader, often hostile, societal discourses about practitioners like themselves. Some articulated more localised organisational discourses which seemed to be impacting on their identity work. In this reflection phase, Beech's (2008) work on dialogic identity work offered theoretical ideas around embedded discourses and their impact on identity work. Clarke et al's (2009) study on antagonistic discursive resources as used by managers in their identity work offered a perspective on the way that contradictory discourses may provoke individuals to incorporate apparently incompatible elements into their own identities. Cunliffe's (2001) work on organisational discourses, and the idea that managers co-author them, also offered a new perspective on the way that these discourses are utilised as well as perpetuated by senior leaders. These ideas helped to focus attention on the way that participants in subsequent interviews articulated and drew on organisational and societal discourses. The alienation and loneliness evident in many accounts motivated a reading of Weber's (1965 [1919]) 'Politics as a vocation', which talks of tension and irreconcilable conflict derived from the ethical demands on individuals holding political office. For Weber, it is the conflict of their own convictions and their responsibilities towards others that provokes this tension in politicians. This idea that individuals in positions of power need to balance their ethics of conviction with an ethic of responsibility, and that this makes for tension and loneliness, resonated with the accounts of some participants who described being caught between the expectations of those beneath them and the pressure from those above them in the hierarchy. Weber's work thus offered a theory as to why the participants were voicing these tensions, and this focus informed the final data collection phase in which increased emphasis was put on the questions 'What expectations do you feel that others have of you in a work situation?' and 'Who do you feel responsible for, and who do you feel responsible to in a work situation?'. Participants who expressed feelings of loneliness or alienation were prompted to give detailed accounts of these feelings, and of the impact on them in their work lives.

It was perhaps this added attention, in the final phase of interviews, to the loneliness of senior managers that led to the emergent idea in initial analysis of these eleven transcripts that an individual's level in the hierarchy of an organisation may impact on their moral identity work. The reading around the role of dominant discourses in the process of identity formation could also have influenced this idea. These interviews evidenced attempts on the part of the participants to defend themselves against charges of unethical behaviour. Several participants articulated a moral-at-heart identity in which they invoked personal memories of childhood and upbringing, perhaps as a way of asserting themselves as moral practitioners in the face of evidence and discourses to the contrary. These themes influenced reading around stigmatised identities (e.g., Toyoki and Brown, 2014; Ashforth et al, 2007) and identity threats (e.g., Costas and Fleming, 2009; Brown and Coupland, 2015) as a way of shedding light on how and why individuals respond to external discourses that cast them as unethical. Concepts expounded in the significant body of work focusing on middle management were also considered as a way of further elucidating the idea of hierarchy impacting on identity work.

Maintaining a strong emphasis on the use of observed data and emergent themes to inform theory engagement and vice versa was an important way of encouraging reflection throughout the data collection phases. The purpose of this approach was to encourage the researcher to move continually between data and theory, to reflect on the empirical data and emergent themes in the light of existing theory, but to keep in mind the primary aim of building on existing academic work and starting to develop new theoretical insights, ideas and concepts. In shedding light on the way that senior managers construct and perform their moral identities, and in moving between data and theory in this way, this study sought to extend extant theory to deliver greater understanding around the process of moral identity formation in this group of participants.

3.6. Data analysis

Analysis and theorisation of the narrative data was an iterative process in which induction was used to identify and draw out themes, and existing theory was used as a starting point to explain empirical observations. Analysis thus incorporated several phases, and encompassed the narrative data itself, the emergent themes, and existing theory, all of which were reflected upon.

To begin with, interviews were transcribed, and the transcriptions imported into the Nvivo qualitative data software package. Nvivo is widely used for qualitative data analysis, and is

highly appropriate for analysing unstructured narrative data because it allows the user to classify and sort the data and to examine and interrogate it in a structured way. The researcher transcribed eighteen of the interviews herself, and the final twelve were transcribed using a professional transcription service, due to time constraints. Analysis entailed searching the transcript data for emerging and relevant themes. This was done by looking for and coding recurrent topics, typologies and categories that came up, including metaphors and other verbal devices that were used, and similarities and differences in the ways that interviewees talked about things (Bryman, 2008). Emergent themes could therefore include words in a semantic field, as well types of language employed, such as passive, emotive, or religious.

One of the strengths of a qualitative form of analysis such as narrative analysis is arguably in the revelatory insight and creativity that it can bring, although some see this as incompatible with the requirements of a systematic approach to data analysis. Gioia et al (2013) argue that traditional theory development is too closely focused upon, and driven from, existing theory which can discourage originality. They believe that focusing excessively on constructs – 'abstract theoretical formulations about phenomena of interest' (Gioia et al, 2013, p16) - detracts from researchers' ability to deliver deeper insights into organisational workings.

Acknowledging the difficulties qualitative researchers sometimes have in convincing others that their research is rigorous and not simply an interesting but unconvincing perspective based on selective choice of quotations, Gioia et al (2013) propose a systematic approach to qualitative data which combines participant and researcher voices in a two-level analysis. In the first order of analysis, codes are inductively generated from the data. In the second order of analysis, it is the researcher who becomes the 'knowledgeable agent' and who considers the participant-generated codes along with 'the more abstract 2nd order theoretical level of themes, dimensions and the larger narrative' (Gioia et al, 2013, p20). The aim is to consider the question 'What is going on here?' This is where the role of the researcher is to try to identify whether emerging themes suggest relevant concepts that explain the phenomena that are on view and under investigation. These themes are then distilled down further into fewer 'aggregate' dimensions. This is an approach embraced by other identity researchers, notably Creed et al (2010, p1342) who give an account of the way that they 'moved iteratively between the data, the emerging themes and existing theory in several phases' in order to ground their initial constructs in the narrative accounts

of their participants, before introducing several different theoretical lenses to help them to draw out second-level constructs.

In line with Gioia et al's (2013) approach, the first round of coding was done completely inductively, which means that it was led entirely by the data. No codes were developed in advance or applied to the data at this stage. Instead, codes were established with recourse to the transcripts, and everything that appeared to be of interest was coded using the language of the participants. Using the terminology and language of the participants to name the codes - a technique known as in-vivo coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) - was an important way of avoiding the researcher imposing preordained understandings onto the participants' way of thinking and sense making (Gioia et al, 2013). This was one way in which the researcher sought to ensure rigour in the data analysis process. Using their language was also intended to give voice to the participants, an approach underpinned by the assumption as espoused by Gioia et al (2013, p17) that participants are 'knowledgeable agents' who 'know what they are trying to do and can explain their thoughts, intentions and actions'.

Gioia et al (2013) acknowledge that the first level of data analysis may generate an overwhelming number of codes, and that the researcher may feel 'lost' in the data, but assert that this is part of the process. As the analysis continues, similarities and differences should become apparent and the codes may merge a little, reducing the number. The first round of coding of the thirty transcripts in this study, covering around twenty three hours of interviews, generated 715 codes. Coding involved reading through the transcripts and attaching codes to all pieces of participant talk that the researcher felt was interesting for any reason. Great care was taken to use the participants' language in the names of the codes. This first round of coding took several weeks and was done during November and December 2016.

Once the first phase of coding had been completed, the second stage of analysis involved aggregating the codes generated in the first phase by grouping similar codes. This was done during January and February 2017. The 715 codes generated in the first round of coding were reviewed and clustered into 57 aggregate codes. This process involved searching for relationships between the different codes – for example, where the participants seemed to be expressing similar ideas, albeit maybe using slightly different language. During this phase, the process remained rooted in the participant data, and sought only to draw out the ideas and themes that the participants themselves were elaborating and referring to in

their accounts. In this way, the aggregate codes themselves became the basis for a number (39) of first order concepts. Once this had been done, theoretical concepts were introduced by the researcher and applied to the data, with the aim of developing explanations for what was going on. The first order concepts became the foundation for second order themes. During this process, the researcher gathered together similar concepts and developed and applied more abstract labels in an effort to begin to explain what was going on. The grouped concepts, or second order themes, were then themselves assembled into aggregate dimensions.

The overall focus of the research was on the way that individual participants construct their moral sense of self, and the broad theoretical lens adopted at this stage was that of identity work. The notion that individuals respond to identity threats (Ashforth et al, 2007; Toyoki and Brown, 2014) in specific ways which impact on their identity work, and the idea that individuals perform elements of their identities for the benefit of others as well as for themselves (Goffman, 1959) provided theoretical frameworks which were drawn on at this stage of data analysis. Weber's (1965 [1919]) work on the practice of politics, and the need for political leaders to balance the ethics of responsibility and the ethics of conviction also provided a lens for data analysis. Literature focusing on middle management (e.g., Sims, 2003; Harding et al, 2014) offered insight into hierarchical issues that emerged.

One overarching third order aggregate dimension - *the loneliness of seniority* - was identified. This relates to the environment or context within which senior managers in this study often talked about finding themselves as they sought to develop their moral senses of self. Two further third order aggregate dimensions emerged, related to the strategies that these senior managers adopted as they did their moral identity work. These are identified as *reaffirming myself as essentially moral*, and *becoming and being a moral manager*. The first order concepts, second order themes and third order aggregate dimensions are summarised in table 2 below.

Table 2: Initial data structure

First order concepts	Second order themes	Third order aggregate dimensions
Stereotypes of our professions cast us as unethical	Others see my profession as unethical	**The loneliness of seniority (Overarching dimension)**
People expect us to be immoral		
Pressure from above	Caught in the middle	
Expectation from below		
Feeling accountable to many		
Decisions are complex and difficult	Difficult dilemmas which tear me; impossible to please everyone	
Conflicting agendas and diverging objectives		
Emotional wrangling with impossible dilemmas		
Unpopular, hated by many	Lonely	
Alone		
My morals come from my upbringing	Being a moral person at heart	**Reaffirming myself as essentially moral**
My religious beliefs underpin my morals.		
Feeling uncomfortable	Not being able to tolerate unethical behaviour	
I would have to say something when confronted with unethical behaviour		
Morals as essential to me		
Feeling I know what is right	Just knowing right from wrong	
Morals as just in me		
There are some things I just cannot do		
Setting the right example	Needing to set the moral tone	**Becoming and being a moral manager**
Doing the right thing		
Hard to rebel		
Being strong		
Knowing where the line is	The tension between being good and being competent	
Constantly having to make judgments		
Having responsibility for many things		
Prevented from doing what I think	The system as working against me	
Not being able to do the right thing		
Being drawn into unethical behaviour		

Table 3 (below) offers insight into the way that one of the third order dimensions emerged from the narrative data, through the progressive stages of analysis.

Table 3: Anatomy of a third order dimension: Reaffirming myself as essentially moral

Exemplar narratives	First order concepts	Second order themes	Third order aggregate dimension
I mean it feels ultimately quite instinctive, I mean I suppose it's just where does it originate from, I mean I guess it's, it's probably you'd say upbringing on some level for sure, you know the values that are instilled. (M14)	My morals come from my upbringing.	Being a moral person at heart.	Reaffirming myself as essentially moral.
I grew up in a in a very religious Christian household and I've always been brought up that your values are your values doesn't matter where you are you live your values. (F1)	My religious beliefs underpin my morals.		
I suppose I just take the view that um if I feel distinctly uncomfortable with something then I will tend to shy away with it er shy away from it um and if I don't then it's probably OK. (M8)	Feeling uncomfortable	Not being able to tolerate unethical behaviour.	
I think I'd call it no matter what. (M11)

If I came across sharp practices, I would raise it and say, I'm really not happy about working within this environment with the organisation doing this. (M20) | I would have to say something when confronted with unethical behaviour | | |
| I think I've always been like that, I've always been someone that's considered the bigger moral implications of my actions, whether it were work or outside. (F5) | Morals as essential to me | | |
| …so personally I will take the judgement of what I feel to be right, and that's how I've always worked. (F9)
I think the ninety nine to hundred percent of the time I know what to do. (M7) | Feeling I know what is right | Just knowing right from wrong. | |
| Yes it's something in me, yeah something in me (M8) | Morals as just in me | | |

And that gut reaction tells you, actually, I'm on the right path here, now. (F6)			
…but I've also learned a lot of things that I … I wouldn't do as an individual er because I just disagree, you know they don't sit right with me. (M13) *And I just went, I just can't do that. (F6)*	There are some things I just cannot do		

3.7. Reliability, Validity and Generalisability

The concepts of reliability and validity of data, which are traditionally associated with assessing the rigour of quantitative research data, can nonetheless be adapted for qualitative research such as this, which adopts a different epistemological stance and methodology. Unlike the positivist tradition, social constructionism asserts multiple realities and context-bound truths, embraces the notion that researchers interact with their subjects, and rejects conventional positivist notions of causality in favour of 'multiple interacting factors, events and processes' (Schwandt et al, 2007, p17). In the positivist paradigm, reliability relates to the consistency and replicability of results while validity relates to whether the study measures what it purports to measure. Internal reliability refers to the extent to which a measure is consistent within itself, and external reliability refers to the replicability of a study. Internal validity relates to the extent to which the study measures what it seeks to measure and external validity relates to the generalisability of findings (Bryman, 2008).

Guba (1981) offers alternative criteria, based upon the traditional concepts of reliability and validity, to assess the rigour of qualitative research data. Guba terms the overall concept trustworthiness, and contends that it encompasses four sub-criteria – credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Ensuring that the research is carried out in accordance with well-established practices will address the credibility criterion. Offering a 'thick' (or detailed) description (Bryman, 2008) of the context of the research allows others to judge whether or not the findings are transferable to other contexts. Providing a detailed account of the research design and data collection process will address the dependability criterion. This detailed account, along with a clear statement of the research assumptions and research limitations, will address the confirmability criterion which, while recognising that complete objectivity is not possible with research of this sort, nevertheless

seeks to demonstrate that the researcher has done everything possible to avoid researcher bias (Shenton, 2004).

Researcher bias and subjectivity in qualitative research is sometimes seen as inevitable, given that 'a researcher's personal beliefs and values are reflected not only in the choice of methodology and interpretation of findings, but also in the choice of a research topic' (Mehra, 2002, p5). The social constructionist stance asserts the role of interaction in the creation of meaning, and so separating the researcher entirely from the subject in qualitative research is not an option. Participants themselves can also be a source of bias if, in the course of their interaction with the researcher, they offer responses that they believe the researcher approves of or wants to hear. Social desirability may also influence participants to give accounts that they believe to be socially acceptable (Bryman, 2008). The narratives upon which this study focuses were acquired during face to face, one-to-one interviews with the researcher, and the main focus of the interviews was morality in the workplace. Participants were encouraged to talk freely about their experiences of these issues in their professional lives. These are clearly sensitive issues, and the possibility that participants may have offered responses that they believed the researcher would approve of or that they themselves believed to be socially acceptable cannot be ignored (Bryman, 2008), particularly in the light of widely available dominant discourses that cast business leaders as unethical, for example in media reports. The researcher behaved in as neutral a way as possible, by asking open questions and avoiding leading participants, in an effort to minimise bias of this sort, nevertheless the potential influence of the social desirability effect in research of this kind must be acknowledged. Keeping a journal throughout the project also allowed the researcher to monitor bias, by capturing and reflecting on subjective reactions to the data and participants (Mehra, 2002).

It is worth noting that a study such as this does not seek to deliver insights that are generalisable to a population in the same way as a quantitative study would strive to do. This study aims to generalise to a theory rather than to a population. This implies a focus upon 'the quality of the theoretical inferences that are made out of qualitative data' (Bryman, 2008, p392) rather than the more usual (for quantitative studies) statistical criteria that are used to judge the generalisability of quantitative data. Thus, it is possible to identify insights through this research that could be relevant to other populations (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002). However, these 'moderatum' generalisations (Bryman, 2008, p392) will essentially be more tentative than those based upon statistically reliable research would claim to be.

As discussed above, a pilot interview in which the initial discussion questions were tested elicited some detailed narratives from a senior practitioner within the banking sector, which increased confidence that the questions could successfully prompt engagement with, and narratives about, these potentially sensitive issues.

3.8. Ethical considerations

The Economic and Social Research Council's (ERSC) framework for research ethics (2010, updated in 2012) was adhered to, to ensure that this study adopted all necessary and relevant ethical guidelines. Demonstrating that the research was well-designed and rigorous was necessary, since these guidelines espouse the principle that poorly designed research is unethical.

This project required, and received, approval from the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee, since it involved research with human participants. It was necessary to demonstrate that participating in the study would not harm or distress participants. Participation needed to be demonstrably consensual, participants needed to be free to withdraw at any time, and they also needed to be free to decline to answer questions. They were advised that the interview would be recorded and transcribed, and that they would be required to agree to this in order for the recording to go ahead. In line with ERSC guidelines, participants were fully briefed on the purpose of the research and on what participation entailed for them.

Participants were assured that data would be anonymised and that they would not be identifiable in the final report. Participant confidentiality was guaranteed throughout the research and in the final report. They were assured in writing that their personal details would be kept in an appropriate way, and would not be shared with or available to anyone other than the researcher. They were also assured that transcripts will be classified and stored using participant codes, not names. Participants were also assured that data protection laws would be adhered to in the storing of the interview recordings and transcripts. They were given the option of receiving a copy of the results. These assurances were all documented for the participants in advance of the interviews. The participants were asked to sign to show that they had given informed consent, and they were given a written copy of the assurances, signed by the researcher, and giving them full details of the university, and the lead supervisor's contact details (see appendix D). In keeping with the assurances given to participants that they will remain anonymous, they are referred to throughout this report using pseudonyms or participant codes. Descriptions of their

positions, organisations and circumstances are deliberately broad and neutral, to ensure that they are not identifiable.

The discussion questions were carefully worded so as not to lead the participants or to offend or upset them unduly, and the pilot interview afforded the opportunity to check this. In fact, the pilot interview conducted in the early stages of the research project did not surface any issues of this kind. The pilot had as a focus the identification of any issues that appeared to make participants upset or uncomfortable. If the participant had appeared reluctant to engage with any questions, this would have been noted and questions re-worded as appropriate. Had this been necessary, the newly formulated questions would themselves have been tested in later pilot interviews.

3.9 Summary

To sum up, the social constructionist epistemological stance underpinning this study supports the choice of a narrative analysis research method. Narrative analysis in this research involved analysing the stories and personal accounts of the participants in order to develop understanding around the ways in which they construct and perform their moral identities. Data generated in thirty face to face interviews with senior managers in for-profit UK businesses were analysed using Gioia's (2013) systematic approach to qualitative data analysis. This process allowed three themes to emerge. These themes - *the loneliness of seniority*, *reaffirming myself as essentially moral* and *becoming and being a moral manager* are explored in detail in the next three chapters.

Chapter 4

Pressure and expectations: The loneliness of seniority

4.1 Introduction

The research findings are presented in three chapters, each focusing on a key theme emerging from the data. These key themes are *the loneliness of seniority*, *reaffirming myself as essentially moral*, and *becoming and being a moral manager*. As discussed above, the narrative accounts of participants provide stories about their workplace encounters with moral issues. In analysis, the aim is to unite the narrative data from these participants to develop a storied account of their recollections, in order to deliver understanding around the distinctiveness and complexity of their professional moral experiences (Polkinghorne, 1995). The narratives themselves take the form of interview exchanges between participants and researcher (Riessman, 2012). The three findings chapters all adopt a similar structure. After a brief introduction, each offers an in-depth exploration of one participant's account, during which three main sub-themes are drawn out. These sub-themes are then explored with recourse to the narrative accounts of other participants. Each chapter concludes with an extended discussion, during which the findings are considered in the light of concepts, ideas and strands of literature identified in the conceptual framework.

This first findings chapter considers the way in which participants present the circumstances in which they find themselves, and the implications of these presentations for their moral identity work. When characterising their professional environments, one broad idea which clearly emerges from many participants' accounts is that of the unique and challenging circumstances in which they operate. The participants, all senior managers, present a view of themselves as alone, sometimes estranged and isolated, and often feeling the pressure of expectation from those above and below them in the hierarchy. This idea of estrangement and loneliness pervades their narratives and shapes the way that they talk about their professional experiences related to moral issues. As such, it is an overarching dimension which provides context for, and influences the emergence of, other themes from within their narratives. The chapter argues that their depiction of a lonely and pressurised environment is a significant enabler of their moral identity work, because it makes certain roles and social identities available to them, in particular the role of the

defender of their subordinates, and the social identity of the competent and effective leader taking difficult decisions for the good of the business and those in it.

Reflecting on the way that these senior managers present such a view of themselves, one participant, F3, Head of Organisational Development in a property management organisation, and an experienced mentor as well as business manager, asserts that the reality of their roles can diverge significantly from their expectations. She contends that senior managers like to imagine that they are powerful and effective, a view that is often reinforced by others within the organisation. The reality, she argues, may be very different, as these executives find themselves 'squashed' (F3) between those above and below them in the hierarchy. This is a difficult position for them, as they feel more constrained than they imagined they would when they were lower down in the hierarchy.

> *Often organisations look up to the top team and think that they have the power but actually people in those roles feel often that they have very little power. They often feel that they are squashed between the huge expectations of the organisation and the massive expectations, of er, you know shareholders and the city and whoever else and that actually they have very little remit within which, and they have very difficult targets to meet, they have almost impossible expectations to meet [...] often they feel like their options have narrowed down much tighter in some ways than they did perhaps when they had a role a couple of roles down [...] they definitely feel they have responsibility but not the power (F3, Head of Organisational Development, Property Management)*

There is, then, something about the expectations that individuals have of themselves and of their roles, and that they feel others have of them, which provokes a presentation of themselves as isolated and under pressure. This identity work seems to be exacerbated by the divergence between their expectations of life as a senior manager, and the day-to-day reality of the role. The theme of the loneliness of seniority is underpinned in participant accounts by three main ideas. Firstly, they talk of the often intense pressure they feel to deliver against business objectives. Secondly, they articulate the many expectations that they feel others have of them, and thirdly they describe feelings of unpopularity and estrangement as they present themselves as caught in a lonely situation between the business owners and their own subordinates.

This chapter uses these three ideas to explore elements of participant accounts that focus on the circumstances within which they operate, and it considers the way that these circumstances impact as participants construct their moral identities. It begins with a detailed exploration of the account of one participant, Will (a pseudonym), whose story draws on the situational issues he has experienced as managing director of a marketing services organisation. The themes that emerge from this account are then explored in more detail and with recourse to other participant accounts, after which a more detailed discussion is presented.

4.2 The loneliness of seniority. The account of one participant – Will

Will's account portrays feelings of responsibility for many. Will is Managing Director of a marketing services organisation which has experienced turbulent times in recent years, necessitating staff redundancies and other cost saving measures.

Will talks of being required to make difficult decisions which have impacted others adversely, and for which he asserts they blame him. Will characterises this as a need to balance the survival of the business with the interests of a range of shareholders. Perhaps inevitably, there are winners and losers, and he articulates the view that the losers hold him responsible for their situation. He also talks of his role as protector of others and of their interests. Will's self-view here is very much driven by a conviction that he is a competent professional who is taking difficult but justified decisions – the right decisions - in order to ensure the survival of the business.

> *So you're... so definitely felt responsible for people's livelihoods and careers. So you've got, [...] that whole sort of hiring, firing, redundancy programs, all of that has played a lot in my line. Rationalising businesses, making decisions that actually affect other people. And particularly at the end of that business where we'd be trying to build something, you've got the different shareholders, vested interests, and you've got employees, and we have to close the business and make... you know, basically, what was the best way of closing that business to protect the interests of as many people as you can.*

> *[Talking about setting up a new business following the acquisition of the organisation he worked for] So the bit where I said actually I took people, clients, and left, but left people in that organisation who I knew would then have no job, and you know, no chance of getting paid. But I carried on. And tried to justify that. I'm fully happy with the decision I made, it was the best... in the best interest of*

everyone. But people got hurt. And, you know, I got a lot of shit for that. From the people who were... you know, why can't you take me with you? You know, it's not fair. And you know, actually it's not my decision. I tried to take everybody.

[I]...managed to protect people by actually, you know, splitting the company up. This... this bit was still going, but they can only be a going concern if they jettison these people. Hugely difficult.

Will's account has a strong focus on other people within his organisation, and on the impact that he feels his decisions have on them. He articulates the pressure he feels to deliver against the expectations of others below him in the hierarchy. As he considers the way that business decisions taken by senior managers can affect others within the business, he seems to draw on broader discourses related to business managers, reflecting on the idea that it can be 'very easy' to lose sight of the human impacts of business decisions. He expresses unease with this idea, and there is a real sense in which Will endeavours to present himself as different to the stereotype of the 'blasé' manager who is given to using their subordinates 'like a pawn'.

As you're shaped by experience of life and you see the impact on people. It's the impact on people, really. If... if you... it's very easy in a big corporate world to be away from the customers or the people you're impacting, or actually to be quite blasé about how it's not me, I'm just part of the machine.

Whereas that sort of, oh yes, I've employed this person and they're trusting in you to make this right, or... you know, without taking on their whole life, you know, I'm not responsible for their life, but you know, trying to give them, you know, a job that's satisfying, that meets the objectives, that's rewarding them. Where they can have some sort of trust in you. You're doing the right... you know, not using them as a pawn.

There is a noticeable focus in Will's narrative account on the necessity of making difficult and often unpopular decisions, with the survival of the business at stake. He consistently presents a view of himself as alone in feeling this pressure. Will seems to assert that he is charged with making the decisions and that, although others have to 'ratify' them or may be 'party' to them, he is generally on his own in making and implementing them. So, he presents a view of himself as unsupported by others in this process. Reflecting aloud on

this this responsibility, he seems to accept it as an integral part of his role. He is required to take and implement the decisions and if he does not, the business will fail.

> *But at the end... I think at the end of the day it's... you have to make the decision. I mean, you have to get people to ratify, but at the top it's quite lonely.*

> *It was very... It was very lonely in terms of, you know, having to make those decisions. Because you... you've got people around you who are sort of party to the decisions, board decision, not my decision, but it's basically I'm the one who has to recommend it and then see it through.*

> *…it felt like if I didn't force this through, you know, you're... nothing's going to happen, we're going under*

The complexity and difficulty of his situation is central to Will's account. He talks about feeling caught between others, and between layers in the organisation. He describes taking sides with one shareholder against another. Again, the survival of the organisation features in Will's narrative, as he talks of 'trying to save the business'. His relations with others feature strongly throughout his account. Here as in other parts of his account, Will presents himself as firmly 'in the middle' of others.

> *[Talking about ousting a fellow director who had absented himself from the business] But trying to save the business, I had to gang up with the other shareholder to basically say, no, you can't be in charge because you're not here. ….So it was like these two people who'd known each other for a long time were getting like a business divorce, and I was in the middle.*

He recalls arbitrating in disputes, and feeling that others relied on him – expected him, even - to resolve their problems. Ironically, his relations with others, notably those above and below him in the hierarchy as well as his peers, are central to his account, and yet he presents himself as alone.

> *So I was basically piggy in the middle for every dispute going. Was... you know, come to see [Will], you know, what are we going to do about it? What are you going to do about it? You need to sort this out. If you don't sort this out I'm resigning. If you don't... You know? So actually trying to balance everything.*

So playing that, actually, you know what's my role? Well I obviously want the business to be a success, so I have a vested interest. But it was, you know, trying to keep personal things out is really hard.

Will reflects on the pressure to keep the business viable, and on the difficult decisions that this necessitates. He speaks of having lost friendships because of the decisions he has had to make. Years later, he is still rationalising these past decisions, and the accusations of 'betrayal' still sting.

[Talking about having to make people redundant] So I knew it was wrong that he should be stuck, but I couldn't control them doing anything. And if I didn't do it then everybody including me would be jobless. So you know, it was eight people's careers... Well actually, eight plus... It was 28 against six people's jobs, or we have to take the whole thing down. So that... that was... you know, that was a difficult decision. And it stays with me. And it, you know, it means I haven't spoken to him since, and he was a friend. And I've lost a lot of friendships through making difficult decisions which I think are right. Another one was the guy I was going to do the management buy-out with, I ended up having to make redundant. And he was like a direct... board director, same level. And keep the guy who we were going to... who we were trying to get rid of.

[Describing facing someone he has had a hand in ousting] So I had to sit in a room... now the anger was expressed more at this other guy because he... he was the guy who was basically the reason we were in a mess. But clearly, you know, betrayal. You betrayed me. But I don't... you know, it was the right thing to do. So I feel that's... that moral compass, however you judge it, if in your heart you know, or in your head you know it's the right thing, then that's fine. You can live with it.

Feelings of unpopularity feature prominently in Will's account, as he ponders the way that he feels others regard him. He says that he is 'hated', he blames this on the difficult and 'unpopular' decisions that he has had to take and implement, and he asserts that this has provoked him to withdraw from social life within his organisation.

But I've been hated now for a long time, you know? So running that... running that business is lonely. I was hated by lots of people. I've had to do some really dodgy things. Not dodgy, difficult things.

So you know? Got to make things happen. And they were unpopular things with at least a faction of the company. There's always part of the company that's unhappy. So you... and I removed myself, so at the time running an agency, it was very social, very gregarious, and I actually removed myself from that and just said I can't do that. I can't be... I have to sort of divorce it more from the social side to actually be the MD. Yes, part of the team, but actually if you want to go out... a lot of the time I know you're going to go out and moan about me, or moan about other people. You know, it was basically an agony aunt. Everybody's moaning about somebody, and you're the one who's in the middle.

So then it went on and on like that with different people and machinations and trying to keep the board together and the company together. Merging with another company. Set up a company in Holland and then that fell apart, had lots of fallout there. So I... by that time I was the MD and the man who had all the bad decisions, you know? Any difficult decisions was me.

Despite his insistence that his position as leader means that he inhabits a lonely space, Will characterises himself as a team player.

I'm not sure I'm such an individualist. So doing it on my own. An entrepreneur. I could be a freelancer or a consultant, but not an entrepreneur.

Yes, definitely more of a collaborator than being on my own

He also presents himself as motivated by things other than money. It is as if, by asserting these characteristics of being a team player and being motivated by other things, Will is distancing himself from the lonely and burdened individual he has become within his organisation.

So part of it is obviously money, but a lot of it is actually for me being master of my own destiny.

So I've started to think about that sort of actually I want to do something that's more... I don't know, what's the word? I don't know, giving something back.

Doing something more meaningful. So there's a sort of... of coming back to the morality or ethics, I don't know, but it's sort of... so the difference between being a total capitalist and actually being part of society,

Will characterises his position as managing director of a successful marketing agency as one fraught with challenges, many of which he sees as derived from the need to make and implement difficult decisions, and to deliver against the expectations of many different stakeholders. He contends that he is required to ensure that the business is financially successful, as well as to provide fulfilling careers for those he employs, to resolve disagreements and even to intervene in disputes between the business owners. The environment Will depicts is tense, difficult to negotiate, and demanding. Above all, he offers the view of himself as central to it, caught and alone, as he describes feeling the weight of expectation from those beneath him and the pressure from those above him in the hierarchy. It is ironic that so much of his account is given over to narratives about his relations with others, while at the same time he consistently asserts that he feels alone. What he describes so vividly in his account is termed here *the loneliness of seniority*.

In many ways the account that Will gives is strikingly negative in tone, as he describes feelings of estrangement from others around him. Three main contributing factors to his loneliness emerge from Will's narrative account: the pressure he feels to deliver against business objectives, the feelings of expectation that he senses from others, and the assertion that he is caught between others, especially those above and below him in the organisational hierarchy. Will draws on these feelings of pressure, expectation and estrangement to construct and present the unique environment that he feels that he inhabits as a senior manager, and all three themes are present in his portrayal of the loneliness that seniority has brought him.

The idea of managers inhabiting a lonely place within their organisations is not new, but scholarship in this area to date has tended to consider it in relation to more junior practitioners. Sims (2003), for example, argues for '…the peculiar loneliness, precariousness and vulnerability' (p1195) of middle managers who find themselves caught between those below and above them in the organisational hierarchy, and who feel pressure and expectation from both. Feelings of pressure and insecurity are also noted by Thomas and Linstead (2002) in a study focusing on identity work in middle managers, and by Harding et al (2014) who talk of the ambiguous position that middle managers can find themselves in which they characterise as a 'buffer between senior managers and staff' (p1215). These studies offer a view of the middle manager as susceptible to the scorn of their superiors, who without really realising it can be dismissive of them and thus provoke feelings of inadequacy and helplessness. But these studies also rely to an extent on the notion that those in more senior positions have successfully negotiated this phase, and have ascended

to the position within their organisations where they have transcended these insecurities. As Sims (2003) observes, however, while middle managers may experience this problematic phase in the hope and expectation that they will inhabit it for a short time, they may be '…blissfully ignorant of how much the senior ranks to which they aspire may feel like the middle ranks when you get there' (p1209). Will's account perhaps exemplifies this idea that achieving seniority brings no guarantee that the feelings of loneliness will be alleviated.

Will expresses several times the conviction that he alone is responsible for the survival and success of the business. He presents this as a responsibility that he feels keenly. The loneliness that he articulates is often linked in his narratives to the need to take critical decisions in the best interests of the business and those within it. Although other managers are implicated in these decisions, their role is restricted to giving their assent, while he asserts that he is the one required to identify the right course of action and then to implement it. As such, Will contends that he alone bears all the responsibility. There is a sense in which Will expresses here a heroic top-down discourse, that of the senior manager as capable of taking difficult decisions on behalf of others and in the interests of the business (Cohen, 2013). The presentation of the circumstances in which he operates - as challenging, lonely and difficult – is clearly linked to this presentation of himself as a good, capable and effective manager. The vivid descriptions of loneliness, estrangement and pressure allow him to present himself as a proficient practitioner with the best interest of the business at heart, and one who is able and willing to do what is necessary to ensure that the business succeeds. In the same way, the characterisation of his circumstances as difficult and demanding are central to his construction of himself as protector of those beneath him in the organisation's hierarchy.

The three themes emerging from Will's account - the pressure to deliver, the expectations of many and feeling caught between the levels - are now explored through the narratives of some of the other participants.

4.3 Pressure to deliver

As they reflect on their circumstances, participants often describe a pressurised situation in which they feel the weight of expectation. The pressure to deliver business results is characterised by participants as relentless. They talk of delivering what is required by the business as of the utmost importance. It is as if they've got to deliver, they believe that it is expected of them, and the thought that they may fail provokes tension and anxiety in them. In this way, the participants paint a picture of a challenging, high-pressure

environment, in which they are charged with the responsibility to deliver results. Their language communicates the urgency of the task in hand, as they speak of the 'need' (M11) to deliver, the 'need to do whatever's necessary' (M11), being 'expected to deliver' (M6) and to 'maintain that momentum' (M19). There is also a sense of them being in the spotlight, and of there being nowhere to hide.

> *In work I have to deliver, I need to deliver something, I need to do whatever's necessary to deliver that within, in an ethical manner, professional manner, but I've got to deliver that. (M11, Finance Director, Logistics solutions)*

> *Well, there is pressure in terms of if we don't, you know, hit the numbers. It's growing, but it's plateaued a little bit recently, so we've got to... that's my worry, is... that's the thing I have to focus on, is how we, sort of, maintain that momentum and, sort of, get that... get that momentum (M19, Managing Director, Software Services)*

> *You're expected to deliver five per cent variable cost savings and ten percent indirect cost savings each year, yeah I think it's quite hard when you've been running the place for ten years getting five percent out of somewhere that's already very efficient is hard yeah so it's all metrics driven there's no hiding you can't (M6, Head of Projects, Wholesaler)*

Participants describe persistent pressure from those above them in the hierarchy who, they suggest, pass on the pressure they themselves receive. The image offered is of pressure as a force coming down upon them from those at the very top of their organisations. The pressure is characterised as relentless and brutal – it is 'immense' (M17), they are 'battered' (M19), it is 'abusive pressure' (M6), and it makes them feel 'bulldozed' (M3). Their use of this strong and emotive language, often including metaphors related to powerful forces and conflict, conjures up an image of them as on the receiving of an almost physical barrage from those above.

> *But I know when we first started the pressure upon us to grow was immense….So at one point you just come back and go, oh, Jesus, they want us to do things that are stupid. (M17, Divisional Director, Financial Services)*

> *He had the pressure from above, from New York, and they were basically saying, [to my boss], you've got to hit these numbers... hit these numbers... hit these numbers,*

so he was getting battered from above, and then in the UK we were getting it from all angles, you know, in terms of trying to get this business developed, moving. (M19, Managing Director, Software Services)

…you get a lot of pressure from the senior management in terms of fairly abusive pressure to get the numbers up….. I had to live it yeah I had to just commit with it and give it out and not say I agree with, cos I had lots of push back from management (M6, Head of Projects, Wholesaler)

…they'd come over and they'd just try to bulldoze you, just try to absolutely intimidate you cos they knew they had 20, 30 years of experience on me, sort of thing. (M3, Managing Director, IT Systems)

Although they opine they are on the receiving end of pressure from those above them, like Will they present a view of themselves as defending those below them from pressure. They portray themselves here as protectors of their subordinates. This idea is central to their accounts and to their identity work, as they draw on discourses of good leadership to demonstrate that they look out for those beneath them, and actively deflect the pressure that they themselves experience.

…with my team it's definitely the case that I act as a buffer and you know to a large extent protect them from direct engagement with him (M13, Managing Director, Business Services)

I also... you know, I'll defend them. I mean, make sure that I've got them covered and that they're not going into something that's going to cause them a problem. (M17, Divisional Director, Financial Services)

I would expect that anybody in my team would escalate that to me …I don't want any of my team to be pressurised and I don't want them to feel uncomfortable (F2, Head of Valuation, Commercial Real Estate)

Asserting that they are on the receiving end of significant pressure from others, but that they actively choose not to pass this pressure on to their subordinates is intriguing, and begs the question of what purpose this presentation of themselves may serve. The idea of managers as under pressure is not new (e.g., Collinson, 2003; Sims, 2003), but their accounts assert that these participants are at pains to ensure that this pressure is not passed on to those beneath them in the hierarchy. Will also talks of absorbing pressure in order that those beneath him in the hierarchy do not experience it. This resonates with

discourses of good leadership, in which managers who actively protect their subordinates from pressure and interruptions are cast as an ideal to aspire to. It is an idea exemplified by Sutton (2010) who offers the notion of 'The boss as human shield' (p106).

At the same time, their accounts present the participants as in the spotlight and required to make decisions and deliver business success and growth. The picture offered is one of the individual manager striving to make the right decisions, with the best interest of everyone at heart, in difficult and pressurised circumstances. Here again, the accounts seem to draw on broader cultural representations of business leadership, in this case perhaps the idea of the heroic leader as characterised, for example, by Cohen (2013) who speaks of heroic managers as 'doing what is right and giving priority to others' needs' (p79).

In a study into middle manager identity construction, Thomas and Linstead (2002) argue that feelings of pressure and insecurity provoke individuals to draw on specific discourses as a way of securing their identities, and that these discourses may be related to professionalism, expertise, performance or commitment. As noted above, although the participants in this study are senior practitioners, this idea resonates with their accounts, which seem to be drawing on discourses of 'good' management practice - where 'good' can imply both ethical and effective (Sharer, 2013; Anon, 2011; Treviño et al, 2000) - as they present themselves shielding their subordinates from the pressure they themselves feel so acutely while working to deliver against the business objectives. Drawing on ideals of manager behaviour, and associating themselves with these ideals, is clearly a part of their moral identity work, and possibly one way of securing their moral senses of self. As well as drawing on these discourses, their use of brutal language to evoke the pressure they experience helps to conjure up a vivid picture of a challenging environment. The articulation of the problematic circumstances in which they do their identity work could be characterised as a way of giving context to their identity struggles and of validating the moral identities they construct and perform.

Depicting themselves as defenders of those lower down in the hierarchy can be conceptualised here as role claiming, a notion explored in an organisational context in some depth by, among others, Creed et al (2010). When presented with contradictions between their own sense of self and dominant discourses casting them in a certain way, individuals can undertake identity work to reconcile the differences. For these participants, asserting their roles as absorbers of pressure and defenders of others is one way of claiming the role, in order perhaps to reconcile their own senses of self with prevailing

dominant discourses about senior managers. The depiction of the circumstances in which they operate is a vital part of this identity work insofar as it establishes the possibility of the pressure impacting others, and thus legitimises their appropriation of the role of defender, which itself resonates strongly with discourses of heroic leadership. As such the presentation of the difficult circumstances becomes an important part of the participants' moral identity work.

Simpson and Carroll's (2008) conceptualisation of role as a boundary object that enables communication between different social worlds also has resonance here, as the participants draw on the role of protector and defender of others while they do their identity work. The asserted defender role bridges the gap between the participants and others within their organisations, but also between the participants and the researcher and, as such, it occupies a relational domain where different actors can use it to make meaning. Simpson and Carroll argue that role does not itself constitute identity, but rather can facilitate the process of identity construction, which would support a view of role here as facilitating the social construction of a moral self. Here then, the presentation of difficult and pressurised circumstances is essential to the availability of the role of defender, and it is the role of defender that connects the individual to others.

4.4 The expectations of many

The expectations of others within and outside of their organisations feature throughout the accounts of these participants. Expectations are, they assert, many and varied. The expectations of the shareholders, their subordinates and the organisation's regulators, to name but three, are often divergent and reflecting on them can provoke expressions of anxiety and frustration.

As well as needing to deliver against business objectives, or perhaps as part of it, participants in this study offer a view of themselves as being exhorted by those around them in the hierarchy and outside it to do unprincipled or unethical things.

> *[Talking about being asked to avoid certain subjects in meetings with external stakeholders] That's happened yeah, 'Don't talk about that; don't mention that'. We've had that absolutely. And what I normally do with those situations is um well the response varies from 'Sod you I'm gonna put it in anyway', to um 'OK I won't put it in but if I'm asked a direct question I'm not gonna lie on your behalf', um to putting it in another way. (M4, Finance Director, Manufacturing)*

> *[Having declined to provide confidential information about a customer to a competitor, who then continued to pressure him] I was starting to get annoyed actually, cos I said sorry not going to do it but it was quite interesting, I thought he would have taken that so I was actually quite shocked when he didn't (M3, Managing Director, IT Systems)*

> *[Reflecting on pressure from clients to influence research findings] …and anybody who's in consultancy, that is one of the hardest ethical things that you have is if you have something and people either want to soften what you're saying or possibly big up the claim in a way, is to try and negotiate that moral minefield. (M10, Associate Director, Professional Technical Services)*

Focusing on pressure from those above them to do unethical things, they often articulate the idea that failure to comply will jeopardise their position within the organisation. The consequences of failing to do what is required are characterised in a very simple way by the participants. Those above them will 'get you replaced' (M3) or 'make changes' (M17). The choice is simple – 'do you want to work here or don't you?' (F8) The simplicity of the language conveys their contention that negotiation will not be welcomed, and that they are expected to conform.

> *[Explaining how those above him attempt to influence his behaviour] Well partly through threats - oh if you don't agree to this then we'll have to get you replaced and do this and the other (M3, Managing Director, IT Systems)*

> *[Talking about those above in the hierarchy] They want success, they want growth, and if you don't... If you don't give it to them, you know, they're going to make changes. (M17, Divisional Director, Financial Services)*

> *You know, I think everybody at heart wants to do the right thing, but I... but, you know, pressures come on and you're told by your boss, you know, you've got to go and do this and you push back, and they say, well, you know, do you want to work here or don't you sort of thing. (F8, Managing Director, Agriculture)*

In stark contrast to this, participants articulate the idea that they feel they are expected to do things in the right or ethical way. These expectations are often attributed to broader discourses of ethical practice, and to external stakeholders.

> *…the NGOs are generally raising the standards they expect but interestingly they are applying pressure across the board. (M10, Associate Director, Professional*

Technical Services)

So what's happening in the market globally is that there's a drive to do business on a more ethical basis across the world, and big corporate companies more and more are being checked up mostly by their shareholders and by the market to do business in an above board, if that's the right word, way in a compliant way because the market does not respond well to bribes underhand um ways of doing business or companies that have had a reputation over years of achieving their results by underhand way (F1, Legal Director, Global Logistics)

Church is becoming, religion maybe the Christian religion the way we have it, is becoming less and less important in the Western world but morality is becoming more important. People don't want to deal with fraudsters. They don't. (F1, Legal Director, Global Logistics)

Their narratives offer accounts of themselves facing up to and dealing with these diverging expectations and the tensions that ensue, and they depict themselves as working constantly to find the right way forward, against a backdrop of pressure and complexity.

…you know you always, you're always trying to make obviously the right decisions for the business, the financial pressures can vary from time to time (M14, Chief Executive, Telecommunications)

…so there was pressure to do that and they'd come over and tell you all these sort of things to do and it was interesting, I got a reputation for a particular phrase which I used to say time and time again which was 'Well how's that gonna work here then? Can you explain?' And they actually used to call me 'How's that gonna work here then?' (M3, Managing Director, IT Systems)

As I say, as a leader you have to have different ways of approaching a complex issue you know, you can't just say no. (M4, Finance Director, Manufacturing)

Expectations of others are articulated often in the accounts of the participants in this study. They talk about those above expecting them to deliver business objectives, and of feeling that failure to do so, even if it involves dubious conduct, will certainly jeopardise their positions. Broader, usually divergent societal expectations are also articulated in these accounts, and there is a preoccupation not only with navigating the difficult decisions they need to make, but with doing the right thing. The picture they paint is one of complex decisions, and many and varied expectations which they feel they must balance. The

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expectations of the participants themselves can also often be detected in their narratives, as they reflect on their efforts to do not only what is required, but also what is right. This is evident as they talk about 'always trying to make obviously the right decision' (M14) and having to have 'different ways of approaching a complex issue' (M4). Here again, the participants' susceptibility to discourses of heroic leadership is evident.

Hay (2014) identifies the influence of stressful circumstances, often driven by managers feeling pressure to live up to high expectations, on individuals' identity work. As they access discourses constructing managers a certain way, notably as '…one who has total control and knows everything' (p 521) these individuals experience anxiety when their own sense of self does not appear to match with these socially available identities. Hay argues that this can lead to the adoption of a façade which is in keeping with their perceived expectations of others. Her study focuses upon early career managers but has resonance for those operating at a more senior level, since many similar anxieties seem to feature in their accounts. Offering descriptions of the way that they approach difficult decisions, often exacerbated by the expectations of many different stakeholders, the participants present themselves as capable, in-control, and able to face up to and navigate these complex scenarios. Whether this is a façade or some other kind of coping mechanism, their accounts of the expectations of others, and of their responses, are clearly an ingrained part of their identity work, as they endeavour to construct and perform a morally good professional self. The way that the participants describe the different expectations that they experience, and their accounts of balancing the needs and requirements of others, plays an intriguing part in this identity work. Their focus on the circumstances in which they operate is crucial to their presentation of self, and placing themselves as central to these tensions, in a pivotal and vital role, perhaps plays also into discourses of heroic leadership evident elsewhere in their accounts, notably when they cast themselves as protectors of others.

4.5 Caught between the levels

Participants in this study often portray themselves as caught between those above and below them in the hierarchy, responsible for and to many others, both inside and outside the organisation. They talk about being called upon to adjudicate in disputes and express the idea that they are pulled in many directions. They present themselves as caught in a difficult situation in which they are on the receiving end of attention and expectation.

> *[Reflecting on who he feels responsible for and to] And I think again the morality of*

that is that you are acting in the best interests of your company so OK the shareholders are the ultimate people that you are responsible to but equally it's wider than that, and most people these days recognise that you know if you're a director of a business it's not just about your shareholders it's about you know the people who work for you it's about the customers it's about the suppliers it's about the banks and the agencies (M4, Finance Director, Manufacturing)

So it's a fine balance all three kind of tensions you know, if you want to get the numbers better then you make more mistakes and more customer errors but then you get in trouble for that, and you could push the people harder and not spend time developing them which gives you a temporary boost in productivity but then you can't force that through the entire time so these three things kind of pull each other in each way (M6, Head of Projects, Wholesaler)

[Talking about the need to keep the press on-side] …and that queue of people could involve the press as well, you know, because they could come and say 'I've got this information, is it true? I'm going to print it tomorrow unless you look after me'. So, you know, it was multiple. (M16, Business Development Director, Manufacturing)

Participants reflect on the idea that their position within their organisation makes them disliked. They construct themselves as alone, sometimes estranged and isolated. Central to this construction is the assertion that others view them with suspicion, that their decisions are often unpopular, and that they have few if any peers with which to share the burden. More than this, their accounts often convey the idea that they feel that they are under scrutiny, that others are making judgements about them.

And one of the challenges I think sometimes is as you get more senior you get more lonely because there's less people you can talk to (M17, Divisional Director, Financial Services)

…did people look at me in the position that I held and thought well, can we ever trust him because he's the boss? (M4, Finance Director, Manufacturing)

…they know I'll go eventually so if I'm awful the time will pass, so there was a bit of waiting, humour him until he goes. (M6, Head of Projects, Wholesaler)

Like Will, in the face of this perceived unpopularity, some participants talk of feeling an expectation of detachment between themselves and others, in particular from their subordinates. This relates to social activities, but also to day to day relationships with

others. They talk of needing to be 'distanced' (M16), of the 'disengagement' (F3) of others and of the difficulty of simply finding someone they can talk to.

> *Obviously, I think they expect me to lead them, to show an example, I suppose, not to be, you know, afraid to get my hands dirty, but at the same time I'm the boss and therefore, you know, I need to occasionally be, sort of, quite distanced from things, I suppose. (M16, Business Development Director, Manufacturing)*

> *…if your job is to challenge and even when you've been legitimised to do that it doesn't mean people like it when you do it and actually they might not necessarily connect how they react to you …what they start feeling is uncomfortable with you and then they start thinking 'well I don't really want to work with her, she, I don't feel comfortable with that and actually I'm not sure she's heading in the right direction, I'm not, you know…' so it becomes quite a subtle kind of, um, sense of disengagement. (F3, Head of Organisational Development, Property Management)*

> *I've sort of almost tried to counteract it [feelings of loneliness] on purpose because, so when I was at [a previous employer] I got very friendly with the guy who did sales and service, and we became big mates. Because we were... there's only us two at that level, really, and so you know, if I hadn't have liked him or got on with him, it might have been difficult [...] and therefore I can talk about what I couldn't talk about with my team for example. (M17, Divisional Director, Financial Services)*

In these accounts, participants often present a view of themselves as estranged and alone, a situation they attribute to their positions within their organisations and to the responsibilities that go with their roles. They characterise a need to make decisions which are unpopular with others as a reason for their isolation, articulating the conviction that, as bosses, they need to be distanced, and that their subordinates prefer them to absent themselves from social occasions. But if the accounts are to be taken at face value, even though they appear to see this isolation as an inevitable consequence of their role and position, it still has an effect on the way that they feel. Although some say that finding a confidante at their own level can help, others assert that this is not always possible in small senior management teams.

As noted earlier, the feelings of isolation expressed by these participants resonate with the work of Sims (2003), who gives an account of loneliness of the middle manager. Sims attributes this to the unique position that middle managers find themselves in, where they

can be vulnerable to the disparagement of those above them in the hierarchy, and the scorn of those below them. Although Sims' work focuses on middle managers, there is a real sense in which the accounts of the participants in this study appear to evidence a similar effect. Squashed between the expectations of those below them and the pressure of those above, and in an increasingly small cohort of colleagues at the same level, feelings of estrangement and isolation are perhaps inevitable. Arguably, though, as managers rise through the ranks, estrangement and isolation become increasingly likely, as the number of peers with which they can share the burden diminishes, and so the expression of these feelings is perhaps predictable.

What is perhaps striking is that senior managers like these participants, having ascended the corporate ladder to a significant degree, still articulate feelings of surprise and disappointment at the way they feel caught between levels and at the way they feel others regard them as a consequence. In some, as for example demonstrated in Will's account, it is as though they are trying to resist a characterisation of themselves as typical senior managers who are often assumed by others to have engaged in ruthless or disreputable conduct to have achieved the status that they have. Will's insistence that he is, in fact, a team player who wants to give something back perhaps exemplifies his desire to be seen as something other than the hard-nosed business executive he feels others position him as. It is as though the identity he desires – his preferred identity perhaps (Charmaz, 1995) - is frustratingly unavailable to him. The idea of individuals struggling to come to terms with the social identities that are available to them is advanced by Watson (2008) who contends that individuals incorporate into their own (internal) senses of self elements of the (external) social identities that are available to them. Watson describes in some detail the way that individuals strive to develop a coherent sense of self while sometimes struggling to accept the range of social identities available to them. It is possible that their depictions of the challenging situations they find themselves in, and the way that they construct the perceptions that others have of them, offer them a way of accounting for the unavailability of the social identities that they desire.

As noted above, Hay (2014) argues that the divergence between an individual's own sense of self and socially available manager identities can provoke disquiet and anxiety, as individuals (in the case of Hay's research, middle managers) feel pressure to live up to ideals of competence and skill, and fear that they are not equal to the task. For the senior participants in this study, their focus on the estrangement that they feel suggests that their identity work is not only about constructing themselves as competent, qualified or skilful,

but also about presenting an ethically sound, more 'human' view of themselves as good leaders, deserving of their positions. Characterising their loneliness and estrangement is one way of presenting a more human side to others and even to themselves.

4.6 Discussion

Participants in this study portray themselves as successful business managers near to the top of their organisations' hierarchies, yet alone and isolated, operating in a difficult and often uncomfortable environment. They construct this self-view through their narrative accounts with recourse to three main tactics. Firstly, they recount detailed descriptions of the intense pressure that they experience coming down on them from those above them, pressure which they say they endeavour to absorb and not to pass on to those below them. Secondly, they talk of the expectations that they sense from those around them, both within the organisation and outside it. This can range from the expectation that they will deliver meaningful careers to their subordinates, to the expectation that they will do unethical things to ensure business success. They talk of the expectations of many different stakeholders, which they need to balance and deliver against, and of the difficulty in doing this. Finally, they reflect on the idea that they often feel caught in difficult situations. This is sometimes articulated as them being caught between the business owners and those beneath themselves in the hierarchy, but it extends to include other stakeholders including those outside the organisations that employ them. In many ways, the feeling of being caught is linked to the feelings of expectation that they articulate, as they present a view of themselves striving to deliver many things to many people, often in difficult circumstances.

4.6.1 Drawing on discourses of heroic leadership to present themselves as defenders

Sharer (2013) expresses the expectations of leadership that he asserts many managers experience as needing to 'consciously act as a role model; deliver strong results in the right way; build, develop and lead empowered and diverse teams; and motivate others with a vision for the future that can be implemented' (p40). The need to do all this, as well as to take and implement impossibly hard decisions means, for some participants, that they find themselves unpopular and, as a consequence, isolated. This presentation of themselves pervades their accounts, and arguably underpins much of their moral identity work, insofar as it enables them to appropriate roles (e.g., that of defender of others) and articulate discourses (e.g., of heroic leadership) as part of their construction of professional moral self. There is something here too which resonates with notions of ethical leadership, where managers are expected not only to be morally good themselves, but also to provide

ethical leadership for their organisations (Treviño et al, 2000). This idea of needing to set the moral tone is considered in more detail in Chapter 6 – Becoming and being a moral manager.

The idea of pressure from above in an organisational context is perhaps to be expected, yet these participants' accounts focus quite strongly on the difficulties that they associate with pressure from those above them in the hierarchy. The pressure is characterised as extreme, and they present themselves as facing up to it alone. But the pressure that they characterise is also drawn on heavily as they present themselves in an almost heroic way, working to ensure that those below them in the hierarchy are not exposed to it. As discussed already, feelings of pressure can provoke individuals in an organisational context to draw on alternative discourses to construct themselves as, for example, professional or committed (Thomas and Linstead, 2002). In the case of these participants, they seem to be using the example of the way that they absorb and deflect pressure to construct for themselves the identity of good managers who act as defenders of those below them in the hierarchy. As such, they are perhaps drawing on an ideal discourse of caring and protective management as they assert their role as good managers, and the pressure that they articulate allows them to construct themselves in this way.

4.6.2 Performing an idealised or preferred identity in interaction

There is also something here of the participants using a face to face interaction, perhaps with their colleagues at work or even in the research interview itself, to rehearse and perform the idealised identity that they have constructed privately for themselves (Down and Reveley, 2009). On Down and Reveley's account, identity work comprises both self-reflection and 'face-to-face interaction that involves mounting credible dramaturgical performances' (p383). So in interaction with others, individuals endeavour to give a convincing performance of their idealised identity. This is possible, for example, with the idea of the defender of their subordinates, when participants assert that they act as a 'buffer' (M13) or that they have their team 'covered' (M17). As noted above, the language that participants use to describe the pressure they feel often includes metaphorical references to power and strength, which they use to evidence the pressure that they experience. This kind of construction is evidently more likely to have its origins in interactions with their teams and other individuals than in formal organisational discourses. This dramaturgical perspective (Down and Reveley, 2009) on identity work supports the idea of identity as constructed discursively, in interaction, as espoused by

Beech (2008), who asserts that individuals undertake identity work in order to associate or dissociate themselves with others or with positions or status. These participants seem clearly to be constructing their own identities as good managers in interaction with others in their organisations, with recourse to heroic discourses of leadership and management, and enabled by their presentation of the difficult circumstances in which they find themselves.

Characterising the many and varied expectations that they experience, and the way that they respond to these expectations, may also offer these participants the opportunity to construct for themselves a preferred identity (Charmaz, 1995), in this case that of a calm and detached leader capable of discerning the right priorities in the face of multiple assertions from others. As we have already seen, Hay (2014) argues that challenging circumstances can provoke the adoption of a façade as individuals attempt to manage their own expectations, and the expectations that they believe that others have, of their own abilities. Ibarra (1999) also argues for the adoption of a façade or persona, through which individuals may attempt to convey an image of themselves as competent and credible. Ibarra suggests that individuals may experiment with a range of provisional selves as they do their identity work. It is entirely possible that the face to face interaction of the interview offers participants the perfect opportunity to do this.

4.6.3 Articulating discourses of loneliness and isolation

The assertion that they inhabit a lonely place, where they feel the need to put distance between themselves and their colleagues, and where they feel relentless pressure and the weight of expectation in equal measure, is intriguing in this group of participants. It is possible, as discussed earlier, that participants draw on these assertions as a way of constructing themselves as somehow more human, as they describe the difficulties of estrangement and the feeling that they need to set themselves apart. Weber (1965 [1919]) offers an alternative perspective on this, though, with his ideas related to the vagaries of political leadership. For Weber, those in positions of political responsibility are required to balance the ethics of their own convictions with the ethics of their responsibility towards others, and this is the source of much tension in their professional lives. As noted by Starr (1999), this resonates strongly with the predicament that leaders in other spheres find themselves facing – arguably not least, the sphere of business management. On this view, the tensions expressed in the accounts of these participants may be real conflicts of value pluralism (Starr, 1999) which pervade their lives and impact considerably on their moral

identity work. As such, the loneliness of seniority may well underpin and provide the backdrop to their moral identity work.

In many ways, the depiction of themselves as operating in such unique and challenging circumstances underpins and enables much of these participants' moral identity work, for example as they construct themselves as essentially moral at heart (Chapter 5) and as they endeavour to become and to be moral managers (Chapter 6). Presenting themselves as alone in the face of overwhelming expectation and pressure is perhaps the first step in the construction of the essentially moral self, because it involves them distinguishing themselves from others, and therefore from the stereotypical discourses that so often cast senior business practitioners as unethical. The presentation of the pressurised circumstances that they inhabit offers a characterisation of the broader organisational system that they argue they vie with when they construct and present themselves as morally defiant. In this way, the loneliness of seniority can be conceptualised as an overarching theme which influences the development of other themes from within participant accounts, and which enables and provides context for the moral identity work that they do.

4.7 Conclusions

In summary, the accounts of the participants offer a view of life as a senior manager as a lonely and isolating endeavour, and their depiction of this context has implications for the way that they construct and perform their moral senses of self. They draw on accounts of the pressure that they themselves experience from those above them in the hierarchy to present themselves as defenders of their own subordinates. They talk of significant expectation upon them to deliver against many and varied objectives, and perhaps in response to the feelings of anxiety that these expectations provoke, present themselves as competent practitioners working hard to make the right decisions. They reflect on the loneliness that they feel, often attributing this to the reactions of others as they themselves make what they characterise as unpopular but necessary (and ethically sound) decisions. Their depiction of these circumstances enables their moral identity work, insofar as it allows them – provokes them even - to draw on heroic discourses and on available social identities to construct themselves as morally good managers.

Chapter 5

Reaffirming myself as essentially moral

5.1 Introduction

This second of three findings chapters examines the tendency observed in participant accounts to assert a fixed moral core which they trace back to childhood, and which they present as a significant influence on their moral conduct. As already noted in the previous chapter, life as a senior manager is presented as complex, and decisions can be complicated and challenging for these high-ranking practitioners who are called upon to make difficult and nuanced choices on a daily basis. Many decisions involve judgements about right and wrong, and what is right for the business is not necessarily right for the individual or for other protagonists. Participants often assert that they feel the pressure of their positions and the weight of expectation from those around them in the hierarchy. Participants also articulate broader discourses related to the way that their professions are seen by others.

> *I never ever used the phrase 'Investment Banker' about myself, even during the good days before it all started, to me just the word had negative connotations…. Investment bankers were people in pinstriped suits from the eighties who ripped people off (M1, Head of Real Estate Finance, Banking)*

> *I think you know all employees look up the chain to their bosses and almost, you almost expect some sort of immoral behaviour because you're almost well he's the boss so there must be something going on that he hasn't told me or there must be some ulterior motive (M4, Finance Director, Manufacturing)*

> *The whole …industry is quite piratey, and the most you'd hope for is to be a buccaneer (M2, Marketing Director, Manufacturing)*

This idea that they are part of a broader group which is regarded by many as unethical or corrupt is a backdrop to much of the moral identity work that these participants do, and their narrative accounts evidence strategies to address the dissonance they feel when they see themselves, or people like themselves, labelled as immoral. Constructing themselves as essentially moral is one of these strategies. It involves recourse to the idea that an individual can have a set of fixed characteristics that determine what and who they are. Participants draw on the belief that they are moral at heart, something that they often

attribute to their upbringing and to the adults who shaped and moulded their moral values. In their accounts, they assert that their moral core is evidenced by their inability to tolerate unethical behaviour, in others as well as in themselves. They offer the emotional reactions they experience when faced with such behaviour as evidence for this intolerance. They also assert that they have an inbuilt moral compass which allows them to know, by instinct, whether a course of action or decision is morally right or wrong.

This broad stratagem is termed *reaffirming*, because the participants use a range of tactics to reassert themselves as essentially moral. It is as though they are reassuring themselves and others that, despite discourses casting business leaders as unethical, they themselves remain ethical at heart. Three main reaffirming tactics are evident in participant accounts; asserting that they know they are moral at heart because of their upbringing, claiming that they are unable to tolerate unethical behaviour in others or in themselves, and professing that they possess an inbuilt morality which tells them, automatically, whether something is right or wrong.

This chapter first explores in some detail the narrative account of one senior manager as he reflects on the way that he has experienced moral issues in his professional life. His story draws on the moral dilemmas he has encountered and observed during his career. The themes emerging from this first account are then considered in more detail, and with recourse to the stories of other participants. A more thorough interpretation of the stories and emergent themes, in the light of literature relating to identity work and identity construction, follows.

5.2 Constructing himself as essentially moral. The account of one participant – Daniel

Daniel (a pseudonym) is Managing Director of a medium-sized business services organisation. His account in many ways exemplifies the strategy of reaffirming, as he articulates the struggles he has encountered, in his most recent senior role, to be able to do the right thing while delivering against the objectives of the organisation and in particular, of his boss.

Daniel has come to his current position following a number of senior roles in large organisations where the culture was radically different to the environment in which he now finds himself. He attributes the difference in culture to the leadership style at the very top of the organisation. He worries about his boss's style, and its effect on his own style of leadership. The way that he sees his boss behaving provokes feelings of discomfort.

I joined him because I felt I could learn from him, which I have done, and so I've learned an awful lot that's good, but I've also learned a lot of things that I wouldn't do as an individual er because I just disagree, you know they don't sit right with me

…this latest restructuring was right for the business er but it didn't sit right with me. It was more the how we did it rather than the fact that we did it.

[Talking about how the restructure made him feel] Er well the impact was that it went against the grain you know, I, I so I've been brought up in the other organisations that I've worked in and I guess you know at a personal level have a, you know feeling of treating people fairly and with respect and that was um seriously compromised in, has been seriously compromised in the last few months with my boss

Daniel talks of finding that it is not always possible to be the moral leader that he wants to be in this organisation. He articulates dominant discourses that cast managers like him as unethical, and clearly feels uneasy about them. He worries out loud about being sucked in to unethical behaviour by degrees, and about knowing when, or if, he has gone too far. The anxiety is acute and palpable.

Yeah of course because you know I read the stuff about fat cats and you know I know when I look at what I get paid and you know what I earn from what I do and I'm definitely in that category

… so you know, at what point do you as an individual say right OK, actually I'm not getting involved in this, whether it's Srebrenica, whether it's, er you know what happened with the Holocaust or whatever else. There were lots of people who ended up getting involved in things that, in the cold light of day, they probably would never, ever had been a party to. But, and I think that does happen in organisations and, you know, then as a senior leader you have to recognise your, you know, your culpability er in that you know.

Daniel's sense of moral self is dealt a blow by the experience of reading, on a company review website, what other people think about him. He experiences a strong challenge to his own perception of himself as an ethical leader, and has to acknowledge that others see him as inextricably associated with the unethical behaviour that he seeks to distance himself from:

…none of it named me personally but it talked about the leadership team of which I am a member and you know some of the stuff said 'how can you guys sleep with yourselves?' So when you see that you start to think, ah actually I am culpable here and, you know, I might not have kicked this off but I'm a part of, you know … I'm a part of what's happening here and I don't feel comfortable with it.

You know ultimately I'm going to have to leave [this company] because I can see that eventually I, may be little things that I'm doing today that [my boss] is asking me to do, but eventually, cumulatively, they are going to result in me doing something that I might later sit back and say, actually I'm not comfortable with that

Reflecting on his boss and the kind of behaviour that he engages in, Daniel is clear that he sees himself as very different from this. There is a line that he is determined not to cross. Daniel seems to take comfort from the assertions of others that he is succeeding in being different.

…so I have to make a very conscious decision to try and say right that actually that's part of his positive behaviour, that is something that I will take and you know adapt my style based on that but then actually this element of his behaviour I don't agree with, I don't support and you know I'm not going to behave like that. And the way it's been characterised by people in my team in the past is that …. you're creating a, almost a counter culture

Daniel ponders his moral self, articulating his belief that he is at heart an ethical individual. He attributes this to his upbringing and background. This upbringing has, he asserts, established in him a moral core which helps him to distinguish between right and wrong.

I was brought up a Catholic… I still go to church... I think a combination of probably that and the way that my parents brought me up is what guides sort of right and wrong for me

…so I think it's a number of things but I think the core of it was about yeah how I was brought up and particularly the fact that I was brought up a Catholic and I think you know getting that stuff every Sunday sort of into your head er it definitely had an impact on me.

This senior manager expresses the feeling that, caught between his desire to embody his idea of a 'good' leader and the pressure to deliver against the agenda of his boss, he finds himself in a deeply uncomfortable place. He acknowledges dominant discourses casting

people like him as unethical and considers the possibility that that they may apply to him. The words of others, casting him as complicit in unethical behaviour, present to him the likelihood that he may not be seen as the ethical leader he aspires to be. It is perhaps in an effort to deal with the dissonance that this feedback provokes that he responds by reasserting himself as, at heart, an ethical person. He does this with recourse to his upbringing and his religious beliefs, presenting both as integral and longstanding influences on his sense of self which pre-date his current circumstances. This self-view is based upon deeply personal experiences rooted in his childhood and early family life.

Daniel also describes distinct emotional reactions to the unethical behaviour he witnesses in his boss, which 'didn't sit right' with him, and which 'went against the grain', and reflecting on these reactions concludes that these feelings are powerful enough to make him seriously consider whether he can cope on an ongoing basis in this environment. The discomfort that he describes when faced with unethical behaviour, and the idea that it will eventually provoke his departure from the company, is offered as evidence of his inability to tolerate unethical behaviour.

Daniel clearly articulates the view that he is different from others around him, and in particular from his boss. He expresses several times the idea that there is something within him that helps him to know what is right, and he just knows when something is wrong. Daniel's moral identity work is very much focused upon constructing himself as inherently moral. This raises the question of what purpose this construction serves in these circumstances. It is possible that Daniel is performing this 'ethical-at-core' identity in interaction with the interviewer, but that the performance is as much for his own benefit as for the benefit of the interviewer (Goffman, 1959). As such, it may well serve the purpose of addressing (assuaging even) his own feelings of guilt, anxiety and disappointment that, according to feedback from others, his conduct has somehow deviated from his desired behaviour. He may not have succeeded in living up to his self-imposed ideal of a 'good' manager, but that does not mean that he is not an ethical person.

As he narrates his experiences negotiating ethical issues in the workplace, Daniel reflects on his ethical self. One discursive strategy which emerges from his account is the way that he articulates a view of himself as essentially moral. He does this through his talk in several ways. Daniel speaks of being moral at heart due to his upbringing, of being unable to tolerate unethical behaviour, which he evidences through feelings of extreme discomfort, and of simply knowing right from wrong. These discursive tactics that emerge from Daniel's

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account are explored in more detail now, with recourse to the narratives of other participants.

5.3 Being moral at heart due to upbringing

Like Daniel, a strong emphasis on their moral core features in the accounts of several participants. This is a part of themselves which they often present as rooted in their childhoods, and which they strongly associate with specific people who were important to them during their upbringing and formative years, usually a parent or both parents, but occasionally other family members or adults. The essential moral core is about deeply held values related to right and wrong which they have derived from their upbringing and those around them during their formative years. The participants often articulate the feeling that these values are integral to their sense of self, and see them as fixed, non-changing parts of themselves.

> *Yes, well, I think it comes from my upbringing, I think it just comes from my family and I think it comes from the way I was brought up, I think it comes from my mother, and yes, I have done some thinking about it, but I think that it's who I am. (F7, Managing Director, Media and Information)*

> *And that's where one's moral compass to start with is fundamental er I think, I do think that and I think um that is a result of you know the values that you, you know, come to you from your upbringing and um the kind of circumstances you've been exposed to. In your education and everything else. (M8, Commercial Director, Software Services)*

> *I'm quite a strong believer in, generally in human rights and environmental issues and I've always had possibly from my parents, from my childhood a very, and certainly some of the influential people I had in my life when I was a teenager were very much about equality and transparency. And I think that's where it's comes from. (M10, Associate Director, Professional Technical Services)*

Their moral values, frequently attributed to their upbringing, are presented as the result of sustained effort from their parents. The moral values are 'instilled' (M9) or 'bred' (F4) into them gradually and purposefully, over a period of time. Their values are, they say, shaped and moulded by their parents throughout their childhoods, eventually becoming an 'instinctive' (M14) part of the participants' sense of self.

My parents would have always instilled, you know, doing the right thing. (M9, Commercial Director, Food and Beverages)

I mean it feels ultimately quite instinctive, I mean I suppose it's just where does it originate from, I mean I guess it's, it's probably you'd say upbringing on some level for sure, you know the values that are instilled (M14, Chief Executive, Telecommunications)

I've got some really strong views on some things that are borne out of me just because they were in bred in me as a child (F4, HR Director, Banking)

Religious beliefs are sometimes implicated in this process. Some participants reflect on being taken to church as a child, or on having had a parent who held religious beliefs, and on the way that this may have influenced their own moral development.

I grew up in a in a very religious Christian household and I've always been brought up that your values are your values, doesn't matter where you are you live your values. (F1, Legal Director, Global Logistics)

I think it... So it comes from growing up, really. So it comes from my parents and my experience. So I'm not religious but they... Well my mum is Methodist, it was like the most religious family. I went to Sunday school. But that moral... so that sort of... you know, the moral code of being brought up in that environment is mainly, you know, what's right and what's wrong. (M15, Managing Director, Marketing Services)

The values that were encouraged and nurtured to the extent that they formed a fixed part of the individuals' sense of self have often, they assert, also formed the basis of enduring beliefs, which even in adulthood continue to guide them, and to trigger in them strong emotional responses.

I'm married to somebody who's coming through exactly the same sort of upbringing, that's been... you know, you would never cheat or steal or... you wouldn't cheat when you... we would never cheat when we were playing a game with the kids, eg, you would... you know, if you were playing cards or... and we... and of course living all over the world, we have done a lot of playing cards and playing games with the kids at home, and we would never cheat, we would never accept cheating in the game. (M9, Commercial Director, Food and Beverages)

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I have a real um issue around um offering roles to family members and such like, any of that sort of stuff that really turns my blood cold and that's just something that would have been bred in me from a very young age, that that's not OK to use your relationships in any way to secure any, and that's just really clear (F4, HR Director, Banking)

I think it's partly... I suspect a lot of it is nurture, but, you know, for example, I know if I do something that I feel... or say something that was... that is... was, sort of, unfair to that individual or something, that I would worry about it, I will... I will worry that I wasn't fair. (F7, Managing Director, Media and Information)

These participants affirm that the moral core instilled by parents in childhood continues to influence well beyond childhood, hence cheating is not even acceptable in a family card game, nepotism 'turns my blood cold' (F4) and the thought of behaving unfairly towards others provokes ongoing anxiety.

Reflecting on childhood experiences, the participants seem to recall simpler times. They assert that the nurturing and shaping processes present throughout their upbringing helped to define and instil their moral values, and the result is that they still feel a strong connection to it. Their accounts of childhood memories often express moral dilemmas in a binary way, and they talk about straightforward and unequivocal choice between right and wrong as taught by their parents. Grey areas do not feature in these accounts of childhood. The choices are simple and there is clarity around what is right and what is wrong. Moreover, there is a real sense of these individuals recalling being moulded by their parents – maybe even a sense of nostalgia for a time when they were not required to set the moral tone, but rather simply to follow the lead of their elders. Bardon et al (2015) identify nostalgia as one stratagem that their participants use when constructing themselves as former members of a corporate business organisation, advancing the idea that individuals draw on the past, reconstructing it in a positive light, romanticised even, in comparison with their current circumstances. They assert that this is one way which people find to articulate their dissatisfaction with their present circumstances, an idea that resonates with the identity work undertaken by the senior managers in this study, as they reflect in almost wistful terms on the simplicity of childhood, from their radically different and significantly more complex standpoints in the present.

The language used by these participants in constructing themselves as moral at heart is decisive and robust. They talk of 'strong views' (F4), of being a 'strong believer' (M10). They

assert that they would 'never accept' (M9) things they believe to be wrong. They speak of the difference between right and wrong being 'really clear' (F4). Moral values were, they say, ingrained at an early age. They recall clear and strong guidance from parents, who insisted upon non-negotiable morally right behaviour and these recollections are central to many of their accounts. In simpler times, was it more straightforward? Is their nostalgia really for someone else having the responsibility that they now bear? Strong reactions are articulated to immoral behaviour, or to the thought of it. According to their accounts, guidance received in their formative years has stayed with these participants and continues to influence their world view.

5.4 Not being able to tolerate unethical behaviour

A second way of reaffirming themselves as essentially moral is the way that participants describe their responses when confronted with the unethical behaviour of others, or when they feel pressure to behave in an unethical way themselves. This is often done with recourse to the feelings that they experience when they witness unethical behaviour or even simply suspect that something unethical may be expected or in progress. These feelings are often characterised as automatic reactions, reflexes almost, which are beyond their control. They describe being alerted to unethical behaviour through a physical feeling, such as a 'gut feel' (M4) or an 'inkling' (M11).

> *I think most of it's, you know. I mean most of it's been um knowing or you have the inkling and then you've got the inkling you, gut feel is a big thing….. alarm bells go off (M11, Finance Director, Logistics Solutions)*

> *I think sometimes the discomfort starts with an emotion or a feeling and then you have to intellectualise it before you can make a conclusion (F4, HR Director, Banking)*

> *It's some kind of a judgment, I mean I could be completely wrong but you know you get a gut feel as soon as you walk in the door I think and when you're talking to the CEO or the HR director or whatever you can get a feel for how does this business run, how does it tick… (M4, Finance Director, Manufacturing)*

They reflect on feelings of discomfort that let them know when something may not be right. The discomfort is characterised as physical response which guides them and their behaviour. The feeling that something is not quite right will cause them to stop and reassess. Yet they often are only able to describe these feelings in quite vague terms. They

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may feel 'uncomfortable' (M8), for example, or they may identify something that 'doesn't feel quite right' (M17). They can't quite articulate exactly what it is, and in some ways this works to support the idea that their inability to tolerate such behaviour is inbuilt and beyond their control.

> *I think that at the end of the day one is kind of minded in those situations [when feeling something may not be right] to do what one can to keep the show on the road but er I don't know quite how one draws the line as you know as to you know where you feel as though you're doing something that's possibly questionable ethically I suppose I just take the view that um if I feel distinctly uncomfortable with something then I will tend to shy away with it er shy away from it um and if I don't then it's probably OK (M8, Commercial Director, Software Services)*

> *I've been somewhere in the car or I've been at home thinking, you know what, that doesn't quite feel right. And then... But then I've gone back and talked it through with someone to give it... Just to check that I'm not just having... You know, because there is a bit sometimes of behaviour of the easy option. (M17, Divisional Director, Financial Services)*

> *but sometimes I just say, you know, this just doesn't feel right to me (F8, Managing Director, Agriculture)*

In retrospect, feelings of discomfort at having been implicated or involved in unethical behaviour of some sort can persist, and participants assert that they can feel undiminished. When talking about them, participants often voice the feeling that they still feel uncomfortable, even after a significant period of time has passed.

> *So there was no charge for having a bank account, but if you had it overdrawn that's where the people would start to pay. So the whole... I'm very uncomfortable about that. (M15, Managing Director, Marketing Services)*

> *And I... and I can't remember the exact example. I could... but there are... I know there have been two or three over the last... it's probably years, so it doesn't happen often, but I know I'm distinctly uncomfortable, and it'll get... sometimes I'll have come back: 'I am so sorry about how I handled that situation when I said so-and-so', and they'll look at me like I'm absolutely insane and go, what are you talking about? I didn't even think anything, you know? (F7, Managing Director, Media and Information)*

I've come across one or two more extreme, you know, more out-there types of questionable activity, which actually I'm not sure whether you would have called it... no, I would have called it acceptable, you know, treated it as, kind of, acceptable behaviour within the companies themselves, but actually, you know, it was something that I felt very uncomfortable getting close to. (M20, Finance Director, Media and Information)

The feelings are characterised as powerful enough to influence their behaviour, to try to ensure they avoid the discomfort. This may mean that they take extra care over decisions, to ensure that they can sleep at night, or to avoid them having to feel compromised in future situations, but it can also involve them taking extreme action by leaving the organisation.

So I think you have a huge responsibility to yourself to make sure that you can sleep easy at night. I don't want to be sitting at home thinking I wish I hadn't done that I think I've crossed a line (F2, Head of Valuation, Commercial Real Estate)

…whether it's with the bank with a customer or with a supplier, that I can without squirming say this is why I've taken it and this is consistent with everything else that I've done. (M7, Finance Director, Global Resourcing)

..the only place I've seen where behaviours really concern me, and I've left, and written in my letter as well to say that, you know, I don't want to be a part of... it's very clear (F9, Head of Intelligence, Media and Information)

Some participants see themselves as less able to tolerate unethical behaviour than others are. It is something that they believe sets them apart from others. Their narratives evidence tension and struggle as the participants contend with their own roles, the expectations of others and their personal self-identifications. They provide emotive accounts of the impact of these struggles on the way that they feel, to evidence their assertion that their inability to tolerate unethical behaviour means that they are different from others. This appears to be a kind of deliberate positioning of themselves versus others, with a clear focus on what they are *not* like.

And I think different individuals are able to cope with that discomfort more than others and I think I think I'm definitely someone that is not able to cope with guilt in any way and therefore it would always make me uncomfortable doing anything cos that guilt fear is so great (F4, HR Director, Banking)

[Talking about unethical behaviour in others] I think it manifests itself in more what I would call careless decision making so you know without the consequences, without fully thinking through the consequences and if things don't work out as they've previously planned but there are casualties as part of the process then they seem to be able to move on without any particular concern about it....in a way that I would struggle to do. (M4, Finance Director, Manufacturing)

... therefore and what I've observed is that if you are a bit like that [unable to tolerate unethical behaviour] then as you climb through organisations and have to take tough decisions then I think they do put more pressure on you as an individual than maybe other people. That's not to say I'm the most moral person out there I'm not, but um you know if you are grappling with difficult decisions in an organisation sometimes that does tear you a bit more than it might others. (M4, Finance Director, Manufacturing)

An inability to stop themselves from speaking out when they witness immoral conduct is also something that participants express, and seem to offer as proof that they cannot endure unethical behaviour. This applies not only to their work situations, but to everyday life in general. It is invariably described as a compulsion to act – they cannot stop themselves once provoked. They 'have to' (M9), or 'need to' (F9) act. As with the feelings of discomfort provoked by exposure to unethical behaviour, they do not explain the mechanism in detail, other than articulating the idea that it is beyond their conscious control. In this way it is presented as an integral part of their sense of self.

So I'm the person that doesn't, er, if I see something that makes me uncomfortable I'm not the person that thinks before I act (F4, HR Director, Banking)

So um you know from school stepping in when people were bullied and ending up getting yourself you know punched for example would be a perfect example of where, and there's no conscious thought behind that, it's an emotional reaction to seeing someone um seeing someone you know mistreated or feeling uncomfortable with the behaviour and I will just step in so there's lots of instances from school and such like where I've done that or um where I have felt compelled to um say things that I haven't thought of the consequences, the result of doing that but I've felt compelled to say it um to a recent incident where I was sat, I've had laryngitis and I was sat in a restaurant with the family and we were all ill and we couldn't talk and there was a conversation going on behind us and it was in relation to a sixth form

pupil at a college um talking about women in a way that I found very uncomfortable and so I wrote to the college subsequently (F4, HR Director, Banking)

But if I saw one of my colleagues doing something that... you know, under-invoicing seems like the classic one, then I would have to say something… (M9, Commercial Director, Food and Beverages)

I'm so ethical that yes, that would make me very uncomfortable, and if I was aware of it, I'd need to do something about it, essentially, (F9, Head of Intelligence, Media and Information)

Participants contend that their inability to tolerate unethical conduct extends to their own behaviour and they offer straightforward and clear examples of the ways in which they try to exemplify the standards that they expect of others.

No, well, I was just... I was just thinking of an example, and I think the example goes beyond something external. It goes to telling the truth if you've made a mistake, and I'm quite good at holding my hand up and saying, actually I've screwed up there. I'm sorry, you know, this is why I've done it and it's a mistake, and I'm telling... I tell you straightaway, and I won't do it again, and this is what I'm going to do about it. (M9, Commercial Director, Food and Beverages)

So, an absolute classic is, I learned, from my years with [a large multinational], that when you've cocked up, that you tell people. You say, I've made a mistake. This is what I've done. This is what I think I ought to have done. This is what I'm going to do to put it right. And this is how I'm moving forwards. And that is, to me, is really, really important. (F6, Managing Director, Childcare)

I just have a simple rule really, you know just don't state things that are not true (M3, Managing Director, IT Systems)

But according to their narrative accounts, the simplicity of these statements can belie the difficulties they face as senior leaders. Decisions are complex and challenging, and it is not necessarily straightforward always to do the right thing, even if their moral inner self demands it.

And sometimes you don't want to be there you know, sometimes to be honest you're just thinking well actually you know this is you know I want to be a leader and I want to do these things but I'm finding this very difficult because um you

know and it's moral it's not religious I'm not a religious person in any way so it's not from that angle it's just you know I like to be um like to do the right thing. (M4, Finance Director, Manufacturing)

To sum up, these practitioners assert that they simply cannot tolerate unethical behaviour. In their narratives, they detail the emotive responses that they say unethical behaviour, or even the thought of it, can provoke in them. Their descriptions of the feelings that they experience in the face of unethical behaviour are candid and often intense, and characterised as automatic and beyond their control. Participants claim that these feelings are powerful enough to trigger changes in their behaviour as they attempt to avoid them. Participants also attribute their intolerance of unethical behaviour in others to central, fixed and longstanding elements of their own characters. They see themselves as inherently moral individuals, and they assert that this inherent morality sets them apart from others who are not. Their aversion to the immoral behaviour of others is offered as evidence for this.

Reflecting on their inability to tolerate unethical behaviour inevitably leads some participants to articulate what they are not, rather than what they are, often with recourse to examples of other people's behaviour. Ybema et al (2009) argue that the discursive distinction between the self and the other is an important element in identity construction and enactment, because it is in articulating similarities and differences that we come to know who *we* are and are not, and who *others* are and are not. The way that participants articulate what they are not, with recourse to portrayals of the behaviour of others, also resonates with Sveningsson and Alvesson's (2003) ideas around anti-identity, when the tensions of doing their identity work in the face of dominant discourses and the expectations of others constructing them in a certain way can provoke individuals to reject these discourses and expectations, and to construct a sense of self that is at variance with them.

5.5 Just knowing right from wrong: Something in me (which I was born with)

A third tactic that participants in this study employ as they construct themselves as essentially moral is to assert that they simply know right from wrong because they have, within them, character traits to underpin and guide their moral convictions. These traits are often seen as present from birth rather than being attributed to the nurture or intervention of others or to circumstances external to themselves. Because of the traits, participants contend that they are simply and automatically able to tell right from wrong. This is subtly

different from the previous tactic, where participants assert an inability to tolerate unethical behaviour which they evidence through strong emotional reactions attributed to their moral core. When they talk about *just knowing right from wrong*, although their moral core is deemed responsible, the response is more measured and less emotive.

> *Me personally I have quite a strong internal ethical code so just, I am just that type of person so if I'm dealing with people internally with the organisation then it's all about transparency and openness (M4, Finance Director, Manufacturing)*

> *You know, so my, kind of, register and sensitivity to this stuff is actually quite high (F7, Managing Director, Media and Information)*

> *I think I've always been like that, I've always been someone that's considered the bigger moral implications of my actions, whether it were work or outside. (F5, Finance Director, Retail)*

Some participants assert that they were born with these traits. This builds on the essentialist view of themselves as holding characteristics or traits which are longstanding, beyond their control and fixed.

> *to me you're either born with the values of I respect people and I don't want people to be maybe upset with me or feel that maybe I'm not acting in a way that they would hope and that's a value I think that you either have, i.e., you can't change that (F2, Head of Valuation, Commercial Real Estate)*

> *I mean this might sound quite naïve, but I actually think it's within you, it's built within you, I think it's just the type of person that you are you know I take it to ridiculous levels like um you know this is gonna sound stupid if I find 5p left over in a vending machine then I won't take it I'll leave it there and if the kids find it there I'll make them leave it so I think it's just something that is inbuilt in you, you just are that type of person (M4, Finance Director, Manufacturing)*

> *I do believe that that comes down to the personality that you have because everybody has values and you can't change those values, to my mind you can't you're born with values (F2, Head of Valuation, Commercial Real Estate)*

Others voice the idea that the traits are something that are simply in their 'make-up' (M18) or just 'in me' (M8) or 'who I am' (F7).

I'm a fairly loyal soul anyway I think that's just my make up if I commit to something you're in, hence I've been there for nineteen seventeen eighteen nineteen years, whatever it is (M18, Head of Commercial Operations, Media and Communications)

Yes it's something in me, yeah something in me (M8, Commercial Director, Software Services)

... there was an inherent thing in me that I wanted to manage this team well, not so much that I looked good, but that that relationship worked, they did a good job, I felt that they were... you know, they felt they were supported, we could... you know, and that's just who I am, I think, really. (F7, Managing Director, Media and Information)

They sometimes express a sense of their moral core changing over time, often presenting a view of themselves as becoming more moral with the passage of time.

Yes, you sort of just sit there and go... and I suspect my moral compass has become more moral as I've grown up. (M15, Managing Director, Marketing Services)

I think that generally speaking I have had a sense of what's right and wrong all the way through. I think it is more considered these days than it used to be, so... (M20, Finance Director, Media and Information)

so I think my ethical views have matured over time that's er I think a really important thing I think it's something that you grow and mature over time so I wouldn't say that my ethical business perspective is, that I've got today is where I started I think it's something you need to learn and develop and mature and understand. (F4, HR Director, Banking)

They present themselves as feeling compelled always to act in accordance with their moral core. For these participants, consistency is deemed to be crucial and it is therefore important for them to maintain these moral standards in different environments and circumstances. They often articulate the idea that not to do so is simply not an option.

You just would never... it would never occur to you; you play by the rules and you... and you follow the rules and, you know, let the cards fall where they may, sort of thing. (M9, Commercial Director, Food and Beverages)

The way you bring up your children you can't be one thing for your children and something else when you go out partying with your girlfriends and something else when you are sitting in the office and somebody might make a suggestion of doing something untoward I think as an individual to be true to yourself you have to follow your morality through wherever you are because otherwise I think you are defrauding yourself. (F1, Legal Director, Global Logistics)

A priority voiced often by participants is the identification of a work environment that suits their moral sense of self. Participants also express concerns that the wrong professional or work environment would be difficult for them to cope with.

well I've just acquired this company I don't know what they're like um and I would question the ethics of the owner that we bought off because I know he has shafted people and he's done it deliberately and so again I've seen what the other side is like and it's like well I wouldn't be comfortable living my life or running my business in that way. (M7, Finance Director, Global Resourcing)

I think it's very important because I think if you if you work for a company that just always want to live on a bit of the compliance and moral edge I would personally find that very, very difficult. (F1, Legal Director, Global Logistics)

…there are certain organisations that I'd feel very, very uncomfortable about working in, to the extent that I wouldn't work there. So, you know, I wouldn't want to work for a bunch of thieves or criminals or what have you, I'd draw the line there. (M20, Finance Director, Media and Information)

The language in these narrative accounts is often decisive and the participants speak with conviction about their innate morality. It is 'just something that is inbuilt' (M4), 'just my make-up' (M18), or it is 'just who I am' (F7). Like the rooting of the moral self in childhood, this presents a view of the moral self as something longstanding and fixed, but it goes further in contending that morality may be something that an individual is born with rather than something introduced and nurtured by others. The participants present it as something that they cannot control, and which is decisive in influencing their behaviour. Whereas they point to powerful feelings of discomfort to evidence an inability to tolerate unethical behaviour, they express their absolute confidence in the presence of an inherent moral self which has always been with them, to explain how they just know right from wrong.

A tendency towards essentialist notions of identity in participants' identity work is observed in other empirical studies. For example Watson (2009) notes his main participant's propensity to claim fixed character traits in order to explain who he is. Reflecting on this, Ybema et al (2009) argue that essentialist claims are perhaps 'stabilised moments in an ongoing process of identity formation and re-formation' (p305) and as such simply another rhetorical device through which individuals attempt to claim an identity or role, or to present themselves as decent. This begs the question of who the intended audience is, and whether it may in fact include themselves.

Costas and Fleming (2009) submit the idea that the expression of an authentic, arguably imagined self is a tactic used by individuals engaged in identity work to distinguish their real from their non-authentic, fake corporate selves. This idea that individuals seek to distance themselves from certain organisational cultures and management discourses in this way draws on Goffman's (1959) notions related to front and backstage performed selves. Costas and Fleming argue that this may be a way of constructing and retaining a sense of self-determination, where the true or backstage self is seen as somehow superior to the frontstage one. They invoke the notion of authenticity to contend that the inner self is constructed as the true self, and that the knowledge of this may work to assuage the individual's feelings of discomfort when confronted with their false corporate self.

5.6 Discussion

5.6.1 Constructing themselves as good at heart

As they do their moral identity work, one broad stratagem that participants adopt, often in the face of discourses casting them as unethical, is to construct themselves as 'good' people at heart. This is done in three different ways, but all three have in common some expression of, or allusion to, the idea that they are 'essentially' moral, with reference to a fixed and enduring moral 'core' or inner self which influences and moderates their behaviour.

Some participants present their moral core as something which is traceable back to their childhoods, and invoke memories of parental shaping and moulding of their characters and of their sense of right and wrong while growing up. These accounts frequently adopt the passive voice, as the authors recount the way that values and moral codes were 'instilled' (M9) or 'bred' (F4) into them. The passive voice here often seems to recall a time of simple choices and clear guidance from their elders, where they themselves were required not to lead but to follow. This is perhaps in contrast to the complexity they face in their ethical

decision-making as senior business managers. There is a noticeable sense of nostalgia in some of these accounts, as the participants reflect on the clear distinctions between right and wrong that they remember from their childhoods. The way that specific values instilled by their parents have persisted into adulthood is also central to several accounts, as participants, now parents themselves, present themselves as the moral exemplars of their own children, instilling the same ideals. This strong focus on upbringing and parental influence is central to the construction of these participants, by themselves, as inherently and essentially moral. Invoking intensely personal details of childhood allows them to construct an enduring moral core, established and nurtured by their parents, which continues to influence and guide them as they, in turn, nurture their own children's senses of right and wrong.

For some, the inner moral self is evidenced by powerful feelings and emotions that they experience, which alert them to unethical behaviour, and which underpin their inability to tolerate unethical conduct in themselves or people around them. These accounts are replete with vivid descriptions of the feelings that unethical behaviour provoke in them. They frequently describe feeling 'uncomfortable' (F4), but they also offer more intense accounts of behaviour that they witness making them 'squirm' (M7), 'tearing' (M4) them and triggering worry or guilt. The feelings they experience when confronted with unethical behaviour are strong enough to prompt behaviour change in an effort to avoid them, even to the extent of leaving an organisation to distance themselves. Their inherent inability to tolerate unethical behaviour sets these participants apart from other people, and their accounts evidence a tendency to distinguish between other more typical managers, and themselves. Part of this difference is articulated as a need, often portrayed as a sub-conscious reflex – to call out unethical behaviour when confronted with it, whether it be perpetrated by themselves or by others. The aversion that these participants experience to unethical behaviour triggers vivid emotional reactions which, in turn, fuel their identity work constructing themselves as moral to the core.

Others, instead of pointing to feelings of discomfort provoked by exposure to unethical behaviour, or to the knowledge that their parents brought them up to know right from wrong, assert that they are able to distinguish between right and wrong because of something within them. They often articulate this *just knowing right from wrong* as an integral part of their character or make-up. It is attributed to character traits, often in quite a vague way, expressed as 'something in me', something that is 'within you' or 'an inherent thing in me'. Many see the traits as something they were born with, or consider them as a

manifestation of who they are. Although it is something that they are born with, the moral self can grow stronger over time, and it can compel the participants actively to seek out the right environment in which to work, which is in tune with their moral core, because they find being in the wrong sort of environment difficult.

While their accounts may offer divergent ideas about the source of the moral core, what unifies these participants is an unshakeable belief in themselves as essentially moral. The moral self, whatever its provenance, is invariably characterised as enduring, and undiminished over time. It is central to who they are and as such, it is critically important to them. It influences their perceptions and their behaviour. It also offers a potentially effective route in to addressing the charges of immorality implicit in dominant discourses about unethical business practices and practitioners. As such, the presentation of themselves as essentially moral is powerful and enduring way of reasserting themselves as good people.

5.6.2 Drawing on dominant discourses that stigmatise them to construct alternative identities for themselves

This presentation of themselves as essentially 'good' resonates with Toyoki and Brown's (2014) investigation into stigmatised identities in prisoners, where the researchers observe 'efforts to manage stigma by casting themselves as moral agents' (p728). They do this in the face of prevailing discourses and circumstances (i.e., being incarcerated) that construct them as morally deficient. For Toyoki and Brown, this insistence on constructing and presenting themselves as moral is a response to being positioned by others, and mainly by the criminal justice system, as untrustworthy and dishonest. Interestingly the prisoners' claim to morality is often an attempt to demonstrate that they have changed and improved to *become* moral individuals, whereas the managers in this study tend rather to claim that they have *always been* moral agents, a subtle but potentially significant difference in the presentation of the moral self, because it implies the essentialist view of character traits as fixed and unchanging. This essentialist view pervades their accounts, and the purpose that it serves is discussed below. The idea that stigma inflicted by discourses casting them as unethical may provoke participants in this study to respond by constructing themselves as the opposite of unethical is interesting, and suggests that the discourses are intruding into, and impacting significantly upon, their moral identity work. The construction of the self as inherently good may be a way of protecting themselves, or deflecting the taint that they feel the discourses inflict. It may also be a means of persuading themselves and others of their moral integrity.

In a similar vein, Brown and Coupland (2015) offer empirical evidence for their assertion that elite sportsmen draw on discourses that threaten their professional identities to craft alternative, more positive versions of themselves. Thus, apparently negative discourses can trigger identity work which leads to the construction of favoured identities and in doing this, individuals can both express agency and quell the anxiety provoked by the negative discourses. In the face of high profile public censure of business scandals, and societal-level discourses denigrating business leaders' behaviour, constructing themselves as essentially moral could certainly be construed as a response to these discourses as well as a way for these participants to reassure themselves, and others in interaction, that the discourses do not apply to them.

Ybema et al (2009) argue that 'an intrinsic part of the process by which we come to understand who *we* are is intimately connected to notions of who we are *not* and, by implication, who others are (and are not)' (p306). They argue thus for the significance of self-other comparisons in identity work, and note in particular the idea that what they term 'sameness' and 'otherness' is often central to individual identity work. As discussed above, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) offer insight into the 'not-me' positions articulated by participants. Ainsworth and Hardy (2004) also assert that identity construction can involve positioning oppositions, as individuals seek to construct themselves as different versus others, but also possibly to establish a hierarchy, where they attempt to cast the others as less good or less respectable than themselves. The way that the participants in this study draw on their judgements about others, to help them express a sense of what they themselves are not, is revealing in this respect. They do not always identify specific individuals, but refer rather to vague 'others' who are able to tolerate unethical behaviour in a way that they themselves are not. The difference between themselves and the 'others' is evidenced with recourse to powerful emotional reactions which cause them anxiety and stress, and the implication is that the 'others' either do not experience these emotions, or are able to bear them in a way that the participants are not. The participants thus offer a view of themselves as the exception, as atypical and unusual but more than this, arguably as somehow morally superior.

5.6.3 The role of nostalgia in the construction of the essentially moral self

Lutgen-Sandvik (2008) finds that victims of workplace bullying experience identity challenges, or threats to their sense of self, by observing their own responses to the bullying. Some respond by drawing on past self-narratives in an attempt to prove that the bullies' disparagement of them is unfounded, with recourse to reminders of their past

experiences and successes. This is part of what she terms reconciling identity work, where individuals endeavour to reduce the dissonance provoked by identity challenges by focusing on preferred identity, in this case one from their past. This is perhaps another way of interpreting the way that the managers claim an inner moral self that they trace back to childhood – as a response to the identity challenge posed by dominant discourses surrounding business leaders and their culpability in scandals. For Lutgen-Sandvik, reconciling identity work allows the bullied individuals to neutralise and even counter the criticisms they experience of themselves, and this idea also resonates with the way that these managers seem to be reaffirming themselves as moral agents, in the face of broad assertions to the contrary.

As noted earlier, drawing on past memories is also identified as an identity work stratagem by Bardon et al (2015) who argue for the role of nostalgia in identity construction as a way both of appreciating the past and of almost recovering or re-enacting parts of it, in order to compensate for deficiencies in the participants' current circumstances. This notion of compensating for deficiencies in the present is interesting, and in many ways captures the sense of anxiety present in many participant accounts. For some, as evidenced in Daniel's account, it is clear that the reality of being a senior manager is very different from the way that they imagined it would be, and becoming the morally good leaders they envisaged they would be has proved to be challenging in the face of overwhelming pressure to deliver business results. The morally right choices are not always straightforward or obvious. Perhaps nostalgia for a simpler time, when the difference between right and wrong was clearer, binary even, motivates these participants as they assert a moral core rooted in childhood and shaped by their parents. Is this the way that they opt to compensate for the deficiencies of their present situations?

Bardon et al (2015) argue that in an organisational context, individuals can incorporate 'elements of a past professional experience into their self-narratives' (p583). However, this present study evidences individuals incorporating elements of a much earlier time, long before their professional lives began, into their self-narratives. This is perhaps surprising, given that the original premise of their recruitment for the study was their seniority within their organisations, and the main focus of the interview was their professional experience of ethical issues in the workplace. They could have articulated nostalgia for an earlier time in their professional lives, but they did not, and their preference for childhood experiences as an anchor for their present moral identity is significant. Incorporating deeply personal aspects of childhood into their professional moral identity narratives suggests a yearning

for simpler times and greater clarity, something that they are clearly not able to draw from earlier professional experiences.

5.6.4 The performance of the moral core as an idealised identity

The notion of face to face interactions as an opportunity for individuals to perform and confirm idealised identities is explored by Down and Reveley (2009), who argue that identities thus performed are subsequently re-absorbed into the individuals' narrated self-identities. Goffmans' (1959) ideas around identity as performed feature strongly in Down and Reveley's work to the extent that they argue for this perspective as indispensable to the study of narrative identity, because 'successful performances undergird managers' attempts to craft stable narrative identities' (p379). As noted earlier, performance of a preferred or even idealised identity is also observed by Costas and Fleming (2009) as a coping mechanism for individuals attempting to dissociate themselves from organisational domination.

There is indeed a sense in which some of the participants in this study appear to be presenting an idealised – even crafted – version of themselves as they articulate an essential moral core. Invoking deeply personal elements of their childhoods, asserting an inbuilt sense of right and wrong, and recounting powerful emotional responses to unethical conduct in themselves and others, their accounts do seem to incorporate performed, possibly even rehearsed elements. Goffman himself notes that performed identities often 'incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society' (1959, p45) and that those performing can be taken in by their own performances. Clearly, there is much focus on societal notions of morality in these accounts with talk of the need to distinguish between right and wrong and expressions of disapproval of other people's behaviour, and while their audience is potentially the person with whom they are interacting, in this case the interviewer, as Goffman asserts, individuals can perform for different audiences, including the imagined other, and even themselves.

5.6.5 What purpose does the construction of the self as essentially moral serve?

Whether they are claiming a moral core that they attribute to childhood, or that they are incapable of tolerating unethical conduct, or that they simply know right from wrong due to deeply embedded and fixed character traits, the moral identity work of these participants evidences a heavy reliance on ideas of themselves as essentially moral. As we have seen, this often involves invoking memories from early childhood, long before they embarked upon their professional lives. They also insist that their morality can be

attributed to characteristics which they were born with. In senior business leaders, these claims are striking and, perhaps crucially, extremely difficult to challenge. They also arguably express widely held normative ideas that the difference between right and wrong is something that is learned early in life, and which endures. In response to dominant discourses that cast them as unethical, they articulate further dominant discourses constructing moral values as innate, stable and enduring. What is the alternative to this? Arguably, it would be to assert a flexible moral self which changes in response to circumstances, including external pressures and self-interest, a position which would run counter to many ideals of business leaders who are expected to be consistent, decisive and principled. Perhaps, influenced by notions of ideal leadership, declaring an essential moral self is a way of evading potential charges of weakness and indecision and asserting strength and moral authority.

5.7 Conclusions

Participant narratives evidence a strong tendency to reaffirm themselves as essentially moral in their identity work, with recourse to three tactics – claiming that they are moral due to their upbringing, asserting that they are unable to tolerate unethical behaviour and contending that they know right from wrong because of an inbuilt sense of morality. This research identifies the role of dominant discourses in their moral identity work which provoke the participants to construct alternative idealised identities in an attempt to deflect or mitigate the stigma of such discourses. Nostalgia for a simpler time, when distinguishing between right and wrong was a matter of simple choices guided by others, also seems to play a part as participants elect to draw on childhood rather than early professional lives to explain their moral cores. There is a sense in which these participants appear to be performing the essential moral self, both for themselves and their audience, in response to broader notions of strong leadership which demand strength and decision. Rooting their present moral selves in their distant past may be a way of constructing themselves not only as moral, but as the strong and decisive leaders they seek to be.

Chapter 6

Becoming and being a moral manager

6.1 Introduction

The distinctive situation that senior managers describe as they face up to moral choices in their professional lives features in many participant accounts, and is portrayed by them as unique, complex and challenging (see Chapter 4). The participants reflect on the expectations of decisive leadership and career progression that they detect from those below them in the organisational hierarchy. They also talk of intense pressure to deliver against business objectives that they perceive from those above them, at the very top of their organisations. Drawing on these diverging tensions, they offer a picture of themselves as caught between the levels, in a lonely and often isolated position. In these circumstances, making the right decisions for themselves as well as for their organisations is presented as demanding and problematic.

By contrast, as they do their moral identity work, participants often look back with nostalgia to their early lives to reaffirm themselves as moral through and through in the present day (see Chapter 5). In so doing they draw on memories of childhood and a time when the difference between right and wrong was simple. This is in stark contrast to the complexity that they assert their career progression has brought. As a senior manager, their accounts suggest that they see the difference between right and wrong as anything but simple and straightforward and yet they persist in characterising right with recourse to the simple dilemmas of childhood, and wrong with recourse to examples of consummate evil.

This findings chapter explores the way that, in their narrative accounts, the participants often assert their role as moral champions within their organisations, depicting themselves as striving to do the right thing for themselves as well as for the organisation and for their colleagues. This moral identity work is termed *becoming and being a moral manager* and it encompasses three main elements: expressing a feeling that they are required to set the moral tone for their organisations; noting the tensions that they observe between being moral and being commercially competent; and contending that they endeavour to act morally in the face of an organisation they characterise as a system working against them. In many ways, this theme of becoming and being a moral manager offers a focus upon moral identities in practice, bringing together as it does the apparently incompatible and

divergent themes emerging from the first two findings chapters, namely the complexity that they describe in their work situations (Chapter 4) and the simplicity of the moral elements of identity that they construct for themselves (Chapter 5). The present findings chapter examines the way that participants experience the tensions that this disparity provokes, and the effect that this produces on their moral identity work, and on their moral identities in practice.

Whereas in reaffirming themselves as essentially moral the participants' accounts evidence a strong focus on their childhoods, and a nostalgia for the simplicity of moral choices as taught by their parents, becoming and being a moral manager has a much more current focus. Participants present a view of themselves as situated within their organisations, facing up to the realities of their perceived roles as moral leaders of the businesses, roles that are performed in the face of pressures that threaten, they assert, to thwart them. Being a moral manager can mean setting the moral tone, making the right choices and being morally good as well as competent, but it can also mean resisting a system in which they, as leaders, are complicit. This tension is the backdrop to their accounts.

This chapter begins with the account of one participant, Oliver (a pseudonym). It explores the way that he narrates his experiences with moral issues, and in particular with the moral leader role that he perceives he must fulfil, in his professional life. The themes emerging from Oliver's account are then explored in more detail through the narratives of other participants. As in the previous two findings chapters, this is followed by a more in-depth consideration of the themes with recourse to identity work literature, and finally by an extended discussion around the theoretical implications.

6.2 Becoming and being a moral manager. The account of one participant - Oliver

Oliver (a pseudonym) is Finance Director of a UK-based manufacturing company, and an experienced finance professional. Currently working in the manufacturing sector, Oliver also has experience in the food sector and in a professional services organisation at senior levels. Oliver articulates the idea that the moral tone of the organisation comes from those at the top and that, as a leader, he needs to exemplify the moral approach that he is attempting to foster. This is not always straightforward in the environment within which he finds himself. Oliver's account offers insight into moral identity work in practice.

For Oliver, morals are closely linked to values, and embracing moral values is a way of setting the right tone for the rest of the organisation. Throughout his account, he expresses

the importance that he attaches to his perceived role as moral exemplar within his organisation.

> *I think the most important thing about values is that they go right up to the top and people actually follow them*

> *You've got ethics, morality, values, you know they're all, I'm sure a scientist could give you a precise definition of where one starts and the other ends, but the reality is they're all part of you and how you behave.*

There is a strong sense in which Oliver presents himself as feeling the scrutiny from those below him. He expresses the stereotypes that are often articulated about senior managers in general, and about finance directors in particular. These stereotypes in many ways provide a backdrop to Oliver's account, and he contemplates his role and responsibilities, and the kind of manager that he wants to be seen as. He reflects on the way that his subordinates may have viewed him in the past.

> *Well I'm just hypothesising in terms of you know did people look at me in the position that I held and thought well, can we ever really trust him because he's the boss?*

> *It could be I guess because you're an FD it's you know I suppose you are the keeper of the dark secrets or whatever.*

Reflecting on setting a moral example, he expresses the idea that real lived values are essential, and that any attempt to deceive people by merely offering lip service to values will fail, because people will immediately notice.

> *…if you want to hold yourself up as a moral leader or a moral organisation you actually have to do it. Because people don't respect leaders unless they actually live by what they say the values are.*

> *…because, you know, we've all seen values where it's sort of, you know, um 'it's a set of values but don't expect me to follow them'.*

> *People aren't stupid people are very perceptive and they will know if the organisation is following its values. And they're normally very quick to tell you if it's not. Yeah we all know that. You soon lose credibility in any organisation if you launch a great values system and then you know ten minutes later something happens that just completely trashes it and people are very perceptive.*

Presenting himself as an inherently moral individual, Oliver asserts that he feels the need to behave in a moral way and that he experiences conflict with other members of the leadership team who do not share his outlook. This is a source of tension for him. He contrasts, for example, his perception of his own approach to openness of communication with that of some of his colleagues. The unease is embedded in his language as Oliver describes 'wrestling' with these issues, and of being 'at odds with' his colleagues.

> *...and, um I think sometimes where the conflict arises internally is where um senior management or maybe an executive board don't want to communicate further down the organisation particular issues. So for example if the company isn't performing particularly well, if there's particular restructuring plan that doesn't want to be shared, um and you, I always wrestle with those sort of things because, um there comes a point where you need to communicate that further through the organisation and I normally find myself at odds with the rest of the senior management team in wanting to communicate it in a more fair and open manner. And probably quicker as well.*

Reflecting on the reason for his colleagues' differing approaches, he suggests that they have an ulterior motive.

> *So, you know, they'll withhold information because, um it does give them power and influence*

Oliver characterises the issue of being open and transparent as an inherently moral one, asserting that it is about doing the right thing. He insists that he feels the need to behave in precisely the right way to develop and sustain his position as a good leader. Yet reflecting on the finely balanced decisions that are required of senior leaders, he articulates the worry that his efforts to behave morally may, in fact, be perceived differently by others. Having asserted that others act unethically because they believe it gives them power, he suggests here that in acting ethically, he risks being viewed by others as naïve. Oliver is at pains to emphasise that naïvety is 'not the same as morality', nevertheless being seen as naïve is clearly an uncomfortable prospect for him, and these reflections hint at the notion that as a senior manager Oliver feels he must ensure that his moral code is not seen as interfering with, or detracting from, his business acumen.

> *It is a fine line you know because boards and, you know, excos [executive committees], leadership teams in businesses obviously have to take that balance*

but you know I have observed that that is a moral balance that sometimes you have to take, if you have news that should be shared with everyone when you do it.

I suppose there is a tension between um transparency and morality and even naïvety you don't want to be naïve cos if you are naïve then naïvety is not the same as morality

Oliver's presentation of himself as genuinely concerned with the morality of his actions is in stark contrast to his characterisation of some others in his organisation who, he asserts, do not share his outlook. He typifies these individuals as 'careless' in their decision-making, with no consideration of the impact of their choices, and 'able to move on without any particular concern' when others are disadvantaged by them. His depiction of them as 'crashing around' in the organisation evokes images of thoughtless and inconsiderate behaviour. Oliver's assertion that he would 'struggle' to behave in this way allows him to differentiate himself from this depiction of uncaring and cavalier colleagues.

So yeah, um, and I think there are people who I've come across who don't really have a high degree of morality. Not many to be fair but there are people who operate in my experience in business without those sort of concerns.

I think it manifests itself in more what I would call careless decision making so you know without the consequences without fully thinking through the consequences and if things don't work out as they've previously planned but there are casualties as part of the process then they seem to be able to move on without any particular concern about it…. in a way that I would struggle to do, yeah absolutely.

If those sort of people are crashing around in your organisation then it does make it very difficult yeah. That's a source of conflict.

Behaving in the way he thinks he should is not without its challenges, however, and according to Oliver's account, other people in the organisation can endeavour to exert influence on his behaviour. This is a prominent theme in his account and one which, at times, preoccupies him. He presents an image of himself as resisting these influences, but asserts that resistance is not as straightforward as simply refusing to do what others expect. What he presents is a negotiation, with those applying the pressure but also with himself, as he strives to do the right thing for himself and for the business. He explains how presentations to external stakeholders are discussed.

Some people say, 'Well you know we don't want to talk about that cos that's bad', and you say 'Well OK, we won't talk about that but if we get into a discussion about it then don't expect me to say something that isn't true or to hide it cos that's not gonna happen'. And those are things that you need to do very early in a relationship with your peer group and then they understand that, and some organisations can't cope with it, you know I've seen people leave businesses because they are too open and honest and they can't get on with their peer group.

… you know, what do you disclose and what do you not disclose? You know and there is an element of, can you still be moral if you haven't disclosed that particular fact? And you have to try and disclose it in a slightly more positive way for your business but you see this is when it gets very interesting because when you flick from internal to external, then you're actually as the Finance Director of the business you're actually the protector of that business you're now actually going in to bat for that business um so but that doesn't mean you have to leave your moral code behind you… the morality of that is that you are acting in the best interests of your company.

Faced with these pressures, Oliver portrays himself as comfortable in asserting his own moral position. Thus, he presents himself as sticking to empirical facts – 'the numbers are the numbers' – taking decisions that are to the advantage of the majority, and always considering all options.

Um I to be honest my starting point is 'The numbers are the numbers'. You know, I'm not really paid to make them particularly good or bad, if there's a particular thing which is judgmental and in the middle and you know it is a big parade then I'll look at all the options then think about it and choose the one that is most appropriate. But I would call it consultation.

[Contemplating redundancies] I mean at the end of the day you have to think that if what you're doing is for the greater good of all the people in the business you know if you have a business of 500 employees if you're going through some difficult decisions and you know ten or twenty people are affected through that then at the end of the day you can justify what you're doing by looking outside and saying well look you know I'm actually taking these decisions for the benefit of the 480 people who are left within the business so you can ultimately back up your decisions on that basis.

> *I don't enter into any decision like that um without doing that. Well, first of all you have to do it to yourself you know, was that the right course of action, was there another course of action*

Juxtaposed with descriptions of the behaviour of others, Oliver presents himself as morally good and endeavouring to do the right thing for himself as well as for his business. On his account, this is not straightforward. Oliver's commentary on the way that he views the moral behaviour of those at the top of business organisations is significant. He argues that senior leaders set the moral tone of the organisation, and that the most potent way for them to do this is by clearly living by the standards and values that they espouse. Perhaps because of this, his account evidences much reflection about the way that others perceive him, and about the way that his own behaviour – which he contends is a manifestation of his moral self – is seen by others. Needing to set the moral tone as a senior manager in his organisation is thus a significant preoccupation in Oliver's account, and it is perhaps one reason why his account also focuses heavily on the need to strike the right balance with regard to ethical issues. With his own avowed focus on openness and transparency, and his presentation of the behaviour of others as often resistant to it, Oliver evokes an image of himself as engaged in an ongoing struggle to assert his position. The struggle is characterised almost as a moral campaign, and it is focused as much on the organisation and its systems as on the individuals within.

Oliver's characterisation of immoral behaviour of others as a potential source of power, and conversely of moral behaviour as a potential indicator of 'naïvety', implies that moral identity work in a business organisation has a subtle connection to issues of status and power which are unique to this context. Oliver's clear resistance to the 'naïve' label, along with his disparagement for those seeking to derive power from behaviour that he sees as unethical, provoke him to reflect on finding the right ethical line to tread. While it is clearly important to Oliver to be a morally good practitioner, he worries that being seen as too moral may risk him being cast as insufficiently astute to be taken seriously as a business leader. This is problematic for someone who, like him, wishes to present themselves as both morally good and commercially competent. Crane (2000) observes a similar phenomenon, which he terms 'amoralization', in an empirical study into motivations for greening initiatives within corporate environments. Pondering his finding that 'motives of ethics and social responsibility are rarely claimed by executives other than those from social mission companies' when it comes to corporate greening, he contends that bracketing of personal morality in a work situation is not a new concept, having been

articulated by Weber (1947, in Crane, 2000) and Jackall (1988) among others. Oliver's account evidences multiple and conflicting expectations, and his dilemma as articulated is that he does not wish to be seen as 'careless' or as 'naïve'.

Drawing on the conduct of others as a way of constructing one's own identity has some resonance with Ezzell's (2009) ideas around defensive othering. Ezzell argues that individuals acknowledge and articulate a stereotype, but utilise it to present themselves as the exception to it, and that in so doing they can inadvertently legitimise the stereotype. Ezzell notes that this tactic in his own participants served not only to legitimize, but also to 'reinforce the stigmatizing power of the devalued identities they sought to deflect' (p125). There is a sense in which Oliver does just this with his account of the unethical behaviour of the 'careless' decision-makers who seem able to move on without any conscience when their behaviour and decisions have adversely impacted upon others. In articulating this stereotype of the uncaring, unethical business manager, Oliver arguably gives it credence, before drawing on it to present himself as the antithesis of it.

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) see identity work as one way that individuals within organisations manage the tensions that they experience when their own expectations of their roles do not match those of others. As such, they argue that identity work can act as a shield against the ambiguous environment in which individuals can find themselves. One tactic that they identify is that of the construction of an 'anti-identity', whereby individuals draw on available discourses related to their roles, and construct from them alternative often divergent identities. Sveningsson and Alvesson identify 'not-me' positions that individuals craft for themselves with recourse to these anti-identities. Here, Oliver appears to be drawing on wider discourses related to unethical behaviour in managers to construct an alternative identity that is positive rather than negative. Others are 'careless'. They crash about in the organisation, and are 'able to move on' in a way that he would 'struggle to do, yeah absolutely'. In this way, Oliver clearly articulates a more positive 'not-me' position.

In the course of his account, Oliver reflects often on the way that he believes he is, and conjects about the way that others may view him. The divergence between the two is clear. In doing so, Oliver draws on the idea that business managers are often seen by others as unethical, and he articulates dominant discourses related to these practitioners. So-called anti-business discourses, in which businesses are cast in the media as 'greedy and unethical' and business professionals presented as 'villains' (Brammer, 2003, p149)

underpin Oliver's account. Essentially, Oliver articulates the idea that subordinates always have an expectation of immoral behaviour of their senior managers. As finance director, for example, he suggests that he is seen as 'the keeper of the dark secrets'. These reflections suggest that he doubts whether, in his capacity as finance director, others could ever really view him as a moral individual. Creed et al's (2010) thesis related to role appropriation could be relevant to Oliver's experience as he faces up to the contradictions between his expectations of himself and the expectations that others may have of him, which he expresses in the discourses that he articulates. On Creed et al's account, individuals encountering differences between the way that they see themselves and the way that others perceive them undertake identity work to reconcile these inconsistencies. This identity work involves role claiming and role embodiment, whereby individuals may draw on culturally available resources such as role models or dominant discourses to challenge norms and attempt to initiate change. In presenting himself as a moral practitioner, using comparisons with others and 'not-me' positions, Oliver endeavours to secure for himself the identity of ethical business manager, despite the fact that, as his narratives indicate, he harbours doubts as to whether this identity is even available to him. His portrayal of himself as making considered decisions, and resisting exhortations to behave in a way he considers unethical, suggests that Oliver is attempting to embody the role of a morally good, as well as competent, senior manager.

The broad themes emerging from Oliver's account, of feeling the need to set the moral tone, of the tension between being seen by others as morally good and competent, and of the system of his organisation working against him, provoking him to articulate discourses of moral resistance, are explored now in more detail with recourse to the accounts of other participants.

6.3 Needing to set the moral tone

Participants talk often of a need to set the moral tone within their organisations. Like Oliver, this is often founded in an assertion that those at the top of the organisation ought to set the tone, and so it is something that they present as a central part of their roles as senior managers. Participants talk of the importance of doing the right thing, and of being seen to do the right thing, in order to set the right example to others. Thus, they present themselves as moral leaders of their businesses, with a duty to do the right thing, to set the right example, and to exert a strong moral influence on others within their businesses.

I just think it comes from the top, you know if the top is doing things that are dubious, it says it's acceptable to do things that are dubious so as a finance director for instance, I've always made sure that I'm whiter than white on the expense policy almost to the extreme because how can I hold other people in the organisation accountable for what they claim on their expenses if I'm not being whiter than white? (F5, Finance Director, Retail)

… certainly from my personal perspective, that will always be a guiding influence, you know, what is, what is the, the um honest and ethical thing to be doing in all circumstances and sometimes that's not always that clear um but I think then that will filter down (M14, Chief Executive, Telecommunications)

Much easier to start with four guys than it is with forty on the bottom layer or four hundred or four thousand you know if you get the four guys on the top doing the right things you know the next level down will see that and hopefully adopt that and hope be coached and supported in adopting that and then it goes down and down so much easier to start at the top (M5, Finance Director, Food)

Like Oliver, other participants distinguish between real and fake values in their reflections, and this distinction is often drawn to emphasise the positive impact and power of real or lived values. Participants often refer to a colleague whose approach has impacted upon their business and who has clearly also influenced their own approach and behaviour.

…in my last role I worked for somebody who was very keen that the standards by which the members of the team should expect, what they should expect from their team leaders was actually written down and we all signed up for it um and he was quite open to and receptive to people pointing out that he wasn't acting in that way and he would almost immediately hold his hands up and say 'That's a very fair challenge, what do you think we should do about it?' And it's quite unusual to see somebody who's firstly is actually going to list out this is the way we think that we should be treating people, make that public and then when they are caught out as it were say yeah we should be sticking to what was written down. (M12, Head of Operations, Banking)

The CEO was a management apprentice at fifteen so he really knows everybody and he genuinely knows so many people. He joined with them or he hired them or so it's from the top down they really do live values so these cornerstones have been

launched and they're not really built into HR reports or any hiring process that I've seen it's not been really well integrated into the HR but it's actually you can genuinely see it's working (M6, Head of Projects, Wholesaler)

... and seeing how he is and generous to people but firm, he's not going to be the CEO of the business without sort of knowing what he wants to do and he's very driven and very competitive so that's sort of my guide, it's like I'll see him on a regular basis and see how he is with other people and I think I'm fairly similar to him so it's not like I've got to remodel who I am but it's like right that's sort of someone who is a guide (M7, Finance Director, Global Resourcing)

Articulating admiration for their own moral exemplars leads participants to contemplate their own roles as moral exemplars to others. Setting the right example is presented as an integral part of their position as a senior manager and it is a responsibility that they seem keen to embrace.

Yeah I do see myself as being the person that sets the example um kind of always thought that's what they paid me for. (M1, Head of Real Estate Finance, Banking)

Yes, I mean I try and set a tone. So you know, depending on different sizes of team, but I... You know … I like to set the tone within my team, and within the broader division, about certain behaviours that we will tolerate, or there are some things that I won't tolerate. Obvious ones from bullying to any form of prejudice. So we will... We will... But we'll set that as a team. You know, we will have a series of things that says, no, this is not how you behave, and this is what we want from people. (M17, Divisional Director, Financial Services)

I think role model. Certainly members of the team who've left have repeatedly said, you're the best manager I've ever had. Now, I'm not listing these sorts of comments and asking, but they always come back and they will say, you're the most open and collaborative, I guess is the word, so it's lead by example, trust. (F9, Head of Intelligence, Media and Information)

Perhaps because they see themselves as role models for others, participants express the view that doing the right thing is vital – it is almost a fixation. It is as though they are presenting themselves as uniquely placed to set the moral tone. Their language communicates the significance that they attach to this responsibility, and so doing the right thing is 'important' (M9), 'everything' (F8) needs to be right, and they have a 'formal role'

(F4) to deliver. These participants are clearly at pains to present their moral responsibilities as a central part of their perceived roles.

> but yes, doing the right thing's important (M9, Commercial Director, Food and Beverages)

> The answer is no, there's never a time to be unethical full stop. (M11, Finance Director, Logistics Solutions)

> so I'm the voice of the colleague around that table to make sure that the right thing is done for our people indeed so that's, that's, I have that as a, almost like a formal role. Others also, to be fair, play that naturally just because of the nature of who they are, but I've got that formal piece to make sure that we're doing the right thing. (F4, HR Director, Banking)

> You know, it's like... you know, this is all... you know, I've got to do everything right, I've got to be fair. (F8, Managing Director, Agriculture)

According to their accounts, however, doing the right thing is not always straightforward. A recurrent theme in participants' narratives is the idea that it is easier to be ethical when business is good and conversely that, when business is bad, unethical behaviour is more likely to creep in. This is reminiscent of their presentation of themselves as under pressure to deliver against business objectives (see Chapter 4), insofar as it offers a contextualised view of their endeavours to be morally good practitioners. The complexity of their environment is presented by participants here, as they depict themselves as embedded in their organisations, working to be 'good' in two distinct senses – competent, and moral. Previous meta-analyses (e.g., Orlitzky et al, 2003) have identified a positive association between corporate performance and corporate responsibility. Participants in this study assert a related connection, arguing that moral conduct is easier when the business is doing well.

> You know, there are times when I've made a decision when I've had doubts, and I've probably erred against it although it might have been profitable. I've thought we don't need to make that decision, I've got some doubts about its integrity I've got some doubts about a relationship, I'm not sure I'm comfortable with it. We're going to make a call to back away. It's a difficult decision for the business, we're not going to proceed down that path that ultimately could have been profitable. But I do that knowing that I've got a fundamentally stable business (M14, Chief Executive,

Telecommunications)

…well you have to predicate this with the fact that the business has done well for the last ten years, the business has done very well, so there isn't the same pressures that you have you know when you're on the margins you know… you can do whatever you want to do really you within the sort of confines of your own sort of moral compass if you like, so um it definitely helps that you're making money (M5, Finance Director, Food)

The one thing I would say is that I think it's easier to be moral and ethical when you can afford to be (M7, Finance Director, Global Resourcing)

…it's the businesses in trouble that are most likely to be doing something wrong. (F8, Managing Director, Agriculture)

Participants often talk about having an eye on the future. Here, lofty ideals are expressed, and idealistic language employed, as they reflect on their 'values' (F4), their 'legacy' (M11), on 'wanting the world to be a better place' (F1) and on social consciousness. They seem to contemplate the possibility of themselves influencing the future, making a tangible difference and being remembered for it. Consideration of the likely legacy of their tenure is one factor that may contribute to their assertion, as discussed later in this chapter, that they work hard, in challenging circumstances, to assert their moral code within their businesses.

So I don't want to be doing anything that short term um, leave legacy rather than history (M11, Finance Director, Logistics Solutions)

I do feel for wanting the world to be a better place and being a parent you almost want it even more because you're going to leave at some point and your children are going to stay behind (F1, Legal Director, Global Logistics)

So um for me compliance is about meeting the legal and regulatory requirements. Ethics is about broader social conscious - you know… ethics is much broader than compliance and I think compliance can be quite dangerous in an ethical sense because it drives a tick box type mentality um and it's about avoiding penalties or such like, it doesn't change the value set of the individual and if you're a compliance driven organisation you're not addressing the broader values which is the more important piece. (F4, HR Director, Banking)

With their strong emphasis on the idea that moral tone is set at the top of the business, and an assertion that, as senior managers, they take this seriously and endeavour to offer the right example to others, the accounts of these participants offer in-depth reflections on their perceptions of their roles as moral leaders. The avowed importance of lived values, even in the face of circumstances that make this difficult, is evident. With recourse to clearly expressed ideals of moral leadership (Treviño et al, 2000; Sharer, 2013) and examples of the way that their own conduct measures up, there is a strong sense in which the participants are presenting themselves as equal to the task of moral leadership within their organisations. In contrast with the nostalgia of their reaffirming strategy (see Chapter 5) where they assert the simplicity of knowing right from wrong with recourse to childhood teachings, their narratives related to becoming and being moral managers evidence a tacit acknowledgement of the complexity of moral decisions within their organisational environments, and of how much is therefore at stake, both for themselves and for their organisations. This perhaps reflects the participants' shifting focus from the past to their present circumstances and even on into the future with their talk of legacy.

The presentation of the senior manager as a source of moral guidance within a business organisation is central to the accounts of many of these participants. Gill (2013) identifies a similar phenomenon in an investigation into the identity work of management consultants, observing that his participants utilised socially available discourses to construct for themselves an elite identity founded in 'distinctive and positive aspects' (p317) of their positions. Arguably the presentation of the senior manager as part of the organisation's moral leadership implicitly elevates the identity of a senior business manager to an elite status in a similar way. Gill asserts that while participants articulate commitment to the elite identity they construct, it also has the potential to provoke 'status-anxiety' (p306) in them, as they worry about whether they can maintain their positions, and this resonates with what we see as the participants in this study express the idea that it is easier to be moral when business is good, and as they reflect on the future and on their potential legacy for their businesses. Presenting potential barriers to their own moral behaviour and contemplating the idea that they need to leave a good moral legacy suggests that these participants worry about their ability to live up to the morally good identity they have constructed and are working to perform.

As noted above when considering Oliver's account, Creed et al's (2010) ideas on role claiming and embodiment also have some resonance here, as the participants depict the challenges they face, and articulate and then claim the role of moral leader as part of their responsibilities. Declarations from colleagues that they are 'the most open and collaborative' (F9) manager, for example, and their own assertions that they are focused on setting the moral tone for others, are cited to support their claims to these roles. Creed et al also observe the use of a variety of cultural resources, including role models, by individuals in the course of their role claiming identity work, and this is clearly evident in the accounts of these senior leaders as they reflect on specific individuals who have influenced their moral thinking and approaches. Here we see the discursive creation of the moral exemplar, as they detail the behaviour of their role models which exemplifies their moral credentials, and the efforts of the participants to appropriate this identity for themselves as they express the conviction that they absolutely must 'do everything right' (F8). Knights and Clarke (2014) propose the notion of aspirant identities – idealised identities to which individuals aspire, and which bring the promise of a superior future – which could also account for the participants' focus on the role of moral exemplar as well as on their own moral legacy. Knights and Clarke argue that the aspirant identity evidences the fragility and insecurity that individuals can experience in relation to their professional senses of self, which resonates somewhat with Gill's (2013) assertion that the elite identity provokes status anxiety. Here again, participant focus on the impact that their business environment has on their ability to take moral decisions – notably the assertion that it is easier to be moral when business is good – suggests that they see their moral senses of self as strongly linked to circumstances that are beyond their control.

6.4 The tension between being good and being competent

According to these accounts, setting the moral tone and leading by example are not without their challenges in business organisations with their many and varied influences and tensions. Participants reflect often on their ongoing endeavours to strike the right balance with regard to the ethical issues they encounter in their professional lives. It is important, they assert, to be seen as morally good but also to be seen as a competent professional. Like Oliver, their narrative accounts evidence anxiety that the two may be less compatible than they had imagined. Oliver articulates this concern as a worry that morality may be mistaken for naïvety. Others conject, for example, that being too open and honest could put them at a disadvantage versus less scrupulous competitors, and that although

being seen to be driven by customer outcomes is ethically commendable, it may also be seen as commercially disadvantageous.

> *[Reflecting on sales presentations] So I think you have to be very open and honest with all the relevant facts but you can't you know if you're selling, you can't you know talk too much about the negatives and not about the positives yeah? You'd never end up selling anything yeah? So there's again the continuum at what point is that fair open and honest and relevant and open enough that they're likely to buy a product that meets their expectation yeah? Whilst you know maintaining your competitiveness versus other products which may well be worse but they may be putting a much better spin on it yeah? So that's quite a difficult thing to actually get the right balance on actually. (M3, Managing Director, IT Systems)*

> *Everything is driven by customer outcomes, but it's still done, I see, with a pinch of regret. Or not to... how do we ensure that we're seen to be driven by customer outcomes, not necessarily we really are driven by customer outcomes. You know, it's that balance of doing what's right for the customer versus doing what's right for commercial reasons. How do you balance those two things? (M15, Managing Director, Marketing Services)*

> *... and it's getting that balance between how to do it, when to do it, and not to push people into behaving in the wrong way to try and get that done. And at different times I've seen it work well, and other times I've thought, actually it's just not right. And you're going to force the wrong behaviour if you're not careful. Or we're going to do things that we're going to tick a box for them. But actually, you know, what the customer or for the organisation, it's not ultimately the right thing to do. That would be my opinion. (M17, Divisional Director, Financial Services)*

This idea that they, and others like them, need to distinguish between what is right for themselves, and what is right for the business, comes up often in their accounts. While the tension between what is good for the business and what is good for the individual can be significant, there is also the added dimension of self-preservation. This resonates with their portrayal of the distinctive environment in which they do their moral identity work as examined in Chapter 4, but it bears repeating here. As two participants articulate it:

And I think that they then... they then have to do this big thing when they've got to decide, do I go along with something that I think's wrong to protect my career and my mortgage and my family and everything else, or do I stand up and say something about it? And I think that the majority of people are in the first camp, which is why it just snowballs until it gets so big that somebody does put their hand up and say, actually this has gone too far now.. (F8, Managing Director, Agriculture)

If you have a senior person who's doing things which are inappropriate, it can be extremely difficult to address those, because that person can influence, you know, whether you have a job in the next six months, and not only that, whether you have a job after you leave that job, moving forward. So you have to think about the consequences of anything that you might do. (M20, Finance Director, Media and Information)

Like Oliver, other participants assert that they can often feel under pressure from others within and outside of their organisations to behave in an immoral way.

And I can remember one of the bosses actually saying to me, 'you with your highfalutin [previous employer] this that and another. We're a small business and we need to make some money and we need to do it fast. We can't…' And [I] can remember sitting there going, [I] can't do this. (F6, Managing Director, Childcare)

…there was activity which was just plain illegal and wrong, and I was being asked to be a party to this activity and this, you know, it was not acceptable as far as, you know, my career and my professionalism and just my sense of what's right and wrong, and so... you know? (M20, Finance Director, Media and Information)

and that's something I actually probably touch on that quite often in my job actually where you know oh could you get me, could so and so my daughter come and do this or do you think we can give them a route onto the graduate scheme or anything like that and that I'm incredibly uncomfortable about and that… (F4, HR Director, Banking)

They depict themselves as being alert to the possibility of being drawn in and to the potential consequences. Here, participants clearly distance themselves from such behaviour with decisive declarations. Being 'straight down the line' (F5), means 'I won't have anything to do with it' (F5). In the face of misrepresentation by other organisations

and the temptation to respond with counter accusations, 'we've made a very conscious effort not to do that' (M14). This language sets the participants apart from those they are describing, and presents them as different. This presentation resonates with Oliver's assertion (above) that he is not like others within his organisation who behave in ways that he sees as immoral or unethical.

> *…the week after I joined he asked me a question and I thought, he's asking me how straight I am is how I interpreted it, and I basically said to him, look, I am straight down the line. If you've got anything that you want to do that's not quite kosher, you know, even if it's to do with putting your personal expenses through the company, I said, don't do it through (this company) … I'm just like, I won't have anything to do with it. (F5, Finance Director, Retail)*

> *[Talking about responding robustly to requests from customers to participate in under-invoicing and bribery] Because you get to be known as somebody who's, you know, bendable, and the moment that you're known as somebody that's bendable, it will be non-stop, and therefore you don't do it once, and that's really the way that, you know, I see... I saw my role there' (M16, Business Development Director, Manufacturing)*

> *when they misrepresent what [my company] is, and I think that naturally the inclination is to try and not do the same but to sort of counter that in some way and I think I and we've made a very conscious effort not to try and do that because um we may you know get it wrong you know and then we're as almost as bad as them in a sense (M14, Chief Executive, Telecommunications)*

In the face of these pressures, most participants present themselves as decisive in their rejection of unethical behaviour. This is often done with recourse to uncomplicated and unequivocal declarations, which in many ways contradict the complexity of the situations, decisions and tensions that they articulate throughout their accounts. There is no flexibility when guiding colleagues – 'I'm not going to grease the wheels. And you can't either' (M7). Faced with a dubious request from customers 'we just instantly say no' (M9), and there's 'absolutely no place' (M3) for unethical behaviour in subordinates and team members.

> *it's like, OK we have no flexibility on this [requests from business associates overseas for bribes] and we won't entertain it so if you come across it and you say well I need to give this person a bribe to get paid I'm not interested. I'll take legal*

action against them and I'll do what I need to do but I'm not going to grease the wheels. And you can't either. If nothing else you will be fired straight away. So it's that sort of message that will come across (M7, Finance Director, Global Resourcing)

[Talking about requests for under-invoicing from customers] Well, we never... we never entertain it, so it's a very straight... it's a very straight conversation straightaway. It's just... we just say, point blank, no, we're not going to do that, we will never do it, we... and we're just very abrupt about it, really. It just... we just brush it straight off and bat it straight back …we just instantly just say no, it's not possible, and we don't do that. (M9, Commercial Director, Food and Beverages)

[Discussing the guidance he gives to his sales force] Well I make it very clear that you know the reputation of the company is paramount, is paramount, that I only want to run a business that is very well respected in the market place that there's absolutely no place in [my company] for anybody who wants to behave inappropriately, dishonestly… (M3, Managing Director, IT Systems)

Decision-making can be challenging at the best of times, and according to their accounts, when ethical issues are involved, the participants feel that the stakes seem often to be higher, and the consequences more enduring. Participants express disquiet about the connection between being good in a moral sense and being good in a business performance sense. They articulate in particular the suspicion that the two may not be as compatible as they had perhaps anticipated, and that being seen as morally good may be considered detrimental to their business performance and may thus harm their chances of being seen as competent business managers. Their accounts position themselves as responsible for business objectives as well as for moral leadership, which perhaps reflects once again the aspirant identity (Knights and Clarke, 2014) of a successful moral exemplar combined with a commercially astute business manager. They contend that striking the right balance, and delivering against business objectives without tipping over into illegal or immoral behaviour, is critical to their success as a senior business leader.

The way that participants reflect on being seen as morally good and commercially competent, and their characterisation of their endeavours to find a balance between the two, is in many ways key to understanding their moral identity work. This is not about good versus evil in a philosophical sense, but about the tensions that emerge from these accounts as the individuals grapple with the practical implications and manifestations of

their inner moral senses of self. Charmaz (1995) argues that the way that individuals wish to define themselves can be driven by the circumstances they find themselves in. Their perceived commitments to, and responsibilities towards, others can affect the identity goals that individuals establish for themselves. These identity goals are essentially preferred identities that people 'assume, desire, hope or plan for' (p659). Their depiction of themselves in their narratives as striving to be both morally good and commercially competent could be conceptualised as the participants crafting, and working towards embodying, their preferred identities. Their articulation of the potential incompatibility of the two central elements of this preferred identity evidences the uncertainty and perhaps even vulnerability that they experience as they contemplate it. Clarke et al (2009) argue that 'managers' identity work may incorporate contrasting positions or antagonisms' (p324) and that this can contribute to them incorporating apparently incompatible ideas into their senses of self. They opine that this may be, in part, due to the contradictory environment in which business managers can find themselves, and the way that these participants depict themselves as caught in challenging circumstances resonates with that contention. Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) thesis that discourses derived from organisational controls and processes can exert pressure on individuals to be a certain way also supports this conceptualisation of the environment of a business organisation as complex, and as highly influential in the individual identity work of employees.

Down and Reveley's (2009) work on dramaturgical interaction and self-narration also has relevance here. These authors contend that individuals perform ideal identities in face to face interactions and confirm them in self narration as part of ongoing identity construction. Successful performances are thus re-absorbed as part of their identity work into their narrated self-identity. So, in recounting instances when they have successfully performed the role of moral leader, the participants are arguably verifying and confirming their ideal identity for themselves as well as for the researcher and for others with whom they interact. This idea helps to explain why participants may choose to present themselves as responding in simple and unequivocal ways in the face of unethical conduct or of the threat of it. In reality, the issues are not straightforward and the negotiation of the role of moral leader is fraught with challenges, but presenting the role in a simple and straightforward way is potentially as much a performance for themselves as for others, and an integral part of their moral identity construction. Ybema et al (2009) also argue for the role of staged performances in identity construction, and assert the importance of self-other talk in this process. This involves individuals drawing comparisons between

themselves and others, often with recourse to 'oversimplification and distortion in definitions of sameness and otherness' (p307) which work to amplify the differences. This is arguably what these participants do as they present a picture of ethically dubious others exhorting them to abandon their moral principles in the interests of business success.

6.5 The system as working against me

Participants describe their struggle to ensure ethical conduct in themselves and in others as a fundamentally individual mission. Their adversary in this quest seems often to be characterised not as a particular person or group of people, however, but rather as a system, way of life or set of norms that their organisation and its environment represents for them. This presentation of themselves, often alone, struggling with the vagaries of a structure which continually works against them invokes the image of a moral leader endeavouring to assert their personal notion of the good in the face of divergent and embedded ideas and practices. Participants voice the belief that it is not easy to challenge unethical behaviour within their organisations and that it can be hard to rebel against it. The organisations themselves are presented as challenging environments within which to operate. Participants present the organisation as an entity that works systematically against them.

> *[Talking about how managers feel they are up against a system they cannot change] That sense of… they don't have a sense of they can really change things in the big picture so and they also have very you know legitimate needs to survive so I think it's also quite clear in organisations if you really try to make big changes to culture that there is potentially a very heavy cost. To yourself, to your job because you are going to be challenging pretty tricky stuff and nobody's going to thank you for it and often there's a kind of shoot the messenger problem um which I myself have experienced (F3, Head of Organisational Development, Property Management)*

> *Well, I don't know. One... so a particular... so one, sort of, where this feedback said, oh, you know, you need to learn how to operate in the shark pool, and I was like, what on earth is that, but actually recognising that there is such a thing that people consider to be the shark pool and being able to, you know, sort of, identify what that might look like and then how you're going to deal with it was actually quite a useful process, really, (F7, Managing Director, Media and Information)*

… acknowledging it's an environment you've got to operate in that doesn't necessarily sit well with you, but acknowledge that and manage yourself through it I think is something that you learn over time as well. (F7, Managing Director, Media and Information)

The system is depicted as exerting its influence on the individuals that operate within it. Whistle-blowers are presented as 'vilified' (F8), those in charge are often portrayed as powerful and likely to inflict consequences, and this makes rebelling difficult to contemplate. Participants argue that it is not easy to go against the grain, or norms of expected behaviour, and that this makes their efforts towards moral resistance harder. They point to the need to be 'brave' (M17) , that taking action may be 'damaging' (M20) and that rebels need to accept that pointing out unethical behaviour may be 'career limiting' (M15).

...you read in the press that the whistle-blowers ... are vilified and end up leaving and things. (F8, Managing Director, Agriculture)

Well, you're not powerless, it's just that, you know, it would be probably more damaging to yourself to take the action which you think possibly could be appropriate than the consequences to the person... to the wrongdoer, and, you know, it's like everything, you have to weigh up these things and say, you know, do I really want to damage myself and my ability to earn for... and I'm not... you know, I'm not going to get any benefit from being a whistle-blower here, so why would I do it? It makes no sense. (M20, Finance Director, Media and Information)

To actually stand up as someone trying to build a career and say, no, this is wrong. You know, that's a very career-limiting statement. So that meeting where they're talking about PPI, you know, I'm sitting there going, I don't know how we can justify, this is not... you can't justify, it's immoral, you know? It's immoral. But, you know, actually it's not my decision, it's yours. Am I going to be the one who stands up and says, why don't we just not take so much profit? You know? (M15, Managing Director, Marketing Services)

You have to be a brave man to be able to ride out a business that is saying no, no, I'm not competing because the market's gone bad. I'm not going to push my credit criteria, I'm not going to push my price. And so I think a lot of the behaviours start with the definition of success within the business which is we've got to be seen to be

> *growing because otherwise we're not growing, if we're not growing we will be*
> *deemed a business going nowhere, our share price will fall off with the pressure and*
> *I'll get sacked. (M17, Divisional Director, Financial Services)*

Pushing back against the system is thus portrayed as unrewarding and difficult, and it is something that participants assert many others decline to do. In their accounts, participants often describe others who they present as non-challengers, who won't stand up to unethical behaviour in a way that they themselves will. One participant, Head of Organisational Development in a Property Management organisation, offers a commentary on these 'others' who, she asserts, choose not to resist the system.

> *I think people tell themselves two things, they tell themselves 'I can't really change*
> *it, so it doesn't matter what I do' […] er they tell themselves 'what I had to do*
> *conforms to the rules and that not step outside the rules, and then I can't be*
> *blamed' […] There's so much to be gained from shrugging and going through the*
> *motions. […] everyone in the organisation thinks someone else has got the power*
> *(laughs) to change it which means that in some ways if you don't believe you've got*
> *the power to do it you often don't make the steps, so you may not take that really*
> *step into moral dilemmas because your sense of yourself I can't do very much here.*
> *(F3, Head of Organisational Development, Property Management)*

Participants also talk of feeling that they don't have the power to challenge things, but with the focus on processes, decisions or the organisation itself rather than on particular colleagues. These participants describe their feelings of powerlessness in the face of the system, and not of specific other individuals. So, a directive comes not from a business owner but from 'head office' (M6), and people feel that they cannot challenge 'the process' (M12). This characterisation of the organisation chimes with Jackall's (1988) account of managers who, he argues, are required to do no more or less than to conform with the requirements of their organisations' bureaucracies. Yet Jackall asserts that bureaucratic power 'is embodied in [managers'] personal relationships with their bosses' (p18) whereas the participants in this study talk not of individuals but of systems and practices. This kind of language is effective in erasing people from the organisation and in constructing it instead as a collection of places and processes. This contributes to the feeling that they are working not against specific others, but against a powerful and pervasive force.

> *but I have seen them where we've walked away and everybody went yep,*
> *everybody's view was that they couldn't really challenge the process therefore*

everything had been looked at um and if that's the decision of the people at the top then you get on with it. (M12, Head of Operations, Banking)

So there have been situations where I've been very uncomfortable with seeing certain activity but felt absolutely powerless to do anything about it. (M20, Finance Director, Media and Information)

Um you get the sort of dictat from [head office] you've got to do this and they are very much more removed from the associates whereas you get down close to the management side seeing the persons, actually letting them go it's much harder and then it's a decision you didn't agree with at all and no way of changing this (M6, Head of Projects, Wholesaler)

In the face of such pressure, participants reflect on their options. Some argue that the only alternative to taking on the system, and pushing back against it, is to leave the organisation.

The only thing you can do is basically, you know, start looking for that job outside or... you know? If it's as serious as thinking, I really can't afford to be associated with this, then you only... the only course of action you've got is actually to leave the company. (M20, Finance Director, Media and Information)

I suppose it's easy for me to say it because if it came down to it I could just walk away from my job, right, because I've got enough confidence to know that you know we've got enough money to keep going and then I could find another job (F5, Finance Director, Retail)

The only place I've seen where behaviours really concern me and I've left and written in my letter as well to say that, you know, I don't want to be a part of... it's very clear (F9, Head of Intelligence, Media and Information)

But participants also often offer examples of themselves resisting unethical conduct. This is sometimes done with recourse to comparisons with others who would not, or do not, take the same approach, but often participants depict themselves as facing up to others and expressing their views in order to bring about change.

[On being asked their opinion on a superior's policy decision]Now a [different person] would've probably tempered their response on the basis that this person for the next four years in a way is influential in my career and whether or not I would

get the [promotion] role. And a lot of them do stand up, but some of them do feel that it's considerable pressure. And I was able to just go back, and I told him what I thought, which wasn't his view. I didn't agree with his view at all, and actually he respected it. (F10, Associate Director, Cyber Security)

One that came up was over health and safety in the warehouse because I felt that we were not taking it seriously and obviously as directors we have to and um I sat him down and told him that I didn't think we were doing what we needed to do and told him the kinds of things we should be doing. He tried to argue against it … and then in the end I just said I'm sorry [name of boss], what we're doing's not acceptable. I don't care what you say, we're directors, we have a moral let alone a legal responsibility to do it and to say that you're not going to do it is no longer acceptable for this business. (F5, Finance Director, Retail)

[Talking about confronting a male peer's chauvinistic behaviour towards a female subordinate] And, you know, I basically told him straight and face to face but privately that that was the case and that he needed to start respecting her … (M16, Business Development Director, Manufacturing)

There is a palpable sense in which participants portray themselves as pursuing an ongoing moral campaign within their businesses. They depict themselves as pushing the moral agenda, often alone, resisting the negative forces around them, and striving to ensure that the right thing is done. In many ways this reinforces the idea, as considered earlier, that they see their resistance to the system and the pressure it exerts to do unethical things as an integral part of their role within their organisations.

I'm here to make it, things better and improve things and have that, ensure that moral compass exists…. I'm the voice of that across the division. (F4, HR Director, Banking)

[Relating a conversation with one of the business owners] And I said 'And how lovely for you that you don't have to consider what might go wrong because you know I'm doing it for you, so all you need to worry about is growing the business because I am looking at all the things that might go wrong and making sure we're protected'. And he went 'Mmmm' (F5, Finance Director, Retail)

[Talking about health and safety breaches] Yeah I mean it was me and the Ops director were a little pocket of 'this is the right thing to do' I suppose, her more than

> *me cos she knew what was going on, you know she came into the business from another factory at Christmas time and was just appalled you know at the short cuts that were being taken left right and centre....whenever she told me what had happened I was like, bloody hell that's not right, is it? So she'd say will you support me and, yes of course I will you know. (M2, Marketing Director, Manufacturing)*

As with Oliver's account, the narratives of these participants offer reflections about themselves in relation to the system that they contend they work within. A central theme is that the organisation somehow acts to prevent them from doing what they think is right. They also present themselves as working to resist it and its demands, by avoiding being sucked into unethical behaviour, and ultimately by taking on the role of moral agents of change. Although they claim this role, however, their accounts often lack specific, detailed examples of actions that they have taken to resist unethical conduct, and outcomes that have ensued. Their narratives thus often present them as engaged in general moral resistance within their organisations.

Central to this presentation of themselves is their characterisation of their organisation as a system that works against them. The system is constructed in their accounts as a purposeful, intransigent and often intimidating entity – it is effectively endowed with its own distinctive identity and character. Some participant narratives even credit the system with agency, implying as they do that it exerts influence and wields power. They sometimes articulate the idea that they feel powerless in the face of the system, and unable to challenge it or to change things. Some even contend that leaving the organisation is the only decisive way to address these feelings. Given that many of the same participants go on to claim the role of a moral practitioner who actively resists the system, however, a plausible explanation for this presentation of the system as provoking feelings of powerlessness in them is that they are using it to set the scene for what will follow. Goffman (1959) acknowledges the importance of setting for the performance of self, arguing that some performers 'cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place, and must terminate their performance when they leave it' (p33). While Goffman undoubtedly had a physical location in mind, the same could surely apply to the discursive construction of identity, insofar as individuals need to provide a setting for their performances in order to bring them to life, to make them real, and perhaps to ensure that they are convincing.

Although the system is often presented in their narratives as a collection of processes and places rather than of people, and their resistance is depicted as being focused on this often nebulous entity rather than on other individuals, participant accounts do include some focus on other individuals. However, this is almost exclusively as a way of demonstrating, with recourse to descriptions of others, what they themselves claim they are not. So, as noted earlier, the thesis of Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) related to 'not-me' positions resonates, as does Ybema et al's (2009) notion of self-other talk and Ezzel's (2009) work around defensive othering. This 'othering' tactic is particularly evident in the way that participants draw on descriptions of colleagues giving up on resisting the system in a way that they themselves assert they do not. In line with Ybema et al's thesis, participants resort to over-simplification in presenting the others and themselves, and this is effective in allowing them to construct themselves as proactively battling while others claim that they 'can't really change' (F3) things and so are depicted as electing to 'shrug and go through the motions' (F3).

Collinson (2003) identifies the stratagem of resistance to help elucidate the process of identity construction in an organisational context, and argues that 'by engaging in resistance, employees often begin to construct an alternate, more positive sense of self to that provided, prescribed or circumscribed by the organisation' (p539). Collinson points to tactics such as whistleblowing, indifference and foot-dragging, in which he contends individuals engage to express dissatisfaction with organisational processes. Articulating discourses of moral resistance as depicted by these participants could also be conceptualised as a form of resistance, in which managers engage to push back against a system that they perceive to be working against them. In addition to expressing frustration and discontent with the system, their depiction of themselves as resisting it allows them to appropriate elements of the ideal identity of moral manager into their own senses of self, which perhaps helps them to cope with the insecurities that their situation provokes as well as to cast themselves as agents in control of their own destiny. On this account, the articulation of resistance represents the rejection of organisationally-imposed identities, and the embracing of a preferred identity.

6.6. Discussion

Their narratives offer insight into their moral identity work in practice, as participants reflect on what it is to become and to be a moral manager. In the face of competing claims from a variety of stakeholders, and in the context of the systems of their organisations,

their accounts offer a view of themselves as constantly weighing up the right choices, endeavouring to set the right tone, and resisting pressure to behave in an unethical or immoral way. Articulating discourses of moral defiance is clearly one element of the performance of the moral manager identity. Yet, as senior managers, these participants are likely to be complicit in upholding and perpetuating the systems of their organisations, and this perhaps underlies the tensions evident as they grapple with being both competent and morally good.

Becoming and being a moral manager involves three main tactics. Firstly, participants express the conviction that moral leadership ought to come from the top of the organisation and that they themselves therefore have a responsibility to set the tone and the right example. Secondly, they talk in some detail about the tension between being seen as good and being seen as competent, and the potential interaction of the two, which they assert means that if they are seen as too morally good, they risk damaging their credibility as competent business leaders. This distinction seems to provoke them to express anxiety in their narratives about finding the right balance. Finally, participants present themselves as champions of moral behaviour within their businesses. They do this with recourse to a characterisation of their organisations as systems that they are constantly required to resist, and to push back against.

6.6.1 Identifying and appropriating the elite role of moral leader

In asserting the need for moral guidance to come from those at the top of their businesses, and then presenting themselves as both responsible for and equal to this task, participants are arguably identifying and appropriating roles for themselves (Creed et al, 2010). As they do this, and in line with Gill's (2013) work, there is a sense in which the participants are constructing an exclusive or elite identity of moral exemplar, one which may also provoke anxiety in them as they articulate worries about their ability to live up to such an ideal. This is perhaps why they counter their apparent role claiming with the observation that being morally good is easier when business is good. In so doing, they immediately situate their identity work in the specific surroundings in which they find themselves, and present themselves thus as embedded within their organisations. On Watson's (2008) account, role claiming can involve individuals appropriating elements of a range of socially available identities as they seek to manage the expectations of others and their own expectations of themselves. It is, he asserts, a complex process which draws on external cultural phenomena to craft a coherent sense of self. It is plausible, then, that the construction of

the elite identity of moral exemplar, coupled with the presentation of the impact of circumstances on their ability to embody it, are used by these individuals as they endeavour to depict themselves as moral agents. The 'not-me' positions they adopt with recourse to descriptions of the behaviour of others (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), and the defensive othering (Ezzell, 2009) serve to bolster this role appropriation.

6.6.2 Constructing the aspirant identity of moral and competent manager

Reflecting on the tension between being a morally good leader and being a competent business practitioner, participants express unease about the extent to which these two ideals are truly compatible. Expressing an aspirant or ideal identity (Knights and Clarke, 2014), in this case that of the professional and competent moral leader, participants then go on to assert the difficulty they experience as they try to be both. Thus, they talk about feeling under pressure to do the right thing for the business when it may involve doing something that does not feel right for them as individuals, and this in turn provokes them to contend that failing to do what the business requires may threaten their reputations and even their jobs. These reflections evidence the precariousness they feel about their situations, and perhaps the fragility of their senses of self within the unique context of their businesses (Clarke et al, 2009). Within this context, having contemplated the difficulty of being seen as both morally good and commercially competent, participants' unequivocal pronouncements rejecting unethical behaviour can be seen for what they are, which is essentially a performance through which they present themselves as the embodiment of this ideal identity. Thus in performing the role of decisive manager with a clear moral code, they seek to demonstrate that they possess the strength of character and skill necessary to be both good and competent.

6.6.3 Presenting themselves as moral managers, successfully resisting the system of their organisations

The depiction of their organisation as a system working against them and which must be resisted is central to the accounts of these managers. As noted earlier, this seems to be contingent upon a view of the system as almost humanised, with a character and identity of its own. Arguably, their narrative accounts position the system in the same way that individuals position each other in identity work, and this is evidenced by the way that they talk about the system, as they focus on the business, the process, the rules, head office – in fact on anything except other people. This clearly says something about the way that these individuals construct their positions and their environment. Arguably, the characterisation

of the system in this way plays into their performance of the ideal moral manager, struggling valiantly against indistinct and powerful forces. It is also potentially a way of neatly skirting around the undeniable and uncomfortable notion that they are themselves, as senior managers, inextricably associated with, and part of, the system they claim to resist. This resonates with Costas and Fleming's (2009) thesis around the construction of identities that individuals see as more 'authentic' and that allow them to distance themselves from identities that are imposed in the workplace. It is also possible that their construction of the organisation and its norms in this way helps to shape and perpetuate organisation-level discourses about the system (Cunliffe, 2001), and that this somehow works to legitimise their own positions, roles and actions.

The language used by participants as they describe their resistance tends to be quite impassioned – they talk of being sacked or vilified, of being damaged and of risking and receiving consequences. The impression given is of them knowingly putting themselves in harm's way in pursuit of a worthy aim. Their depictions of others who cannot, or will not, engage in the resistance work to bolster these presentations of themselves as morally good managers. As noted earlier, Ezzel's (2009) work on defensive othering has resonance here, as individuals seek to present themselves as different to a stereotypical other. Ybema et al (2009) note the tendency by individuals engaged in self-other identity work to over-simplify and distort when considering differences and similarities, and they argue that, as Ainsworth and Hardy (2004) contend, this can result in hierarchical positioning, where the 'other' is presented 'not merely as different, but also as less acceptable, less respectable and, sometimes, less powerful' (p157). On this account, participants' presentations of their circumstances as caught between the levels, experiencing pressure from those above them in the hierarchy (see Chapter 4) can also be seen as a way of distancing themselves from the stereotypical notion of the unethical and uncaring business manager.

6.7 Conclusions

All of this reinforces the participants' moral identity work as they strive to present themselves as living up to heroic discourses of leadership (Cohen, 2013) and as equal to the demands of the aspirant identity of the moral and competent manager. Their insistence that they need to set the moral tone, and their depictions of their organisations as systems to be challenged can thus be seen as a way of setting the scene for their narrated accounts of resistance, accounts which can, in this context, clearly be conceptualised as identity

performances (Goffman, 1959). In this way, participants' narratives give insight into the practical implications of moral identity work in senior business managers.

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Chapter 7

Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

This study offers insight into the moral identity work of senior business managers by adopting an identity work lens to examine their narrative accounts of their workplace experiences. This approach differs considerably from that adopted in previous moral identity research, and this has allowed the study to deliver knowledge about the way that these individuals discursively construct and perform their moral senses of self which would not have been possible without the adoption of this perspective. Specifically, the research uncovers the discursive devices, strategies and tactics that participants use as they set the scene for their moral identity work, and the resources that they draw on as they present and perform their moral identities.

The findings evidence the ways in which senior managers construct their own positions as unexpectedly lonely, where they contend that they are held responsible for decisions by those above and below them in the hierarchy, and where they experience an intense feeling of being morally responsible as leaders. They present themselves as deeply affected by external discourses that cast them as morally deficient. They use two main strategies to restore their moral identities, apparently performing for themselves as well as for the interviewer. The first of these strategies is to look back to childhood experiences, and to draw on the notion of an inner moral core to present themselves as essentially moral persons. The second strategy is to talk about how, in their work, they try to show moral leadership and, at times, resistance to morally questionable demands imposed by the systems of their organizations. The study demonstrates the way that managers draw on nostalgic memories of a (morally simpler) past, and on discourses of responsibility and resistance within organizations, to shore up their construction of themselves as moral individuals and moral managers. These attempts to construct themselves as often heroic moral figures in the face of difficult situations and challenges seem to be at least partially successful in reconciling many of the participants to the sometimes morally ambiguous role they feel they have to play in their positions. Yet, they also raise questions about the ability of individuals to be moral within business systems and organizations that pressure them to be otherwise. The findings also beg the question of whether these individual attempts to

construct themselves as moral practitioners may ultimately facilitate a more morally questionable system.

7.2 Background and research questions

This research adopts a narrative analysis method to contribute to the broad area of business ethics scholarship through an investigation of the moral identity of individual business practitioners. Against a backdrop of sustained scrutiny of businesses often driven by media coverage of business scandals (Barkemeyer et al, 2010; Elsass et al, 2016), it elucidates the moral perceptions of individual business practitioners by exploring the ways in which they discursively develop and sustain their own moral senses of self, and the ways that they perceive and depict influences from within and outside their organisations in doing so.

Exploring the individual moral identity work of senior business managers offers a new way of thinking about the broad topic of business ethics. Research that brings together the established concept of moral identity and the constructionist frame that predominates in the identity work literature allows questions to be asked about moral identity in this group which have not been considered before. This research therefore adopts a social constructionist perspective to pose the following questions:

- What do their narrative accounts of workplace experiences tell us about the ways in which senior managers in UK for-profit businesses discursively construct and perform their moral identities?
- How do senior managers draw on internal and external resources as they construct and perform their moral identities?
- How does the way that senior managers experience and depict organisational contextual factors, such as their position in the hierarchy, shape their discursive construction of their moral senses of self?

This chapter continues with a summary and discussion of the findings. It then outlines the contributions to knowledge made by this study, before considering limitations of the research and reflecting on connections to wider debates.

7.3. Summary and discussion of findings

This research reveals the way that participants experience the environments in which they do their identity work, and the identity work strategies that they adopt as they develop their moral senses of self. The study offers three broad findings. Firstly, it finds that

participants describe the circumstances in which they do their moral identity work as challenging, and imbued with expectation from those around them within the hierarchy. This is termed *the loneliness of seniority*. Secondly, it finds that they strongly *reaffirm a moral core* to their identities as a response to dominant discourses casting them as unethical, with recourse to nostalgia for the simplicity of childhood moral dilemmas. Thirdly, it finds that they endeavour *to become and to be moral managers* by asserting the need to set the right example, and by articulating discourses of moral resistance against their organisations, which they characterise as systems that threaten to thwart their attempts to behave in an ethical way. They present themselves thus as striving to be both commercially competent and morally good.

7.3.1 The loneliness of seniority

Participants present themselves as alone and under pressure. This depiction is an overarching theme which pervades, and appears to enable, their moral identity work. They argue that they feel pressure to deliver against business objectives, that they feel they carry the expectations of many others, and that they find themselves caught in a lonely place between those above and below them in the hierarchy. They express surprise at finding themselves in this estranged situation, sometimes articulating the feeling that the lived experience of being a senior manager is different from the way that they had anticipated it would be. Similar narratives have been observed in middle managers (Thomas and Linstead, 2002) and although scholars have speculated that they apply also to senior managers (Sims, 2003), they have not previously been noted in this group.

Participants articulate heroic discourses (Cohen, 2013) about managers being capable of making the difficult decisions necessary to ensure business success, but with the best interests of all stakeholders at heart. They depict themselves as absorbing the pressure they feel from above, and acting as defenders of those they manage, which resonates with discourses of good leadership (e.g., Sutton's, (2010) notion of the boss as a human shield) as well as with heroic manager discourses. The importance of being seen as a moral leader is clear from the accounts of this group of participants, and depicting themselves as protectors helps them to construct a morally good identity. The presentation of themselves as defenders can be conceptualised as straightforward role claiming identity work (e.g., Creed et al, 2010), but the defender role can also be viewed as a relational bridge between actors who draw on it to make meaning (Simpson and Carroll, 2008). Participants' presentation of themselves as in control and capable of dealing with the pressures and

expectations of the stakeholders around them within their organisations also seems to draw on heroic manager discourses. This identity work resonates with the notion advanced by scholars including Hay (2014) and Ibarra (1999), that the adoption of a façade (in this case of being in control) can be provoked in individuals by the anxiety that they may not be able to live up to heroic manager ideals. This presentation of the self can also be understood with recourse to Watson's (2008) contention that individuals can struggle to develop a coherent sense of self in the face of the social identities that are available to them. Participants' depictions of contextual factors, specifically the environment that they inhabit in their professional lives, arguably shape much of their moral identity work, since the presentation of challenging and pressurised circumstances permits them to construct for themselves identities as defenders of others, as competent practitioners who are in control, and as morally good managers. Their level of seniority is key to the way that these managers experience moral issues. Their assertions that they feel alone, estranged and responsible for everything are directly attributed by participants to their positions in the hierarchy. They express the weight of expectation as coming from those beneath them in the hierarchy. They articulate discourses of protection with the same subordinates in mind. They hold those above them in the hierarchy responsible for the pressure that they describe so vividly. Some even look to peers to find examples of 'others' with whom to compare themselves through 'not-me' positioning. All of this serves to emphasise the relational nature of moral identity work, and demonstrates that hierarchical position is a key feature that shapes the construction of these individuals' moral senses of self.

7.3.2 Reaffirming themselves as essentially moral

Participants reject dominant discourses that cast them as unethical, and present themselves as moral at heart with recourse to three main tactics – asserting that they were brought up to be moral, declaring that they experience physical reactions which make it difficult for them to tolerate unethical behaviour in others, and contending that they *just know right from wrong* because of something within them. Participants' rejection of dominant stereotypes of their professions can be conceptualised as an attempt to manage the stigma that they perceive these discourses may inflict upon them. They often draw on the discourses themselves to present themselves as different and this notion of 'otherness' is prominent in many accounts. Thus participants articulate what they are not (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) and position themselves versus others, who they invariably characterise as less morally good, and as more able to tolerate unethical behaviour (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; Ybema et al, 2009). In this way, dominant discourses of

unethical business conduct are articulated, woven into their narratives and used as a counterpoint to their assertions of their own behaviour, and descriptions of unethical 'others' are used as a device to shore up their own moral identities.

There is a strong focus in their accounts on early memories of being taught right from wrong, in which participants evoke memories of childhood days, characterising the difference between right and wrong as simple, straightforward and, generally, binary. These memories of their childhoods, and of the people who were significant in their lives and who influenced them, are invoked and offered to corroborate their assertions of a moral core. It is as though, in returning to the past, they feel that they are able to provide (to themselves as much as to the interviewer) irrefutable evidence that they are good at heart because, back then, the difference between right and wrong was clearly articulated, and policed, by others. The past that they invoke appears to be a time when they know for sure that they were morally good, and articulating these memories thus seems to work to produce a stabilizing effect on their current moral senses of self. This focus on childhood indicates that nostalgia has a central part to play in shaping moral identity work in these individuals (Bardon et al, 2015) but that, in the case of moral identities, nostalgia for an earlier time than previously observed seems to be significant. There is also a tendency to articulate extremes of good and bad when they are reflecting on right and wrong, which supports the notion of nostalgia for simpler times. Here it might be noted that, from the perspective of Kohlberg's (1968) psychological theory of moral development, the participants' narratives might be seen to remain at a *conventional* stage typical of adolescents, with a tendency to rely on adherence to normative rules rather than one's own personal perspective, as would be expected at the next *post-conventional* stage. This does not suggest that participants are objectively sitting at this stage or any other in their moral development, according to Kohlberg's model, but that they are using a conventional view of morality in order to construct their narratives and present their moral identity here. Participants' insistence that they simply know right from wrong rests on an essential notion of identity as fixed and stable, which has been observed in participants in other identity work studies (e.g., Watson, 2009). The observed tendency of these participants to articulate a fixed and stable moral inner self in response to the threat of stigma implicit in the discourses that they articulate represents a new tactic, termed here *reaffirming themselves as essentially moral*, that individuals utilise when seeking to manage moral stigma. Participants use this assertion of a fixed moral core traceable back to their childhoods, to deflect the moral taint of dominant discourses related to unethical

corporate behaviour. Asserting that they are moral at heart is their way of avoiding the taint of the dominant discourses. This builds on previous work on the management of moral stigma which has identified normalization tactics (Toyoki and Brown, 2014), and dis-identification (Costas and Fleming, 2009).

7.3.3 Becoming and being moral managers

Participants depict themselves as engaged in a moral campaign within their organisations by asserting a need to set the moral tone for others, by avowing a tension between being morally good and being competent, and by presenting their organisations as systems that work against their endeavours to be morally good practitioners. Asserting the need to be seen as a source of moral guidance can be seen here as a way of constructing an identity that is founded in 'distinctive and positive' aspects of their roles (Gill, 2013, p317). Nevertheless, participants give voice to concerns that they may not be able to live up to this aspirant identity (Knights and Clarke, 2014) revealing the sense of fragility and insecurity that can pervade their moral identity work. Discourses of heroic leadership recur many times throughout participants' accounts as they endeavour to articulate what it is to be a good and competent business manager. The notions they invoke can be seen as socially accepted ideas of successful management and leadership, such as making sound decisions, and remaining calm and detached in the face of pressure. To these, participants add moral dimensions perhaps less often articulated, including doing the morally right thing, and protecting others. Participants thus draw on a range of heroic and socially available discourses to construct the aspirant identity of the ideal business manager who is both capable and morally good.

Participants also characterise a subtle but distinct tension between being morally good and being a competent professional and, here again, they give voice to worries that the two may not be entirely compatible. Exemplifying the pressure they feel from colleagues to behave in an unethical way allows the participants to articulate the differences between themselves and these 'others' which serves to bolster their own moral senses of self, particularly when the differences are amplified through oversimplifications (Ybema et al, 2009). Presenting themselves as engaging in moral defiance against their organisations, often characterised as systems that seek to thwart their moral ambitions, can be conceptualised as a stratagem of resistance which they draw on to construct a positive sense of self, often in contrast to the identity that they feel is imposed upon them by others (Collinson, 2003).

7.4. Contributions to theory and practice

The ways in which these findings contribute to theory and practice are now elaborated.

7.4.1 Theory

A theory must go beyond pure description to offer a way of explaining a phenomenon, ideally in a manner that can be generalised beyond the specific circumstances of its observation. In addition, good theoretical insights need to be both original and relevant. There are several ways in which empirical research such as this study can make a contribution to theory. These include refining an existing theory, applying an existing theory to a hitherto unexplained or inadequately explained phenomenon, and generating a completely novel theory (Crane et al, 2016). The contributions to theory offered by this research are outlined below, with these considerations in mind.

The research contributes to the broad area of business ethics research by investigating the concept of individual moral identity within the context of a business organisation environment. The social constructionist perspective and interpretivist analytical frame adopted in this study allow a conceptualisation of identities as ongoing works in progress (Brown, 2017) and have allowed the process of moral identity construction in senior business managers to be examined through the analysis of the narrative accounts of individual participants. This analysis has uncovered insights into the way that participants see themselves becoming and being senior practitioners within a business organisation. These insights contribute to understanding of the way that senior business practitioners engage with and respond to moral issues in their professional lives. By elucidating the process of moral identity construction in these participants in this way, the research contributes to understanding of 'the lived reality of ethics in organisations' (Clegg et al, 2007) and thus makes a contribution to the broader body of business ethics research. The contribution to business ethics research lies, then, in the focus on the concept of moral identity, not studied before in senior business managers, and in the adoption of a constructionist epistemological lens through which to study the moral identity of these individuals, which has allowed insight into the lived experiences of the participants as they contemplate moral issues in the workplace to emerge.

This research contributes to the moral identity literature by adopting a constructionist stance and an identity work lens to investigate the established concept of moral identity in a way that has not been done before. As such, it offers a new perspective on an established

construct. Of itself, this constitutes a modest but useful methodological contribution. Approaching moral identity as an ongoing work in progress has permitted the study to identify the resources that individuals draw on as they construct and perform their moral identities, and the part that their experience of their circumstances plays in shaping these constructions. So, the way that participants present the circumstances that they work within as challenging and lonely can be conceptualised as a scene setting device (Goffman, 1959), and their accounts of the immoral conduct of others as a strategy to allow them to identify and claim 'not-me' positions (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) to shore up their moral senses of self. This work responds to the assertions of Shao et al (2008) that moral identity has the potential to increase understanding of moral agency in an organisational context and that situational factors could be a focus for research in this area.

The study contributes to identity work scholarship with its explicit focus upon moral elements of identity which have rarely been adopted as a focus for scholars working in this area. Studies adopting an identity work lens have touched on moral facets of identity (Clarke et al, 2009; Kornberger and Brown, 2007; Holt, 2006; Corlett and McInnes, 2013) and have articulated the relevance of interactional and relational factors to the development of these elements of an individual's sense of self. The present study extends this understanding with an in-depth exploration of the narrative construction of moral identity. In highlighting the way that participants discursively draw on contextual factors such as feelings of pressure and expectation from others, their own positions within the hierarchy and dominant discourses that cast them as unethical, the research illuminates the process of moral identity work in these individuals and underlines the central part that the participants' circumstances play, as they construct and experience them, in shaping the construction of their moral senses of self. With the empirical finding that participants reaffirm themselves as moral at heart, with recourse to the rhetorical device of a claimed fixed and stable moral core, the study contributes understanding into the way that senior managers perceive moral facets of their identities – as fixed not fluid, and as rooted in childhood. The study combines the lenses of nostalgia and stigma management to propose the idea that, in response to dominant discourses that threaten to stigmatise them, participants look back to the simple moral choices of childhood to evidence their inherent morality, and use this knowledge to construct themselves as moral agents, and thus to distinguish themselves from immoral others.

The research makes a contribution to identity work theory by recognising the part that nostalgia for childhood plays in the moral identity work of these participants. As noted

above, participants often invoke memories of childhood to underpin their asserted moral core, and as explored in Chapter 5 (Reaffirming myself as essentially moral) this can appear somewhat incongruous in the context of research which focuses on their professional experiences. The role of nostalgia in individual identity work in an organisational context has been explored before, notably by Bardon et al (2015) who assert that individuals incorporate elements of a past professional life into their self-narratives as a way of compensating for present deficiencies. That these participants articulate nostalgia not for past professional lives but for childhood suggests that their past professional experiences may lack the resources required to bolster their present moral senses of self. Given their insistence that they experience pressure and expectation to be morally good as well as competent, their nostalgia for the simple moral instruction of childhood appears to be both a response to the complexity of the moral issues they now face, and an acknowledgement that they are in, for them, uncharted professional territory. Memories of childhood can thus be conceptualised here as a narrative device used by individuals which has, for them at least, the effect of legitimising their claim to a central moral core. The finding that nostalgia for an earlier time than previously observed can form part of individual identity work thus constitutes both an empirical contribution and an extension to theory related to the role of nostalgia in identity work in general, and moral identity work in particular. In identifying the role of nostalgia extending back to childhood as a resource in moral identity construction, it contributes to understanding of the way that individuals see these elements of identity, as both integral to their senses of self, and as stable and enduring.

This work contributes to the theory of stigma management as an identity work stratagem, with the empirical observation that participants reaffirm a central moral core in response to dominant discourses that stigmatise them by casting them as morally deficient. Previous studies have identified a range of individual identity work responses to stigma, some of which have focused upon the stigma of moral deficiency (e.g., Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Toyoki and Brown, 2014; Costas and Fleming, 2009). Responses observed in previous studies to the stigma of moral deficiency have been conceptualised as normalization, as individuals liken themselves to morally good others, or insist that they have changed to become morally good (Toyoki and Brown, 2014) and as dis-identification, as they attempt to distance themselves from the stigmatised identities imposed by others by discursively constructing other selves which they see as more authentic (Costas and Fleming, 2009). The participants in the present study assert a fixed and stable moral core in the face of discourses that stigmatise them. This tactic is subtly different from normalization and dis-

identification insofar as it is derived from normative ideas of an essential unchanging self on which individuals draw to counter the notion that the discourses could ever apply to them. Articulating discourses of corporate impropriety allows them to subscribe to and assert an essential moral self as a way of expressing their immunity to them. This empirical finding, conceptualised as *reaffirmation of a moral core*, captures a response to moral taint that has not previously been overtly identified and thus constitutes an extension to theory related to the management of the stigma of moral deficiency in identity work.

The empirical observation that participants in this study articulate discourses of moral resistance to systems that they present as working to thwart their moral ambitions extends the theory of resistance as an identity work tactic. This discursive resistance is clearly a part of participants' efforts to become and to be moral managers and as such, it forms part of their moral identity work in practice. The construction of resistant selves has been characterised as an identity-securing stratagem that can manifest itself in a number of ways (Collinson, 2003). Most commonly invoked to elucidate the responses of employees to management controls, the notion of the resistant self nevertheless chimes with the behaviours presented by these senior manager participants. Resistance has been conceptualised as a key stratagem through which individuals express their dissatisfaction with their organisations and its systems (Collinson, 2003), and presenting themselves as resisting the systems they operate within effectively conveys a feeling of discontent. Resistance in the context of identity work has, to date, been characterised with recourse to tactics of distancing, persistence and devotion (Collinson, 1994; Larson and Tompkins, 2005). Participants in this study present themselves as resisting pressure to engage in immoral behaviour in particular, and so the discursive practice of *articulating discourses of moral resistance* is advanced here as an addition to the list of resistance tactics. This resistance is different both in nature and in scope from previously articulated resistance tactics, since it involves managers rather than workers, and since they identify as the target of their resistance the broad system rather than those directly above them in the hierarchy. This construction of the powerful system can be seen as a discursive device which enables individuals to present themselves as moral managers, pushing back and resisting. In advancing the notion of individuals articulating discourses of moral resistance as a tactic in the construction of the resistant self, this study extends the theory of resistance as an identity work stratagem. With the observation that resistance as a stratagem extends beyond the lower ranks in an organisation to the higher levels of management, this study also makes an empirical contribution to knowledge.

This research contributes to identity work theory with the finding that moral facets of identity feature in the legitimacy discourses of managers, on which they draw as they do their identity work. Thomas and Linstead (2002) identify discourses of professionalism and expertise, gender, performance and commitment, and the public sector ethic that feature in managers' identity work as they endeavour to 'confirm, create and legitimize his or her role and purpose both within the organisation and society' (p78). Participants' presentations of themselves in the present study as defenders of those beneath them in the hierarchy suggest that they perceive discourses of protection, arguably heroic discourses of ethically sound leadership, as a central to their managerial identities. Given that morality 'reflects a concern *for other* (beyond one's personal or class interests)' (Lindebaum et al, 2017) these discourses of protection can be considered as moralistic in nature. In constructing themselves as protectors, participants are effectively constructing themselves as morally good. Thus, moral elements of identity can be seen as an integral part of the competent professional manager identity as constructed by these individuals, making discourses of moral leadership a further resource that managers draw on to legitimise their status. This underlines the significance that these participants attach to moral elements of identity as they construct their professional senses of self.

7.4.2 Practice

For research to impact upon practice, it must be seen as relevant by practitioners. This means that the research should have resonance for them, and address problems that they recognise (Buick et al, 2016). Contributions to practice are discussed with this in mind, with the aim of recognising what practitioners could draw from the insights delivered by this research.

This research makes a contribution to practice based upon the finding that feelings of loneliness and insecurity persist beyond middle manager level. The way that participants in this study present their circumstances as challenging, stressful and lonely echoes the way that the circumstances of middle managers have been depicted in other studies. These circumstances have been conceptualised as a function of their positions as middle managers (e.g., Sims, 2003; Thomas and Linstead, 2002), but the present study indicates that the tendency to express discourses of loneliness can persist long after individuals have departed the middle ranks. Knowing that others may be experiencing their roles in a similar way may encourage senior managers to share experiences and coping strategies. It could shape the way that educators develop training initiatives and development

programmes, perhaps increasing focus upon reflective practices to acknowledge and address the feelings of isolation that may accompany senior roles. This knowledge could also inform and help to evolve organisational management development and mentoring initiatives.

The finding that functional group and business sector do not appear to make a difference to the way that participants articulate their experiences of moral issues in the workplace offers an empirical contribution to practice. The absence of any discernible difference in the accounts of participants from different functional areas and different business sectors indicates that level of business seniority is key to the way that these individuals articulate their experiences of moral issues in the workplace – indeed, it is the only factor common to all participants. The research findings suggest that although the morally-charged issues themselves may vary with function and business sector, senior managers articulate their experiences of them in remarkably similar ways. The knowledge that they are not alone in these experiences has the potential to shape the way that senior managers regard and interact with one another. If incorporated into development programmes by educators and team building initiatives by employers, the idea that apparently diverse moral dilemmas are experienced in remarkably similar ways across business functions could transform the way that senior managers approach and deal with these issues in their professional lives. This raises the possibility of greater openness and collaboration across functions which could facilitate the dismantling of functional barriers that are so often evident in business organisations, and that can impede effective team working.

The insight that participants, again across a range of sectors and business functions, articulate the feeling that their organisations act to thwart their personal efforts to drive a moral agenda may also chime with practitioners who engage with this research. By constructing and presenting their organisations as powerful systems that exhort them to behave in unethical ways in the interests of the broader organisational goals, requiring them to push back as individuals in order to do what they believe is right, participants are clearly commenting on the imbalance of power that they feel between them and their organisations. This suggests, for example, that practitioners find dominant notions of individual responsibility for corporate ethical conduct inadequate as an approach to ethical business practice, insofar as they fail to account for the structural elements of business organisations, and perhaps of the business environment generally, within which they have to operate. This in turn suggests that a greater focus on political and structural factors (Parker, 2003) may be required if unethical business practices are to be fully understood

and addressed. Understanding why practitioners feel the need to present their relationships with their organisations in this way could be a starting point for a new debate around the structures, hierarchies and responsibilities of organisations. Reflecting on this may provide the impetus for business owners and leaders to explore alternative business models, hierarchical set-ups and ways of working with a view to addressing organisation-level factors that appear to be a threat to the way that senior managers experience moral agency.

7.5 Limitations of this study

This study was restricted to thirty participants, as outlined in the methodology chapter, for reasons of manageability given the time frame of the study. While they came from a range of sectors and functional areas, all participants were UK nationals working in UK-based for-profit business organisations. While the findings may be seen as potentially relevant to other organisational settings, the sample size and structure should be should be borne in mind when contemplating the generalisability of the findings. Although this size of sample is appropriate for a study of this kind, variance in the findings can be introduced by one or two participants. The participants were accessed using purposive and snowball sampling (see Chapter 3 - Methodology) which can introduce sampling bias, and can mean that the sample is not always completely representative of the population under study.

The research method of semi-structured interviews is also a potential limitation. This method relies on self-reported data from participants which cannot easily be independently verified. Potential problems include selective memory, telescoping (where events are recalled as having occurred at a different time than they actually did), attribution (where participants tend to attribute positive events to themselves but negative ones to others or to external forces) and exaggeration. There is also the potential worry that interviews may not be able to capture all the dynamics and subtleties of the phenomenon under study, and this is clearly a concern when considering the relational elements of identity work. Some researchers advance the view that ethnography may be a more appropriate research method to adopt when exploring complex issues such as these (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007, p1355).

The participants were asked to narrate their experiences of moral issues in the workplace in a one-to-one interview. These are clearly sensitive issues, and the possibility of social desirability effects, where participants are influenced in their responses by what they

believe the researcher wants them to say, must be acknowledged. There is also a risk that participants will decline to reveal details which they feel may present them in a poor light.

7.6 Implications for future research and connections to wider debates

Investigating the moral identity construction in this group of participants has delivered insight into the reality of being a senior manager in a business organisation, and on the way that individuals experience moral issues in this context. It has also provoked ideas and questions which this thesis does not have the scope to address, but which could form the basis of future academic inquiry.

The pressurised circumstances that participants articulate when describing their circumstances, and the way that they express feelings of expectation from those beneath them, suggest that hierarchy is a central feature in their moral identity work. What participants seem often to be commenting on, but not overtly expressing, is relationships of power. So, they talk about feeling responsible, feeling pressure, or feeling accountable, but although it may be implicit in their accounts, what they don't actually articulate is the notion that those above them in the hierarchy have power over them, or that they in turn exert power over their subordinates. Their position in the hierarchy clearly shapes their moral identity work, and as such is central to this thesis, which adopts an identity work frame to investigate morality in this group. Given participants' preoccupation with hierarchical issues, and the dominance of this theme in this research, adopting a power relations frame to investigate moral identity construction would doubtless elicit a range of new and thought-provoking insights.

Participants characterise business decisions as complex and challenging. At the same time, they draw on the simplistic binary moral choices of childhood to present the difference between good and evil, and they often extend this reasoning to contend that they make ethical choices, and that they are therefore moral practitioners. In articulating it in this way, participants appear to deny the existence of any grey area in these moral choices. This clearly shores up their presentation of themselves as moral agents and it seems also to allow them to deflect, or talk down, the taint of unethical business practice. But this divergence in their narratives between the complexities of business decisions and the simplicity of right versus wrong is striking, implausible even, and as an identity work stratagem it offers a potentially intriguing focus for further investigation. Understanding how individuals draw on such divergent and often seemingly incompatible narratives in the

course of their identity work would potentially contribute much to understanding of professional, moral and other identities.

Although the study elicited data from participants of both genders, and attention was paid to gender in analysis, uncovering differences related to gender was not a primary aim of the research. It is noted, however, that more male participants than female appear to articulate discourses of loneliness (see Chapter 4 – The loneliness of seniority). While it was beyond the scope of this study to interrogate this finding, this is something that could be examined in more depth in future research.

The feeling that participants articulate of frequently having to resist the systems of their organisations to behave morally suggests that a greater understanding of structural issues may elucidate moral identity construction in this group further. This idea that the focus of efforts to understand ethical business practice should not be restricted to the conduct of individuals, but rather should consider broader structural and political issues is not new. Parker (2003) asserts that the tendency of business ethics research to be driven by notions of moral philosophy has meant an excessively individualistic focus, and he argues for an embracing of political theory to redress the balance. Interestingly, given that this study utilises an identity frame with which to investigate a business ethics problem, identity research has also been critiqued as tending towards excessive individualism (Knights and Clarke, 2017). This study does indicate that deeper exploration of political and structural factors may be the route to greater understanding not only of individual moral identity construction, but also of broader issues of corporate irresponsibility.

As noted in chapter 6 (Becoming and being a moral manager), participants' presentations of their organisations as systems that work against them are central to their presentations of themselves as moral individuals, working to resist the powerful and nebulous forces that, they assert, threaten to thwart the enactment of their moral agendas. Adopting an identity lens, as this thesis does, this presentation can be seen as a way for participants to access their preferred identities of morally good and competent managers. This also allows participants to avoid the uncomfortable idea that, as senior managers, they are undeniably a part of the very systems that they assert they need to resist. This in turn invokes broader notions of cause and effect in a social world, and of debates around structure versus agency, where arguments centre on the relative influence of social structures and human agency on social action. These ideas are beyond the scope of this thesis, but could provide a fruitful direction for further research.

That the participants in this study, all senior managers, assert the importance of morally good leadership as well as commercial competence says much about the way that they construct their roles within their organisations. As well as avowing the importance of being morally good, the study demonstrates that this group of senior manager participants construct themselves as essentially moral at heart. Media reports of unscrupulous business behaviour, however, show no sign of abating, which suggests that the connection between individual morality and corporate behaviour is more complex than previous research has indicated. As Lindebaum et al (2017, p645) put it, 'determining how and why ethical transgressions occur with surprising regularity, despite the inhibiting influence of moral emotions, has considerable theoretical and practical significance to management scholars and managers alike'. Given their insistence that they really are moral agents, it is perhaps timely to consider the possibility that the moral virtue of individual practitioners is, in some way, actually enabling corrupt behaviour at an organisational level. It may be that moral propriety at the individual level is simply not being replicated at the collective level. If this is the case, could individual-level assertions of morality somehow allow collective impropriety? If individuals believe that being moral agents themselves is enough, what does this say to the collective responsibility of the organisation? The notion of dissonance between individual and organisation level dispositions towards corporate social responsibility as an impediment to successful implementation of CSR programmes has been addressed before, and in a theoretical paper Blackman et al (2012) argue for the development of shared mental models to address this disconnect. A future direction for research into moral identity within organisations might be to investigate the potential for shared mental models to address this apparent disconnect between corporate behaviour and individual moral identity.

This research also raises questions about the way that practitioners and scholars think about ethical issues, and about the apparent disconnect between the two. Participants in this study present their thinking about ethical issues as embedded in the circumstances in which they find themselves, circumstances they depict as challenging and complex. Ethics, for these practitioners, is one part of '…the complexity and disorder of real-life management practice' (Clegg et al, 2007), a complex whole which they are charged with managing. Scholarly focus on business ethics, on the other hand, has had a tendency to assume that ethics can be reduced down to simple codes of practice (Clegg et al, 2007), taking little account of the grey areas that so many practitioners, including participants in this study, describe. It is perhaps partly this disproportionate focus on codes of conduct

that drives individuals back to the simple choices of childhood, as articulated in the moral identity work of the participants in the present study. Examining in more detail the situated nature of business ethics may be a fruitful future direction, for business ethics scholarship in general, and for moral identity scholarship in particular. At the extreme, this may imply a greater focus on co-production (Buick, et al, 2016) of research, where scholars and practitioners collaborate to deliver scholarly as well as practical insights.

**Department for Public Leadership & Social Enterprise
Faculty of Business & Law**

Information for persons participating in a research project

Project: Morality in a Business Context

Background and aims

My name is Maria Wishart and I am a second year doctoral student at the Open University Business School, researching morality in a business context. In recent years, a succession of business scandals related to unethical behaviour in the business world has been reported in the press. My research aims to examine the ways in which senior business managers make sense of the ethical issues that they encounter in the course of their professional lives. In doing so, I hope to contribute to understanding in this area. I am asking for your help with this research project.

What is involved?

This is qualitative research, which aims to deliver insights into opinions and motivations that may be related to behaviour. I will conduct interviews with senior business managers about their experiences of ethical issues in the workplace. The interviews will involve me talking to you for about one hour. The interview will be audio recorded so that I can be sure that I correctly remember everything that you tell me. I will work around you to arrange a venue and time convenient to you for this interview.

My responsibilities to you:

- **Privacy**: your participation will be treated in strict confidence in accordance with the Data Protection Act. Your contribution will be used for research purposes only. You will not be individually identified in the final report, nor will your data be stored in a way that will allow you to be identified. Everything that you tell me will be in confidence. No personal information will be passed to anyone. I will write a report of the study but no individual will be identifiable from the published results of the research. Any data from the interview that I incorporate into the report will be presented using a pseudonym.

- **Your wishes**: participation in the study is voluntary and you are not obliged to answer any questions you do not wish to. If you don't wish to answer a question, just tell me, and we will immediately move on. No one is taking part in this study who does not want to. Even if you agree to participate to begin with, you are free to withdraw at any time up until 31st October 2016, the end of the data collection phase. Should you decide to withdraw, you only need to contact me (see contact details below) by email or phone to tell me. If you decide to withdraw, I will destroy any data already generated from your participation up until that point.

- **Questions**: I will be happy to answer any questions you may have about the research. My contact details are below. If you have any concerns about the research, you can contact my PhD lead supervisor Dr Anja Schaefer, whose contact details are also below.

- **Data Storage**: I will store any data from this research securely, and will destroy it after 5 years in accordance with the Open University's code of conduct.

- **Summary findings:** If you would like to receive a copy of the findings of this research when available, I will provide one.

Maria Wishart/ September 2015

My contact details:
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PhD Research

I am a full-time doctoral researcher at the Open University in Milton Keynes, in the second year of my PhD. My area of research is morality in a business context, and I am investigating the ways in which senior business practitioners make sense of ethical issues in their work lives. I am researching this by interviewing a number of senior managers across a range of sectors, to gain an understanding of the way that they approach these issues.

I would very much appreciate it if you would be prepared to take part in this research. It would involve me interviewing you for around 45 minutes to discuss your experiences of ethical issues in the course of your professional life. The interview would be recorded to allow me to analyse it. All the data that I collect will be anonymised, and will be subject to the university's stringent data protection protocols. You would not be identified or identifiable in any part of the process or in my thesis. I would be happy to travel to your office or to another location convenient to you to carry out the interview.

If this is not something you are able to do, I completely understand – there is honestly no obligation! But if you would be prepared to participate, or if you would like any additional details on the research, I would love to hear back from you.

Thanks & best wishes.

Maria Wishart

PhD Research Student

General Questions

How long have you worked in your current role? Would you mind telling me what it entails?

What do you know about your organisation's code of ethics? What do you see as the positives and negatives it imposes for you in your work? To what extent do you feel constrained or empowered by your organisation's code of ethics when making ethical judgments in a work situation? Is it something you ever talk about? Is it actively used in making decisions? Can you think of an occasion when it has influenced a choice?

What do you see as the most important moral and ethical issues in your work life? Has this changed over the course of your working life? How and why?

As a manager, who do you feel responsibility towards and for? Who would you say you are responsible to?

How important is it to act in a morally responsible way in your work life? Who cares about your moral behaviour in your work situation? Who do you feel is judging your ethical conduct? How do you feel about that?

Can you tell me about a time when you were faced with an ethical dilemma at work? How did you approach it? How did it make you feel? Who did you go to for advice/support? Looking back, would you do the same again?

Where do you seek guidance on matters of moral judgment in a work context? If you wanted to get input from someone or somewhere, where do you think you would go? When you make a judgment at work, how do you satisfy yourself that it is the right one? Have you ever made what you consider in retrospect to be an unsound moral decision? What made you think it was unsound?

Can you tell me about a time when you witnessed someone making a sound/an unsound ethical judgment in a work situation? Why did you think they acted the way they did? What do you think they could have done differently? How did it make you feel?

> *For example, maybe you have seen someone treating someone else in an unacceptable way? Misrepresenting someone else? Abusing authority or power? Being economical with the facts? Favouring one person over another?*

To what extent do you draw on your own values when making ethical judgments at work? If not your own values, then whose values do you think you draw on? Why do you think this is so?

In work situations, do you feel that peers generally share your ethical values? If not, how and why do you think they differ from you?

In a work situation, do you ever find yourself making judgments about other people's ethical conduct? How do you do this and on what basis?

What expectations do you have of colleagues in terms of ethical conduct? If a colleague acted in a way that you considered to be morally unacceptable, how do you think you would react? What do you think you would do?

In a work context, what do you consider to be unethical behaviour and why? How does this compare to non-work situations?

To what extent do you think your moral compass at work differs from your moral compass in your non-work life? Do you feel that expectations of moral conduct at work differ from those in a non-work situation? Who do you feel morally responsible to at work and outside work?

Thinking about when you are considering whether or not to join an organisation, what sorts of factors about the organisation do you take into account? What would attract to you an organisation and why?

What sort of stereotypes do you see in the media of practitioners in your business area? What do you think about these stereotypes? How do they make you feel?

Maria Wishart/9.10.15

APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

Department for Public Leadership & Social Enterprise
Faculty of Business & Law

Consent form for persons participating in a research project
Project: Morality in a Business Context

Name of participant:

Name of principal investigator(s):

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written statement in plain language to keep.

2. I understand that my participation will involve a recorded interview with the researcher and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain language statement.

3. I acknowledge that:

   (a) the possible effects of participating in this research have been explained to my satisfaction;

   (b) I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided;

   (c) the project is for the purpose of research;

   (d) I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements;

   (e) I have been informed that with my consent the data generated will be stored by the researcher and will be destroyed after five years;

   (f) if necessary any data from me will be referred to by a pseudonym in any publications arising from the research;

   (g) I have been informed that a summary copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I request this.

I consent to this interview being audio-taped/video-recorded   □ yes □ no
(please tick)

I wish to receive a copy of the summary project report on research findings   □ yes □ no
(please tick)

Participant signature:

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