

## **Tales From Academia**

**The MAD Set: Michelle Laing, Aileen Lawless and Deborah Humphreys (LJMU)**

### **Introduction**

This book is set within the context of significant social shifts in terms of the psychological contract and expectations of different sets of workers. The Editors of the book argue that within this changing context, human resource development (HRD) theory and practice has remained relatively silent on how such sociological shifts may impact upon the nature of work and subsequent productivity. This chapter focusses on a particular cultural issue, the change in the national default retirement age within the UK from 60 to 67 and beyond.

With retirement age extended, access to pensions is pushed further away, resulting in a changing economic dynamic for a workforce who may be compelled to work longer. Within this context, work becomes more central to society as people review their lives in the workplace and their relationship with work (CIPD, 2015). However, money is not the only motivator, and research indicates that many employees believe that work enhances mental health (CIPD, 2016). Indeed, individuals will have different motivations for choosing to remain in the labour market. Therefore, if we are to create fulfilling working lives, and not just longer ones, employers' actions need to be underpinned by a deeper level of appreciation of why people choose to stay or leave work after 50 (Kenner, 2018).

HRD has a role to play, and this chapter contributes by offering insights into our lived experience of 'becoming' older (we choose the word 'experienced') academics. We have each been employed within Higher Education (HE) for approximately 15 years, and our 'Tales From Academia' focusses on our passion for researching our own practice and our own communities. It is this passion and interest in 'insider-research' (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Trowler, 2012) which brought us together, initially as Supervisor and Doctoral students, and more recently as colleagues, co-researchers and critical friends. We are Michelle (health), Aileen (business) and Deborah (education); co-founders of MAD, an action learning set with a stated aim to raise the profile of insider-research through Mutual Action and Development.

### **The MAD Set as Insider-Researchers**

We situate ourselves as insider-researchers, researching our own practice and supporting students to undertake this form of research. It is increasingly common in academic programmes of study, particularly part-time programmes, for students to select their own organizational setting as a site for their research (Coghlan, 2007; Zuber-Skerritt & Perry, 2002). This insider-research is a key feature of many taught postgraduate and Doctoral programmes. A key feature of this type of research is that the research is undertaken by complete members of organizational systems and communities in and on their own organizations. This type of research can also be undertaken as collaboration between insiders and outsiders (Al-Harthy et al., 2017; Louis & Bartunek, 1992). Insider-researchers are warned of the dangers of being too close and not attaining the distance and objectivity deemed to be necessary for valid research as they have a personal stake and potentially considerable emotional involvement in the setting (Alvesson, 2003). However, others argue that there is no inherent reason why being native is an issue and that the value of insider-research is worth reaffirming (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Ross, 2017) while proceeding with caution (Alvesson, 2009; Trowler, 2012). Despite

this rise in popularity, insider academic research has received relatively little consideration and is seldom published. Brannick and Coghlan (2010) postulate that this is because academic research is primarily focussed on theory development and not necessarily concerned about actions or practice. However, (Welch et al., 2013), in undertaking a rhetorical analysis of two leading management journals, demonstrate how methodological traditions change, evolve and undergo reassessment. In doing so, they draw attention to the need for greater reflexivity about how, as a community of scholars, we present, justify and legitimize the theoretical contributions of qualitative studies.

Therefore, a key consideration for insider-researchers is to reflect and be reflexive about how they can, as complete members 'undertake academic research in their own organizations while retaining the choice of remaining a member within a desired career path when the research is complete' (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007:59). Ethical dilemmas can emerge when organizational members provide information 'in confidence' (Milano et al., 2015). This highlights the dilemma of writing a report and dealing with the aftermath of superiors and colleagues or doctoring the report to keep a job (Nielsen & Repstad, 1993). This dilemma is magnified when the written report is published within the public domain—a key marker of a 'good academic'. So are we 'bad academics' if we do not publish our work because we are being oversensitive to these ethical dilemmas? Arguably, as academics, to remain employed and employable, we must publish. The rhetoric of publish or perish is evident in the appointment and promotion criteria for academic staff, and this criterion is heightened, within the UK, as we approach the next research assessment exercise; the Research Excellence Framework (REF) due in 2021.

Cunliffe and Locke (2015) highlight the importance of continuing to build community and support for qualitative researchers. They highlight that qualitative research practice is a form of craft work with 'masters and apprentices' (Sennett, 2008). The notion of masters (experienced) and apprentices (early career) informs Lave and Wenger's (1991) early work, and this has provided a useful heuristic for our activities and insider-research on the formation of our MAD set.

### **The MAD Set as a Discursive Community of Practice**

The concept of communities of practice, often attributed to Lave and Wenger (1991) and developed by, amongst others, Brown and Duguid (1991), Lave, (1993), and Chaklin and Lave (1993), has focussed our attention on situated learning, arguing that learning is fundamentally a social process. Situated learning involves engagement in communities of practice and participation in these communities becomes the fundamental process of learning. The concept has become influential in health, education and management and is one of the most articulated and developed concepts within social theories of learning. It has been enthusiastically taken up both by academics and practitioners, and an examination of web pages and journal publications indicates the range of fields where notions of communities of practice are drawn on. For example, a Scopus search on 'community of practice' in April 2018 produced 7,832 document results, with 163 being produced in 2018.

Lave and Wenger (1991:98) define a community of practice as 'a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice'. While the concept of a community of practice remains fruitful, it has given rise to concerns regarding consensus and pressures to conform. Critical scholars (Vince, 2014; Sambrook & Willmott,

2014) argue for an interpretation of social learning which can take account of differences in order to understand the interplay among emotion and power.

A discourse perspective opens up this prospect by studying the discursive practices of a community and the language resources participants use. The focus is, therefore, on how people use the available discourses' flexibility in creating and negotiating representations of the world and identities in talk-in-interaction. This enables a focus on the language-in use within a community. A discourse perspective highlights how the self is talked about, how it is theorized in discourse and the discursive functions served by alternative interpretations. These alternative representatives or 'subject positions' can be defined as 'locations' within a conversation, the identities made relevant by specific ways of talking (Edley, 2001). 'Positioning', therefore, involves a process of negotiation, as people actively take up positions within different and sometimes competing interpretative repertoires. Lawless et al. (2012) draw attention to the identity work undertaken by students on a Master of Arts programme and the ideological dilemmas which emerged as students positioned themselves within the HE 'community' and their work 'community'. This chapter draws attention to the ideological dilemmas and positioning which occurred as we participated in our MAD set.

### **Research Context: The Birth of the MAD Set**

We have known each other for several years. Indeed, Aileen supervised Michelle and Deb as they 'became' Doctors, and we used to meet on the First Thursday of every month. This 'First Thursday Set' provided an initial 'safe space' for Doctoral students and supervisors to meet. All members were full-time employees within the Higher Education (HE) system and were researching their own practice. This focus on insider-research, and a shared interest in critical action learning, provided a useful forum for our meetings. Reynolds (1998) gives four characteristics of critical reflection: concerned with questioning assumptions, focus is social rather than individual, pays particular attention to the analysis of power relations and concerned with emancipation, and these provided an overall focus for our set meetings. Our intention was to offer a 'safe space', giving an opportunity for reflective dialogue as we engaged in the supervision journey, striving to 'become' critically reflective insider-researchers within a 'community of practice'.

For students, and supervisors, the risks involved in doing a Doctoral qualification are high. Failure is visible and not an option if one wishes to remain within the HE community. As insider-researchers, we utilized our positions: 'for other, secondary purposes, i.e. doing research within the setting of which one is a part' (Alvesson, 2003:175). The intention was not to put ourselves or own experiences at the centre, as in autoethnography (Richardson, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), but to draw attention to the cultural context of our teaching and professional practice; an approach Alvesson has termed 'self-ethnography'. Within our Doctorate research, we all utilized a 'socially discursive' way to study our 'day jobs' and worked within a comfort zone which accommodated our need to explain and position ourselves in the research process. Sambrook (2017) has labelled this as a 'self-ish' methodological stance.

Michelle situated her Doctoral thesis within her 'day job' as an Educator of Health Professionals. Her research explored the case of the Health and Social Care Act (2012). Informed by discursive perspectives of strategy and policy as practice, Michelle demonstrated a lack of engagement with both parliamentary colleagues, professionals and the electorate, thereby revealing how discourse

and the neglected field of political argumentation can shape reality and influence strategies for action (Laing & Lawless, 2015).

Aileen utilized her 'day job' as a programme manager for a professional master's programme and the module leader for a reflective practice module to inform her Doctoral work. Her thesis explored how students fashioned relations of identity and membership, and how students 'positioned' themselves as they participated in an MA programme (Lawless et al., 2012).

Deborah also drew on her 'day job' as programme leader in education, drawing on the discourses of educational leadership and the under-explained influence of context. Interested in shedding a discursive light on the constraints of context that shaped the discourses of educational leadership, Deborah explored and questioned the taken-for-granted assumptions of everyday interactions and how they framed an individual's understanding of leadership (Humphreys & Lawless, 2015).

As can be seen, we have a shared interest in discourse analysis, insider-research and critical action learning. As experienced academics, we continue to informally support each other and recently agreed to formally meet as a set. At our inaugural meeting, we decided to call ourselves the MAD set as this represented us: Michelle, Aileen and Deborah, but the acronym also signalled the element of fun needed if we were to continue making time to meet and work together. Our stated commitment was to enable each other to achieve Mutual Action and Development, to support each other to publish and not perish. We agreed to support and challenge each other and to act as 'critical friends'. This chapter is one outcome of this challenge and mutual support.

### **Moving Beyond Our Comfort Zone: Autoethnography**

Our MAD set has provided a 'safe space' for us 'become' critically reflective practitioners, sharing and making sense of our lived-experiences. In this chapter, we move beyond our comfort zone of self-ethnography and embrace autoethnography, a 'self-ie' (Sambrook, 2017) methodological stance. There is a growing interest in autoethnography. For example, a new track 'Autoethnography in a Political Mode' was introduced at the 12th Annual International Ethnography symposium, Manchester 2017. Also, a special issue of the Journal of Organizational Ethnography on 'Organizational autoethnography: possibilities, politics and pitfalls' edited by Clair Doloriert and Sally Sambrook will have been published in September 2018. Indeed, within HRD, Clair and Sally have pioneered the use of autoethnography, arguing that the method allows for insightful and emotionally rich readings of organizational life (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2012).

Other champions of autoethnography include Learmonth and Humphreys (2011:105) who argue that 'a refusal to abstract and explain may be politically dangerous'. They show how multiple accounts of the same phenomena, written over time (and therefore written by different versions of the self), can be a valuable way of doing autoethnography. They treat their stories as sources of empirical material and show how these stories can be analysed as 'case studies in auto biographical identify work' (Watson, 2009:425). How, then, do we make sense of our stories? In producing this chapter and participating in the MAD set, we have risen to the challenge of autoethnography, daring to share with each other, and a wider readership, our journeys of 'becoming' experienced academics. We contribute to this analytical genre of autoethnography by providing our individual retrospective tales from academia and our joint analysis of these tales.

At the inaugural meeting of the MAD set, we agreed to individually produce, and circulate to each other, a written account summarizing our academic careers to date, including our reflections of participating in action learning. At the second set meeting, we discussed these 'tales' and jointly produced a 'vision' for the MAD set. These retrospective and prospective 'tales' provide the stories which we have analysed from a discourse and community of practice perspective, providing insight into the positioning which is occurring as we establish the MAD set.

### **Tales From the Field**

We are daring to share, turning the critical lens on ourselves (autoethnography) rather than the other (self-ethnography). We illuminate how, as experienced academics, we continue to support and challenge each on the never-ending journey of 'becoming' critically reflective practitioners. In doing so, we address the following questions:

- Can we, as experienced academics, contribute to our communities by 'becoming' MAD?
- What are the implications for the development of experienced employees?

### **Michelle's tale**

I am a nurse by trade who entered nurse education just prior to the commencement of 'Project 2000' which was a radical overhaul of nurse training, bringing it into Higher Education, so I have seen nursing go through many iterations of 'modernization' and being 'lifted' into the research realms of academia. It has been a very interesting journey going from restricted contracts and not being allowed into the Teacher's Pension Scheme as we were not 'proper academics' to the dizzy heights of the University and obtaining my Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA).

As a nurse and an academic manager, I have had many roles and programme leader responsibilities mainly around pre- and post-registration nursing with some involvement with medical training, radiography, paramedics and social work. I have line managed very large teams of people within higher education; this has been incredibly time consuming alongside the risk management and leadership of the programmes. More recently, I have suffered a very bumpy ride in the restructure of our departments, having to reapply for my own job four times, with a number of different titles and responsibilities. Thankfully, things are quite a bit more stable for me now, and I was given some headspace to pursue a Doctorate. In fact, I am sure that the doctorate was an appeasement for the hellish time I was having, 'every cloud they say'.

It was when I was doing my doctorate I met Deborah, a fellow student, and Aileen, my supervisor. They were such a wonderful support to me at that time in my life. Without wanting to go into detail, both my husband and myself had serious health problems that occurred whilst progressing with my DBA; we are now fully recovered, thank goodness. However, without the support and guidance of Aileen and Deb, I think I might not have completed my work. They provided a safe space where I needed it and encouragement and a good kick when necessary too.

These relationships are so different to any others I have had. I actually feel like an academic when I am with them. We question each other's assumptions, discussing theories and interesting

methodologies. We also share information with each other, e.g. workshops and development opportunities. We offer practical support to each other, together at computers to share ideas and skills. However, most important of all, we trust each other to give feedback on our work. This makes writing somewhat easier if you respect your colleague and are able to listen to critical friends.

We are keen to ensure we use our research skills to make a difference to our future and benefit others. Hence, the MADs development. The truth is, the day job can be all consuming, without the gentle shove in the right direction by my colleagues, I think, I might just be waiting for Godot.

### **Aileen's tale**

I have worked in Higher Education (HE) for most of my career, and I am fortunate that within HRD and the action learning community I feel I have found my academic tribe; a community of scholars and practitioners who acknowledge 'wicked' problems and continue to challenge the theory-practice divide while contributing to the rigour relevance debates. As an academic, I value the autonomy I have. The relative freedom I have had to research what I want and to publish where I want. The opportunities to align my research, teaching and supervision. I attribute this to the support and critical friendship I have had from my academic 'tribe' and numerous inspiring colleagues who have been generous with their critical friendship.

My key research interests focus on understanding the complex relationships between higher education and work. I am an advocate of the power of action learning and value the 'safe' space afforded by a set. As REF 2021 approaches and scrutiny from the top increases, I am conscious of the need to re-position myself; again! Recently, I have been promoted to Reader and have been asked to take a leadership role as Head of a research group. I asked Michelle and Deb to join me as founding members of this research group which has the acronym, LEAD, representing our shared interests in Leadership, Education and Development. The MAD set is currently a sub-group of LEAD and provides me with a safe space. I need this space, sometimes just to let off steam, to moan and groan about the perceived scrutiny I feel coming our way. I also use this space to find out what is going on, we are all quite well networked, internally and externally, and openly share what we know. However, we always end the set meetings with agreed action and a renewed sense of meaning. It is this sense of meaning that can be driven out in the day to day of 'busy work'.

I am increasingly conscious that I have less of my career ahead of me than I do behind me. I have paid my mortgage, at last, so I don't have to work. Obviously, I am financially more comfortable if I do work, but it is liberating to know I don't have to. As I see the end of my career in sight, I want to focus on the aspects of my job I love and the areas where I feel I can contribute the most. I feel privileged to have spent most of my career in HE and I am grateful to the colleagues and students who have supported and challenged me. I am aware that I run the risk of being seen as naïve when I state that my ambition is 'to do some good' wherever I can.

### **Deborah's tale**

This is an account of the complexities of working in Higher Education as a Programme Leader of various Programmes whilst deciding as a mature entrant to do a PhD in Leadership, striving to forge a second career as a university scholar. Being seen as an 'academic manager' responsible for a large team of academics some of whom were new to the world of academia and some on zero rated hour

contracts meant my 'workload management' was pre-decided for me; this did not allow much time for either my own scholarly practice or research. As part of the Programmes Management Team, I spent long hours carrying out administrative and bureaucratic tasks which were taken to be 'natural' and as a result were viewed as self-evident and immutable. It was unconscionable and seen to be 'unprofessional' if one requested time (unpaid) to write up a thesis. My passion was my research and my action learning sets outside of my institution meant that once a month on a Thursday I could escape to that world of scholarly discussions.

In September 2017, leaving my institution behind, I joined Michelle and Aileen. I had moved to a position as a senior lecturer in Leadership and become rather ironically what is termed as an 'early career scholar'. I had begun a new chapter in my life not new to teaching but seen, by some, as new to the profession. I found myself in a position where I had to carve out a new identity for myself both as a 'senior lecturer' but also as budding researcher. It was to Michelle and Aileen that I turned to for the reassurance and support that I had experienced when pursuing my doctoral journey. I am embarking on a new journey, with the luxury of a promise that I will be given time to think and write about what matters to me the most. For the first time in my university career to strive for that authenticity that drove me to do a PhD in the first instance, but the realization that I still need a supportive network.

So now as I embark on the next stage of my journey, we have reformed and become the MAD set and who knows what we will become or achieve. I align myself with providing good educational opportunities and developing students to achieve their full potential. Therefore, I want MADs to provide a 'safe' space so I can have time for my research but continue to enjoy my teaching, resisting the pressures to get through my teaching efficiently rather than effectively.

At the second set meeting, we circulated and discussed our individual tales. We asked ourselves what we wanted to 'become' as REF 2021 approaches.

### **The MADs' tale**

We agreed that we wanted to reach high and challenge ourselves rather than under-estimate what we could do. We identified some key words and phrases we each felt comfortable with: support network; authentic; good souls; critical friends; research; writing prolifically; safe space; non-elitist; making a difference, being heard, having an impact.

These words reflected our shared values and we articulated the following vision for our MAD set.

- To ensure MADs develops as an authentic space where we nurture and sustain each other in our academic lives and where we challenge each other to become the best we can be in our research, our job roles and as individuals.

We re-stated our commitment to enable each other to achieve Mutual Action and Development, to support each other to publish and not perish.

Discursive psychology informs our autoethnography research, and we draw attention to the 'active and creative use of discourse as a resource for accomplishing social actions in specific contexts of interaction' (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002:21).

### **What Does Discursive Analysis Reveal?**

Our stories say something about norms of expression, and ways of producing effects, in particular work identity and legitimacy. Therefore, we interpret our stories in terms of what they accomplish rather than what they mirror, as action rather than in terms of true/false (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). Analysing our tales from a discourse and community of practice perspective provides insight into the positioning and ideological dilemmas which have been revealed as we dare to share via our autoethnographic tales from academia.

Within our individual retrospective tales, we have positioned ourselves as experienced academics and critical friends. We talk about the re-positioning which has occurred, and continues to occur, as we continue to 'become' academics.

Michelle positions herself as a 'nurse by trade' and an 'academic manager', and she talks about the MAD set providing a community away from 'the day job' which she describes as 'all consuming'. She talks about the MAD set as a place to 'share ideas and skills' and as a place where she feels like an 'academic'.

Aileen positions herself as a member of the HRD and action learning communities and talks about support from these communities. She talks about the need to re-position herself, 'again', as REF 2021 approaches and 'scrutiny' from the top increases. She talks about the MAD set as a safe space to 'share' and find 'a renewed sense of meaning'.

Deborah positions herself as a teacher and a researcher, experienced but new to LJMU. She talks about re-positioning herself within this new institution and about 'a promise to be given time to think and write about what matters to me the most'; and her realization that she still needs a 'supportive network', the MAD set.

Collectively, and individually, we have positioned ourselves as researchers striving to 'publish and not perish'. This reveals our acknowledgement, and acceptance of, a dominant interpretative repertoire, a repertoire which shapes REF 2021. We have taken up, or had enacted upon us, this positioning. Talk within this dominant interpretative repertoire equates publishing to success and achievement. However, it is publishing in ranked journals that signals success within this community. We have been told 'book chapters don't count'.

Within our individual and collective accounts, ideological dilemmas have surfaced and our earlier analysis reveals our dilemma that MADs may not develop as an 'authentic space' if we accept, without question, the REF dominant repertoire. We have re-positioned ourselves before and as experienced academics, critical friends and researchers who strive to 'nurture and sustain each other', as we are aware of the need to continually re-position ourselves if we are to remain employed and employable.

Our joint tale surfaces an ideological dilemma, the stated aim to 'publish and not perish' and 'to become the best we can be in our research, our job roles and as individuals'. Indeed, our individual



tales reveal how positioning oneself as an 'experienced academic', a 'critical friend' and a 'researcher' is problematic. We hope that our tales from the field resonate with other academics involved in writing for publication, particularly those who experience 'the day job' as 'all consuming'.

### **Implications and Contribution**

While recognizing that not all social practice is discursive, it is acknowledged that some social practices are inherently more discursive than others (Fairclough, 2003). Indeed, HRD has been conceptualized as a 'social and discursive construction', which has been talked into being (Sambrook, 2000; Sambrook & Stewart, 1998). From a 'communities of practice' perspective, 'talk' is seen as essential to the process of participating in a community and becoming a member of that community. Lave and Wenger (1991) highlight that in the absence of a field of mature practice, 'exchange value replaces the use value of increasing participation'. They discuss test taking in schools and state: 'Test taking then becomes a new parasitic practice, the goal of which is to increase the exchange value of learning independently of its use value' (Lave & Wenger, 1991:112).

Producing and analyzing our tales from the field has opened a discursive space as we highlight the tensions in maintaining our positioning as experienced academics, critical friends and researchers. REF 2021 provides a context for our current lived experience, and we illuminate how we are influenced by a dominant discourse that privileges publications in high-ranked journals, rather than practitioner journals or book chapters. This highlights the danger that REF 2021, and other external monitoring and control mechanisms within HE, can become a 'parasitic practice'.

Co-constructing this chapter has provided a discursive space for us to be MAD. To be Michelle, Aileen and Deborah, maintaining an element of fun while enabling each other to achieve mutual action and development. We contribute by daring to share the lived experience of three experienced academics who have, and continue to have, fulfilling academic careers. We have remained employed and employable, and our set has provided a (relatively safe) place to begin questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and achieve our ideals of 'becoming' critically reflective practitioners. Our collaborative insider-research and the process of action learning has supported us to question some of our taken-for-granted-assumptions. However, this questioning needs to be extended and supported within wider communities (Corley & Thorne, 2006). This draws attention to the relationship between the MAD set and the wider work 'community'.

### **Conclusions**

We offer insight into an emerging ideological dilemma which opened a discursive space for alternative positioning. In opening this discursive space, it has been possible to talk about the dominance and privileging of certain activities and the marginalization of others. Our aim in MADs is to enthuse our mutual action and development with a sense of reflexivity and relational responsibility (Cunliffe, 2014). Our hope is that the process of 'becoming' experienced academics remains enjoyable, less riddled with anxiety and more productive. As can be seen, we have produced our book chapter and thank the Editors for their patience and the extended deadlines. To conclude, we hope the notion of MADs has resonance and captures the imagination of others in HRD. We offer a process and a 'safe space' to critique all things associated with learning and argue the need to reclaim learning and development activities from the dominant performative paradigm.

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