

Boundaries, Meaning and Change: Job Crafting and Academic Identity

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Abstract

Over the past 50 years academic work - academically conceptualised as tasks driven by exploration, uncertainty and the pursuit of knowledge - has increasingly been shaped by market demands, performance metrics and expectations of impact. As a result, academic time and resources are being diverted into activities that support institutional priorities and academic career stability and away from more expansive forms of academic work. Academic values such as academic autonomy and freedom are under challenge, threatening the academic sense of self as captured in Winter's (2009) "academic identity schism".

Despite these challenges, an emerging body of scholarship is highlighting how academics are still creating new academic values and practices in their roles. Building on this literature, this study uses a reflexive qualitative approach and social constructionist framework to explore academic job crafting through interviews with 24 academics from three universities: Suffolk, Essex and Cambridge. The findings are organised around three key themes. Firstly, participants conceptualise their work in terms of playing multiple institutional and academic games. Secondly, participants link meaningful academic work to social, relational and collaborative activity. Thirdly, participants reject the term "academic", preferring self-concepts that reflect forms of work they experience as meaningful.

Overall, this thesis demonstrates that academic game-playing creates spaces for meaningful work through which academic identities are constructed. Participants describe approaching their identities like bricoleurs, drawing on networks, institutions, activities, values, and goals to craft their academic sense of self. An understanding of academic identity is offered that emphasises collaboration and social benefit rather than outputs and funding as markers of academic credibility. Academics are recognised as navigators of neoliberal environments whilst not behaving entirely neoliberal individuals themselves, but rather aligning more with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) concept of "altruistic individualism". A reflexive approach to academic identity is therefore shown where, through academic job crafting, meaningful academic identities are negotiated within, alongside, and beyond, the structures of higher education (HE). Moreover, academics are shown to be not just reproducing these HE structures, but, through job crafting, are subtly reshaping their roles, identities, and the environments in which they work.

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Table 1 - Table of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full
API	Associate Principal Investigator
CL	Course Leader
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
KEF	Knowledge Exchange Framework
OFS	Office for Students
PI	Principal Investigator
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
REA	Research England Allocations
REF	Research Excellence Framework
SL	Senior Lecturer
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

Chapter 1 - Introduction and Background

Researcher Self Reflection

Perhaps unsurprisingly this study has caused many thousands of hours of self-reflection on my own academic identity. I originally proposed this topic for research as an exploration of the strategies that academics use to sustain and develop their academic careers. At this point I had been working in professional services at universities in the UK since 2002, and had seen first-hand examples of academics approaching their work in creative ways that often led to successes largely hidden from view. Capturing these examples seemed like a good idea to show how high quality academic work is still being produced in a financially-driven world.

This project comes from a theme that has interested me throughout my degrees - human agency. The concept of the individual as an agent capable of enacting influence on themselves and the world around them is at the heart of all my academic work. For the theoretical underpinning of this study, Beck's theories on agency took me in a new direction. For Beck, individuals have freedom around the choices in their lives, but with the understanding that the self, the social, and context-awareness sets the (movable) boundaries for this freedom. I need to be transparent - I want very much for it to be true for individuals to have the capacity to improve their lives, even when they face considerable difficulties. Agency, job crafting, and the promise of improved working life, new meanings and new identities, was therefore an exciting pathway for this study.

In this work I focus on a key domain of human agency - the workplace. Modern workplaces are layered with structures and rules, meaning that exploring the extent to which individuals realise a sense of agency in their roles and work identities was both exciting and challenging. As the specific focus of this project is academia, exploring the relationship between agency and structure in an environment subject to continuous change, suggested insights into the ways in which agency can have positive and negative outcomes. I am deeply interested in how academics produce research and publish when clashes between academic and institutional goals make pushing the boundaries of knowledge in a truly academic sense difficult. Do my academic colleagues choose an identity which is either knowledge-focussed, or finances-focussed? Or can both co-exist? The participants in this study certainly demonstrate that through game playing where the game is not personal but the

work is, a sophisticated form of academic identity can be crafted that is, I think, true to core academic values whilst also meeting the demands of building a career in a UK university.

The guidance of my supervisors was immensely helpful. Although I have worked for nearly two decades at the cross-section of academia and administration, this study highlighted how limited my understanding of working as an academic has been. I am now certainly more aware of the complexities and nuances of academic life. My hope is that this work benefits both academic and non-academic staff through making visible successful strategies for building academic careers that are mostly hidden. Several academics have reached out to me about study to ask about the findings and the themes that have come from it, and have engaged with considering their own activities through the lens of job crafting, game playing and meaning making. Their interest may be as much about finding out what their fellow colleagues are doing as it is about building their academic identities – which highlights why this study, and the stories recorded in it so, has been so deeply interesting to undertake.

As a result of this work, my own academic interests have moved towards how individuals create meaning within constrained institutional settings. In this new academic space I have found academic purpose and enthusiasm, and there are many potential avenues for further work, such as through an exploration of whistleblowing in Universities and the NHS. I feel - I hope - that I am on a path that continues to move towards a genuine intellectual understanding of meaning in human behaviour, that I work hard to maintain a sense of my own personal honesty, and that I build on the rigorous academic training of this PhD. The future is bright!

Introduction and Background - Overview

The existing scholarship often presents the changes to higher education (HE) in England over the past 50 years as causing erosion, crisis and constraint for academic identities, highlighting the rise of performance management and the dominance of the market in shaping the sector (Winter, 2009; Henkel, 2005; Ball, 2013). This work is valuable because it highlights the structural pressures on contemporary academic work. However, when considering academic identity, there is the risk that academics are positioned primarily as reactive or passive subjects of HE change, rather than as individuals who actively interpret, negotiate and reshape their work and identities. This thesis therefore builds on, and contributes to, the literature by examining how academics create spaces for meaning, agency and identity construction within changing and constrained HE environments.

In this chapter, I set out the underpinning concepts to this thesis of identity, individualisation, changes to HE and institutional contexts. Firstly, the rationale for this research is introduced with the research questions. I then include a brief overview of identity theory, tracing the shift from identity as fixed or inherited, to identity as socially constructed, reflexive and actively practised. Individualism, individualisation and altruistic individualism are considered drawing on the work of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) so that identity is presented in the context of risk, uncertainty and mutual social obligation. The workplace as a source of professional identity is touched on, moving on to explore the changing nature of HE in the UK, including the effects of neoliberalism, managerialism, massification, performativity and academic capitalism. Finally, this chapter provides an overview of the three universities of this study - Cambridge, Essex and Suffolk. By outlining the differences between the universities in terms of resources, funding structures and staffing profiles, this chapter establishes the underpinning idea that institutional contexts shape how academics construct their identities and engage in job crafting.

By situating academic identity within the wider conditions of neoliberalism, risk society and institutional differences, this sets the foundation for Chapter 2, which examines the literature on academic identity in more detail, and Chapter 3, which considers job crafting as a mechanism through which academics actively construct meaningful academic identities.

Rationale for the Research

The working lives of academics in the UK have changed significantly over the past 50 years (Henkel, 2005; Harris, 2005; Clegg, 2008). Neoliberal ideas and practices have reconfigured UK higher education (HE) around market-driven priorities, transforming universities into competitive, business-like, and individualistic environments (Deem et al., 2010). Consequently, academics are working in a climate of constant change and uncertainty, negotiating academic identities in an environment where academic work has become increasingly precarious, transactional and misaligned with core academic values (Bal & Doci, 2018).

The literature on academic identity has to date has presented a broadly pessimistic view of the impact of the changes to HE on academia (Barrow et al., 2022). Erosions in the spaces for academic freedom and autonomy have negatively impacted the quality of academic work, contributing to growing public scepticism towards academics (Henkel, 2005; Williams, 2016). Changes to student numbers caps, student funding, the introduction of national research and teaching assessments in REF and TEF, and the requirement for academic work to meet financial and social metrics, has directly altered the work of HE (Krause, 2009). Academics are experiencing reduced control over the nature and scope of their work, as well as a reduction in power over their academic roles, resources, and strategy (Floyd & Dimmock, 2011). A resulting state of crisis is being acutely experienced by academics, with tensions between academic and institutional priorities leading to an “academic identity schism” (Winter, 2009, p.121).

Despite the challenges and changes in HE, research shows that academics do find ways to produce work that is meaningful and that contributes to the field of knowledge in their academic discipline (Feldman & Sandoval, 2018; O'Regan & Gray, 2018). For example, academics are shifting the boundaries of their academic work through strategies such as negotiating with university management to create new spaces, intellectual and physical, for their work (Nordbäck et al., 2022). Younger academics are demonstrating a nuanced approach to agency, employing flexible approaches to academic values and a willingness to be adaptable and take on institutionally-directed tasks and roles in order to gain some autonomy over their activities (Archer, 2008). Additional skills outside of teaching, publishing and research are being developed, such as entrepreneurial activities and participation in university branding and marketing, in order to develop and maintain academic

careers alongside institutional priorities (Kolsaker, 2008; Sang, 2018; Bristow et al., 2017). These strategies are proving to be successful, in part, because in rising to meet the demand for social benefit academics are stepping away from academic epistemic dominance in some areas in favour of co-production in research and teaching (Baumgartner, 2020).

This study seeks to build on this existing scholarship therefore by highlighting new strategies for academic work and focussing on how academics create and sustain their identities in constrained and changing institutional environments. It investigates how academics understand, proactively shape and redefine their identities, drawing on the model of job crafting as a reflexive, proactive, individual approach to building identity at work in a changing landscape (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Academia is perceived as a profession with a high potential for job crafting (Coate et al., 2015). However, job crafting in academia has been the focus of relatively little research, to date focussing on how academics experience their workplace identity within institutional and disciplinary structures, rather than how they actively identity build (McNaughtan et al., 2022). This study therefore also proposes to contribute to this relatively small field of work on job crafting academic identities (notable studies to date are largely outside the UK and include Arachie et al., 2021; Melhem, 2019; Brickson, 2011; Kaylan et al., 2018) by also exploring how academics engage in job crafting in order to construct their careers and academic identity.

Research Questions

In response to the areas outlined above in the rationale for the research, this study has been guided by the following research questions:

1. How do academics reflexively construct and negotiate their academic identities through job crafting?
2. How do academics interpret and reshape the boundaries of their roles within different institutional contexts?
3. How is meaning constructed in academic work, and how does this shape the construction of academic identities?

In line with the reflexive qualitative approach of this study, these research questions are theoretically grounded in the relationship between academic identity, job crafting

and meaning-making, and are informed by a social constructionist perspective that recognises reflexivity and interpretation in the situated construction of identity.

What is identity?

Despite the increasing focus on identity throughout the social sciences in the last century, identity remains a complex and amorphous concept in academic literature (Castelló et al., 2021). Conceptualised in terms of continuity, difference and similarities in relation to the self and others, the concept of identity has been in use in England since 1586, “*The sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition of being a single individual; the fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality*” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). Understandings of the duality of humans as individuals and citizens, and as individuals and social beings, have caused social roles to change across time from which the dynamics of civil society and individualism have emerged (Harris, 2005). Identity has shifted from the pre-modern concept of being fixed and bestowed by culture and tradition, to a postmodern phenomenon of becoming, where individuals construct and can be seen as exercising a degree of control in respect of the construction of their own identities (Adams, 2003).

Changes in the relationship between knowledge and society - where knowledge has shifted from being the privilege of the elite, to accessible to all through reason and science, to subjective experience from the phenomenology of the individual, to knowledge as a commodity and individuals as human capital - has defined the boundaries for ideas on identity (Nash, 2003). Identity in this study is conceptualised as a shifting, multi-faceted and dynamic concept, and so exploring identity and identities requires an understanding of the historical, social, political and cultural contexts that they exist in (Galliher et al, 2017). These contexts are therefore discussed in the following sections.

The rise of the individual - A brief history of identity theory

The question of identity, and how humans answer the self-concept question of “who am I” is complex. Heidegger’s (1927) idea of “being unto death” holds that individuals do not fully understand their identity until they are facing the end of their life, as it is only at this point that we are able to consider ourselves holistically. This is in part because identity can be a dormant phenomenon, only becoming salient

when it is threatened or challenged, for example in interactions with others if they fail to validate our ideas of our own self-concept (Renaut & Nehamas, 1997).

Considered by psychologists to be the first work on identity, William James's concept of the self (1890), recognised that an individual's sense of self holds two core components; "I" as the thinking subject with self-concept and an autobiographical story), and "Me" as an object and actor in the world with material experiences and social status (Miell et al, 2007). James's work was seminal in that it did not recognise identity as existing *a priori*, for example through features, such as class that are inherited at birth, but rather that individuals form their identities on a continual basis, drawing on their mental, physical and social contexts (Bordonga, 2007). James's understanding of identity was historically situated, building on the rise of secular humanism from the Enlightenment. This had shifted ideas around the purpose of individual life, opening up new concepts for how individuals could live and self-regard, and enabling the space, mentally and physically, to pursue self-interests (Du Gay, 2005). The Enlightenment facilitated the emergence of the concept of the individual as an autonomous agent, and with it the idea of the individual as different and original (Taylor, 1991). By the 19th century, the idea of identity as individual experiences characterised by progress and developed over time had started to dominate academic and cultural discourse (Wahrman, 2004).

Seen as a fundamental pillar of sociology, Mead's theory of identity (1934) advocated the "me" in identity as a cognitive object rooted in intersubjectivity and interactions with others and external systems, recognising identity as constructed through the relationship between social structures and the individual, as well as internal processes of self-verification (Burke & Stets, 2023; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Mead's theories built on the work of James, drawing on a systematic approach to identity rooted in philosophical pragmatism (Roberts, 1977). This recognition that identity has a social dimension and is constructed through an understanding of how the self is perceived by others, meaning individuals seek to build identity in part through performance, and changed how the autonomy of the individual in society, particularly with their own identity, can be understood (Goffman, 1959). Identities are broadly understood as meanings that individuals assign to the social roles they hold and that relate to the groups that they belong to (Gallagher et al., 2022). Meaning and identity is therefore created from activity and recognises that individuals will have multiple meanings and multiple identities that are linked to

social structures reflecting the many different social roles and social obligations that individuals occupy (Burke & Stets, 2023).

Mead's work also influenced psychologists, and for example the ground-breaking work of Erikson (1968), highlights the importance of a core identity in a psychosocial context. Erickson theorised that identity is characterised by difference, development and continuity, with an understanding of the individual as developing their identity across space and time and in relation to those around them; "*a conscious sense of individual uniqueness...an unconscious striving for continuity...a solidarity with a group's ideals*" (Erikson, 1968, p.208). As with Mead's theories, the relationship between meaning and identity is emphasised, with meaning as the mediator enabling the individual to connect with the social world. Developed further in Tajfel's (1979) social identity theory (SIT), social context is a core component in the development of individual identity, and a person's sense of who they are is based on the concept of shared attributes with the groups they see themselves as members of and distinct from groups they see themselves as different from (Burke et al., 2009). Tajfel's work has been key to exploring the conflict and genocide of the Second World War, highlighting that meaning and identity can create negative as well as positive outcomes for society.

Research on identity has continued to be a focus for much academic work across the later 20th century (Tomo, 2019). The existentialist school of thought on identity, rooted in the work of Sartre, holds that existence precedes essence, meaning that identity is never innate, but rather a creation from individual behaviour as a social being (Sartre, 1943). Existentialism therefore has significant overlap with social constructionism and the concept that individuals are what they do, and that identity is becoming rather than being. In the existentialist and social constructionist model identity changes are a sign of progress, rather than a failure. Moreover, individuals do not have fixed or singular identities but are always experiencing their identities across dualities of individual and social, subject and object, I and me.

Identity as becoming, and identity as a practice, is therefore a dominant conceptualisation of identity amongst contemporary researchers (Hornsey, 2008). This thesis draws on this theoretical framework, recognising identity as constructed, expressed, sustained and realised through activities and behaviours. This view also provides the foundation for the theoretical underpinning for scholarship on academic identity, as explored in Chapter 2 (Barrow et al., 2022).

Individualism, Individualisation and Altruistic Individualism

Individualism, and the extent to which individuals act in accordance with their own values and so demonstrate agency, has been a key concern for theorists since Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) positioned the natural liberty of individuals as a significant challenge to the social order. The main concern with individualism is the idea that self-interested action is a threat to society, *'Freedom of choice and self-determination are virtuous principles, but when selfish individual interests threaten to destroy the common good, the limits of individualism are exposed'* (Callero, 2023, p.18). This is not a new complaint, and De Toqueville, writing in the mid-19th century, noted that *"That word 'individualism' . . . was unknown to our ancestors, for the good reason that in their days every individual necessarily belonged to a group and no one could regard himself as an isolated unit"* (de Toqueville, 1856, p.96).

Concerns about individualism present the interesting challenge of how to understand humans as both self-interested individuals and social beings who contribute to family and community networks. This challenge has been taken up by modern individualism, rooted in the early 20th century work of Weber. Weber's sociological investigation into industrial modern society, grounded in "methodological individualism", situates the individual as the central unit in social theory, and recognises individual action as "meaningful behaviour", and social action as engaging with the "behaviour of others" (Prosch, 2018, pp.31-32). Weber's work is differentiated from contemporary social theorists such as Marx and Durkheim in that it focussed on the individual, individual motivations and goals, and "individual independence" as a driver of individual actions (Palonen, 1999, pp. 526-527). For Weber, rather than being at odds, individuality and sociability are "mutually complementary and operated in the same direction" (Weber, cited in Kim, 2004, p.84). Weber's idea of individual identity recognises that personality is "individual directed actions towards the achievement of a coherent project in the world" (Holton & Turner, 2010, p.11). Meaning, and the desire to engage in meaningful activities, is a key driver of human action, with social interaction acting as both a source and receiver of this action (Schwinn, 2023).

Building on the work of Weber, Giddens, Beck, and Bauman identified two distinct stages in the development of societies in the West since the Enlightenment. The first is modernity, characterised by the rise of science and industrialised society, and

the second late or “liquid” modernity, characterised by a fragmentation of social institutions, “detraditionalisation” and the rise of globalisation from the mid-20th century (Giddens, 1991, p.5, p.37; Bauman, 2000). The role of society is therefore recognised as a significant force in the construction of contemporary identities, and that individuals respond to the loss of pre-agreed social identities through the process of individualisation (Giddens, 1984). Giddens argues that the fast rate of change experienced in late modernity had a significant impact on social institutions and systems of living, creating division and fragmentation and challenging the understanding of identity. Structuration theory recognises structures as “*rules and resources, organised as properties of social systems*” and that these structures are both the products and producers of social systems so limit and enable the freedom of the individuals existing within them (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). Giddens therefore recognised a duality of structure in that the agency of the individual and the structure they live in are inseparable (Giddens, 1984). For Giddens, individuals are aware of themselves within their structures and able to draw on these, and so identity is a “reflexively organised project”, where individualisation is the process by which individuals build their own identities in this context (Giddens, 1991, p.5). Giddens individualisation is optimistic as he argues that this provides individuals with the freedom to construct their own identities, and the “*detraditionalisation of social roles, and so the capacity for individuals to build rather than inherit their identities, can lead to individuals creating stable, although illusory, identities in an uncertain world, providing “ontological security”*” (Giddens, 1991, p.5, p.37).

In contrast to Giddens’ optimism, Beck (1996) identified a third phase of modernity in the late 20th century that has an impact on identity, second modernity, which is characterised by reflexivity, risk, and society organised around mitigating the negative consequences of modernity. Beck emphasised that individual identities are not constructed in isolation, and the structures in which the individual operates have a bearing on the scope and space for identity formation, as well as how the individual self-regards and understands their own identity. The challenge for identity in the later 20th century is therefore to develop a stable and durable identity as a response to identities becoming increasingly fluid across the century (Barrow et al., 2022). Beck argued that individuals address this challenge by seeking to construct new identities “‘. . .the individual must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves’ (Beck et al., 1994, p.13). This process of identity construction is shaped by Beck’s individualisation, or “*the individual’s release from industrial society into the turbulence of the global risk society*” (Beck et al., 1994,

p.7). Beck's theory of individualisation draws heavily on Giddens' work on identity in "high modernity" where individuals build identities as reflexive and unstable projects, unable to draw on traditional social identities around family, class and religion for example (Giddens, 1991, p.81). However, Beck's theories are less optimistic than Giddens, as for Beck, under reflexive modernity, a structural change in the relationship between individual and society has taken place which has greatly restricted the ability of individuals to find meaningful social identities and to take action to improve their lives (Rasborg, 2017).

For Beck, a globalised world has therefore created the "institutionalised individualism" of a, "reflexive" modernity and the "risk society" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002 p.184, p.20). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) further developed their definition of individualisation as a process where individuals disembed from traditional structures and build new identities mediated by risk and self-reflection (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Between the early and late twentieth century, as a result of globalisation, a shift took place in the west that changed the relationship between society and the individual *"For the first time in history, the individual is becoming the basic unit of social reproduction"* (Beck & Beck Gernsheim; 2002: xxii). Their individualisation differs from ideas of individualism, and earlier ideas of individualisation, in that they focus on the influence that structures of society have on individuals and how these inform the choices that individuals make, rather than how personal values inform these choices. How free individuals can be in the process of individualisation is a point of debate, and Norbert (2012) for example argues that individualisation as a "process of liberation" has become "ambiguous" in the later 20th century, as contemporary society has moved beyond the individual freeing their identity from traditional structures, to become more concerned with the scope individuals have to choose their identity (Ebert, 2012, p29).

For Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, individualisation therefore has inherently social implications. As individualisation is a common experience then identities are a social concern and reflexive individualisation is an "inescapable fate" grounded in "mutual obligation" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.22). This is a key point, and individualisation is concerned not only with the structures, but also the social environments, in which individuals operate in (Ebert, 2012). Whereas within individualism individuals were considered less important than the collective, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim see new possibilities for individual identity as social identity, and where in order to "think of oneself" the individual has to be "living for others"

(Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.22). They labelled this concept “altruistic individualism”, describing it as where individuals recognise that in order to construct their own lives and identities, they need to contribute to the lives and identities of others, was a key development in their work, and is an important conceptual underpinning of this study (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.22). The basis for how this idea of altruistic individualism can be seen in workplaces as social forums dominated by structures and processes is now considered.

Professional Identities - An Overview

Professions are defined as distinct areas of work where professional members hold specialist knowledge, specialist skills, provide a specialist service, work to specific ethical codes, and hold titles that give a recognised social status (Sommerlad, 2007). In turn, professional identity is understood in terms of how individuals self-regard in relation to their work, as well as whether they consider themselves to be part of a profession (Tomo, 2019). Interestingly, professional identities can align or conflict with institutional identities, and individuals can become and unbecome a member of a profession (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Archer, 2008). This flexibility in identity may be essential in modern working, and for example Weber (1905) highlights that the rise of public service bureaucratic organisations promoted equality in how the public received the service, but at the price of dehumanisation (Vine, 2021). Weber’s recognition of the bureaucratic “iron cage” creates social systems that seek to treat all participants equally whilst removing individual autonomy, individual subjectivity and renders individuals as objects, which in turn has shaped the professional identities of those who work for them (Holton & Turner, 2010, p.10; Kim, 2004).

Since the 1980s professional practice has been “radically restructured”, as a consequence of neoliberalism - a concept explored further later in this chapter – challenging both the autonomy and claims of expertise by professionals (Beck & Young, 2005, p.183). As individualisation has eroded the scope for individuals to inherit identities with a common, pre-conceived, agreed understanding of what it means to hold certain labels such as “wife” and “teacher”, this has also presented a considerable challenge to the idea of professional identity (Cooper & Olson, 1997). As a result, Stronach and colleagues (2002) argue for a new understanding of professions and professional identity based on what professionals do rather than as purely affiliation to a set of ideals. This view situates professional identity as

constructed through workplace activities whilst also recognising that these activities are fluid and changing, existing between “economies of performance” and “ecologies of practice” (Stronach et al., 2002). A stable sense of self is therefore only achievable when the professionals themselves define their own professional identity, and becomes problematic when external bodies with their own set of interests, such as governments, reshape societal demands on professional work - a situation witnessed in HE, explored in the next section (Deem et al., 2010).

Higher Education in the UK - A brief history

In this thesis, “higher education institution” (HEI) is used to refer to organisations that come under the wider context of higher education, whilst “university” refers more specifically to the institutions that hold university in their title. As Cambridge, Essex and Suffolk are all universities that operate in HE, the terms sometimes overlap, but HEI is used where the discussion refers to broader sector-level structures, policies and institutional conditions. In this regard, academic identity and higher education (HE) identity are treated as related but distinct concepts. Academic identity refers to how individuals construct and negotiate their sense of self as academics, including the meanings attached to their work, values, relationships, disciplinary commitments and professional practices. HE identity refers to identities shaped by the wider sector and by HEIs, including formal roles, organisational categories, career structures, performance expectations, institutional priorities and policy demands.

This research recognises English HE as institutions shaped by neoliberal practices and operating in a society organised around uncertainty, risk and individualisation (Deem et al, 2010; Beck, 2009). Changes to the Higher Education (HE) Sector in the UK, driven by neoliberal and managerial approaches to education have created priorities focussed on financial targets for HEIs, creating tensions with academic priorities of pushing the boundaries of knowledge. In the early 21st century, HE identity in England has presented significant challenge to academic identity, promoting a business-like rather than a knowledge-focussed approach to teaching and research, and “academic capitalism” at the expense of academic excellence (Watson, 2011, p.955; Watermeyer, 2015; Winter, 2009). As a result, higher education institutions (HEIs) are now predominantly shaped by political priorities (Frank and Meyer, 2007). As a consequence, HEIs are learning to be “doing more

with less”, with universities behaving more like businesses, restricting the space for academic priorities and identities (Deem & Brehony, 2005, p.245).

“The industry is booming, more students than ever are entering universities, yet the academy is seen as increasingly in crisis. Staff workloads keep mounting, student debt soaring, and staff and student anxieties alike are multiplying, even as government underfunding, imposed managerialism and commercialisation threaten to reduce the underlying logic of higher education to market principles.” Segal, 2020

Perkin’s (2007) excellent scholarship on the origins of the university highlights that the universities of medieval Europe had intellectual differences from other geographical regions in that they encouraged critical thinking, whereas institutions in China, Asia, the Middle East and the Americas focussed on learning. This ethos caused the early universities in England to expect to be largely autonomous and responsible for their own academic standards (Bohrer, in Kompf and Denicolo, 2013). The original model of HE in England was the Oxford and Cambridge system of learning under a “don”, where a college tutor would teach an entire syllabus to a small number of students, with a view to moulding them for future leadership roles (Palfreyman, 2010, p.94). In contrast, the Scottish Universities of St Andrews (c1410), Glasgow (c1451), Aberdeen (c1495) and Edinburgh (c1583), had implemented a different learning system, where professors were encouraged to specialise in a single subject and to lecture to large classes (Bell, 2000).

The industrial revolution and consequent social changes meant that new institutions of the 19th century had a choice to make around their institutional identity (Perkins, 2007). The Scottish model of HE presented a new identity for HE in England where education and knowledge was treated as a commodity and its students could be leaders in the industrial world (Bell, 2000). This Scottish system was considered a bold new method of HE suitable for an industrially developing society, and was spoken about in the English Parliament during the 1800s with great favour as institutions providing professional education and serving the whole community, *“The English Universities...may be roughly said to teach men how to spend 1,000 a year with dignity and intelligence while the Scottish Universities teach them how to make 1,000 a year with dignity and intelligence”* (Playfair, cited in Anderson & Wallace, 2015, p.265).

During the 1800-1960 red brick expansion, HE in England largely resisted the new Scottish form of HE identity, maintaining an elitist nature and providing a pathway for the rich and powerful members of society to gain status (Palfreyman, 2010). Overall, universities as public education remained relatively small, with 811 students recorded as applying to Oxford and Cambridge each year in the mid-19th century to study for a career in the church, teaching or commercial professions (such as accountancy or politics), with around 70% graduating (in contrast to 714 applying a year with only 25% graduating in the mid-sixteenth century) (de Pleijt, 2016). The Royal Commissions of the 1850s and 1870s introduced teaching of a wide range of subjects, ending the explicit link with the Church and what had been seen as an Anglican monopoly (Perkin, 2007). The English ancient university identity however persisted, and the “red brick” or “civic” universities of Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield and Bristol that followed from 1900s, and then Reading, Nottingham, Southampton, Hull, Exeter and Leicester from 1920s, initially followed suit with the Scottish model, but then moved back towards the ancient university way of learning in the growth of the sector that followed the Second World War (Perkin, 2007).

Government intervention in HE from the 1960s, including the highly influential Robbins Report (1963), resulted in further expansion of HEIs in England. The creation of polytechnics from former colleges of advanced technology established two types of higher education institutions in England, meaning institution numbers almost doubled in the 1960s from 25 to 49 (Deem et al., 2010). In contrast to the universities, the polytechnics were publicly accountable teaching institutions with Local Authority management structures and minimal funding for research, meaning they contrasted to the collegiate academic community organisations of the universities that provided academic leadership in the form of the Senate (Perkin, 2007). Crossover between polytechnics and universities was minimal, and academic mobility remained low, with under 3% of academics moving between the different types of institution before the mid-1980s (Henkel, 2000).

From the 1960s, the new “plateglass” universities of UEA, Essex, Kent, Lancaster, Sussex, Warwick and York were formed, and as they were automatically granted autonomous degree-awarding powers, were able to experiment further with new modes of teaching and learning (Johnston, 2004, p.57). The 1960s also saw the start of the movement towards widening access and increasing student numbers in England (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Massification in HE draws its definition from Trow (1970) as the enabling by government policy and expansion of institutions to

make higher education a social norm for the majority of the population (Tight, 2020). Massification was pursued as an HE policy across the later part of the 20th century, and seriously eroded the autonomy of HEIs through a series of new external policies and scrutiny, which the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) justified in 1998 through *“the rapid expansion of numbers of students and institutions, the associated broadening of the purposes of HE, and the considerable increase in the amount of public money required, more methodological approaches have had to be employed”* (QAA 1998, in Becher & Trowler, 2001).

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed an increased focus on massification and a series of government-led milestone changes to HE in the UK that reshaped the work of HEIs. The influential Jarratt Report of 1985 recommended managerialist principles for the whole of HE, and the Education Reform Act of 1988 unified the HE sector by freeing the polytechnics from local authorities and granting them the ability to award their own degrees. Consequences of this have been described as “seismic”, leading to considerable expansion of the HE sector (Henkel, 2000, p.21). The 1991 White Paper “Higher Education - a new framework” set out a new system for external quality audits and judgements on the quality of teaching and learning for HEIs (Bohrer, in Kompf and Denicolo, 2013, p.129). This then paved the way for the milestone Further and Higher Education Act 1992 which directly converted thirty-five polytechnics to universities, ending academic tenure and the system of academic self-regulation, and leading to the widespread adoption of managerial practices in universities (Deem et al, 2010).

The 1992 Act also resulted in the creation of Higher Education Funding Councils, including the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which not only held responsibility for the distribution of HEI funding, but provided oversight of the two key measures of HEI success in England in the public domain, the Research Excellence Framework (RAE implemented in 1986, replaced by REF from 2008) to assess quality of research, and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF, implemented from 2014, renamed the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework in 2017) to assess quality of teaching. These exercises assessed the quality of research every six years, creating league tables of excellence from assessment of research submitted by institutions, with significant funding being allocated to institutions with highly rated research (Lucas, 2006). The dominance of quality assurance in HE was then formalised with the establishment of the government’s Quality Assurance Agency for HE (QAA) in 1997 with the remit of

“external scrutiny aimed at providing guarantees that institutions have suitable quality control mechanisms in place” (Bohrer, in Kompf and Denicolo, 2013).

Finance was the second key area of HE reform in the 1990s. An increasing body of students resulting from the policy of massification had provided significant income generation for institutions, which was then shifted away from the government purse with the introduction of student fees - from £1,000 in 1998 to £3,000 in 2006 and £9,000 in 2012 (von Alberti-Alhtaybat et al., 2017). This impact of repositioning students as direct purchasers of education also reshaped the work of HEIs (Ball, 2013). Students as consumers were further entrenched by the removal of the student numbers cap in 2015/16 which put institutions in control of their own student recruitment for the first time, albeit in a heavily competitive market (von Alberti-Alhtaybat et al., 2017). For academics, the removal of the student numbers cap succeeded in intensifying the competition for students, as well as for student number targets to become an integral measure of departmental strategies and success (Knight, 2019).

In the 21st century, despite the idea that HEIs have a political role in a neoliberal world, notably the word “academic” features sparsely in strategy in the lexicon of HE policy makers in the UK (Sabri, 2010). For the UK government, education is no longer a goal in itself, and in a speech at the 2021 HEPI conference, Gavin Williamson, the then Minister for Education, set out the purpose of education explicitly as to add value to workplaces: *“Because we must never forget that the purpose of education is to give people the skills that will lead to a fulfilling working life”* (Department for Education, 2021). The function and purpose of education in society has therefore changed across the later twentieth century, away from the Enlightenment model of seeking empirical knowledge that can be justified as objectively true, and towards a model of knowledge that is politically necessary. Two main ideologies have contributed to this change - managerialism and neoliberalism, which are explored in the next section.

Neoliberalism and Managerialism

Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as the reshaping of society into financial goals, as *“a theory of political economic practice that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free*

markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p.2). Neoliberalism has been characterised negatively in the literature on academic identity, described as an ideology that prioritises growth, competition, financial hardship, and a restricted view of knowledge (Tight, 2008). Since the 1980s and the policy changes outlined in the previous section, neoliberalism has been viewed as the main driver of HEIs shifting from being communities of scholars to becoming public service centres of education, focussed on market forces, competition and economics (Henkel, 2005). Critically, this shift is seen as occurring in opposition to the core HE values of education and research that furthers knowledge, and is a direct challenge to the idea of social justice at the core of academia, *"In the neoliberal model, public education is to be made market responsive by being transformed into a competitive market...cast by neoliberals as...“an island of socialism in a free market sea”.* (Pickard, 2014, p.12).

Discussions on neoliberalism in the literature have tended to focus on the three key areas - managerialism, performativity and globalisation (Kenny, 2018). Mahoney and Weiner (2019) define managerialism as the introduction of business practices, typically used by the private sector, into public organisations. Managerialism dictates operational practices focussed on efficiency, accountability and economic gain, enabling neoliberal ideas to be embedded into organisations and is a key catalyst in the transformation of universities into businesses with knowledge workers (Deem et al., 2010). Also, despite the promise of managerialism that it could increase financial resources for academics and their institutions, it has in practice resulted in considerable problems for HEIs through tensions between operational models of centralisation and decentralisation, as well as how to manage control of institutional priorities and innovations (Mahoney & Weiner, 2019).

Managerialist practices have created significant challenges to the autonomy and professionalism of academics through systems of quality control and scrutiny from bodies outside of academia (Henkel, 2000). In the later 20th century managerialism is typified as the practice of removing decision-making from academics, eroding their control of their academic activities, and only enabling re-entry into the power structures of their institutions through the taking on of managerial roles (Klickauer, 2015). However, it is notable managerialism was able to take hold of HEIs, and it did have some appeal through its aim of reducing the financial dependence on the state by increasing the potential for HEIs to pursue income diversification (Deem & Brehony, 2005). In practice this enabled the growth of the competitive academic

worlds of publishing, grant-seeking and consultancy, where academics play a “research game”, drawing on their “academic power” as well as their subject expertise, to gain power and space in their own institutions to pursue their own academic activities (Deem et al., 2010, p.37). Academics bought into these worlds in part because they created spaces for alternative income streams for independent academic work (Henkel, 2005).

Neoliberal ideologies and managerialist practices have created an HE system where academics are increasingly monitored through institutional and external measurements of teaching, funding, publishing, student surveys and league tables. This culture of performance management has impacted the autonomy and space of individual academics, and has meant that the ability to gain, retain and advance in academic roles is now based on metrics rather than on academic ability (Melo et al, 2010; Ball, 2013). The response from academics has been largely negative, with a culture of performativity being created that results in activities focussed on meeting performance measures rather than on the quality of academic work (Mahoney & Weiner, 2019). Academics have had to tailor their activities to fulfil performance management in increasingly homogenised workplaces, although how performance management is dealt with at the level of the individual requires further exploration (Ball, 2021).

Performance management in the context of market-driven activities has created a working environment characterised by competition not only on a local, but also an international basis, for academics (Askins & Blazek, 2017). Globalisation is defined as the internationalisation of the world economy, through “...*the rapid growth of trade, foreign investment and global finance, which have significantly increased the interdependence of national political economies*” (Radice, cited in in Saad-Filho & Johnston, 2004, p.96). Neoliberalism, although not a direct cause of globalisation, is therefore “inseparable” from globalisation (Saad-Filho & Johnston, 2004, p.2). The commodification of knowledge has led to the idea of the knowledge economy, where individual intellect is a marketable resource (Peters, 2010). Human capital, defined as an individual’s knowledge and education, is therefore an integral component of the knowledge economy (Peters, 2003). Slaughter and Leslie have described the impact of globalisation on HE “academic capitalism” (Slaughter & Leslie, 2001, p.154). In turn, academics have had to change their identities, becoming “capitalists” and “entrepreneurs”, focussed on both the “competitiveness of the services they provide” and the security of their employment (Slaughter &

Leslie, 2001, p154). However, as with neoliberalism, academics have found opportunities in markets becoming accessible to them globally, with international academic networks and funding providing new opportunities for their academic work (Henkel, 2005).

The impact of neoliberalism on HE has therefore, in the most negative estimations, removed the core education mission from HEIs, leaving them as “hollowed-out” institutions (Crib & Gewirtz, 2013, p.338). However, it should be noted that the managerial-focussed 1885 Jarratt Report, although government sponsored, was commissioned by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals, and so came from within HE’s senior leaders (Middlehurst, 2004). Moreover, Campbell and Clark (1988), in their influential work *The Academic Profession*, two thirds of British university teachers actively welcomed HE sector expansion. Therefore, whilst an increasing gap between academic and HE identities and values is highlighted in the literature on academic identity, the financial incentives of neoliberalism had support from within the university sector in the UK – including being in part championed by academics who saw the opportunity for new ways of academic working.

Risk Society - an Alternative Lens to Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism, as explored in the section above, is credited with having a significant and negative impact on the construction of academic identity (Nordbäck et al., 2022; Williams, 2008). Neoliberal ideologies are seen as fundamentally changing educational workplaces into sites of competition, instrumentality and individualism, (Ball, 2015, 2012, 2002). However, whilst academics have had to change their working practices to accommodate the demands of neoliberalism, it is suggested that they themselves may not necessarily subscribe to neoliberal principles (Loveday, 2021).

Beck and Beck Gernsheim’s (2002) concept of the altruistic individual emerged from the concept of the “risk society” (Beck, 1992; 1996; 2009). Beck defines risk society as the organisation of western societies around a heightened awareness of risk, with a focus on identifying and controlling threats (Beck 2009). The risk society is therefore a sociological concept that seeks to explain the nature and drivers of modern society as it transitions from industrial society into reflexive modernity, and is characterised by societal and institutional organisation around the concept of risk. For Beck, the risk society has emerged from the failures of neoliberalism and

“globally-manufactured uncertainty” on an unprecedented scale (Beck, 2009, p.55). Beck argues that although disasters have always been present for humanity, the concept of risk and the risk society presents a new and distinct understanding of disaster. Risks are highly ambiguous, in themselves not disasters, but rather represent the anticipation of disasters. For Beck then, the concept of risk in the risk society is a social construct built around what is probable and conceivable, rather than actual, threats (Beck, 2009, p.118).

Beck’s risk society theory has been criticised, most notably around the distinction between natural and manufactured risks as a catalyst for cosmopolitanism and globalisation and that the theory is heavily westernised (Jong, 2022). However, despite these valid critiques, Beck’s risk society is still a useful concept for researchers interested in macro-social trends and cultural practices (Mythen, 2007). The risk society has significant implications for understanding identity as it recognises the burden of managing risk that is placed on individuals, and the reflexivity needed to accommodate this (Wimmer & Quandt, 2006). For academic work, the risk society has led to constant social and political scrutiny of knowledge advancement, creating a state of “reflexive modernity”, where the side-effects of modernity become the focus of society, progress becomes limited by an assessment of the potential downsides, and knowledge becomes ambiguous with those who work in knowledge under increased scrutiny (Beck, in Beck, Lash & Giddens, 1994, p.26; Beck, 2005, p.312). For academics, the risk society holds significant challenges for academic identity as it has created both the need for, and wide mistrust of, knowledge experts (Burgess et al., 2018).

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that the concept of the neoliberal individual is deeply flawed. They emphasise the importance of the social dimension in identity formation and the strategies individuals employ to navigate their broader social and institutional contexts, “*Neoliberal economics rests upon an image of the autarkic human self. It assumes that individuals alone can master the whole of their lives...yet this ideology blatantly conflicts with everyday experience...which shows that the individual...is self-insufficient and increasingly tied to others*” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.xxi). The right to claim academic expertise is linked academic social networks, as well as to institutional identity and the idea that some universities have a greater claim to expertise in knowledge areas than others (Barnett, 2000). Institutional context is therefore explored next.

Overview of the Universities of Cambridge, Essex and Suffolk

This research involves participants from three universities in England - the University of Cambridge, the University of Essex, and the University of Suffolk. The profile of universities – their history, priorities and academic standing - contributes to a sense of institutional identity, which in turn has an influence on the academic identities of the academics that work for them (Billot, 2010b).

Cambridge, the oldest institution in this study and the second oldest in the UK, it is reported, had come about through an unfortunate incident in Oxford.

“In the academic year 1208-9...a scholar killed a townsman with an arrow...The mayor and townsmen, unable to apprehend the scholar in question, seized two or three of his housemates, and with the consent of King John, hanged them outside the walls of Oxford. This clear violation of the privilege of clerics - all scholars were by definition clerics - was not lost on a society that still remembered the death of Beckett...the scholars of Oxford ran for their lives...and rented rooms in another town, where they continued teaching and collecting fees from their students” (Leader, 1988; pp7-8).

The University of Essex was established in 1964/65 as one of a group of seven new “plateglass” universities in the UK, agreed by the University Grants Committee, set up to reshape undergraduate studies (Beloff, 1970, p50). If Cambridge was seen as being founded on clerical privilege, then Essex is also regarded as having its own founding flavour, namely anti-establishment activists.

“Essex students are visibly (and, I hasten to confirm, statistically) more left-wing and rebellious than any of their Plateglass contemporaries. It was at Essex that Mr Crosland was greeted with a banner proclaiming him a Fascist, and that the Vietnam demonstration at Mr Wilson’s honorary degree ceremony in 1967 ended in allegations of police brutality” (Beloff, 1970, p.118).

The University of Suffolk has a very different origin story and ethos to the other two universities in this study. Founded in 2007 as University Campus Suffolk (UCS), UCS was formed as a joint venture between the University of East Anglia, the University of Essex, with Board representation from Suffolk New College (FE College and until the 1998 Higher Education Act a key HE provider in Suffolk),

Ipswich Borough Council and Suffolk County Council, in response to the need for a dedicated Higher Education Institution in Suffolk, and to generate jobs, income and a highly-skilled workforce for the local economy - a “bold, and comprehensive, and unique” model of HEI in England (Denton & Brown, p198, in Funnel & Rich, 2009). Following a two-year process, UCS was awarded University Title and became University of Suffolk in 2016.

Income and expenditure summaries (Table 2) suggest that the three institutions operate under very different structural conditions and priorities. Suffolk’s profile shows a far greater dependence on student recruitment and teaching income, whereas Cambridge has a much more diversified income base and a substantially stronger research profile, while Essex is positioned as having a much more equal blend of research and teaching. For context, in 2021/22, the number of student enrolment FTE at Suffolk was 12,510, at Essex was 15,765, and at Cambridge was 21,225 (HESA, 2023a). This suggests that reliance on teaching income does not necessarily equate to large student numbers, and assumptions of the different teaching pressures, research opportunities, and resource dependence on academics cannot be gleaned from looking at the figures alone.

Table 2 – Income and Expenditure Summary 2021/22 (HESA, 2023b)

	University of Suffolk	University of Essex	University of Cambridge
Total annual income 2021/22	£135,223,000	£284,356,000	£2,238,060,000
Total annual tuition fees & education contracts 2021/22	£122,393,000 (90.5% of total annual income)	£176,097,000 (61.9% of total annual income)	£376,232,000 (16.8% of total annual income)
Total annual research grants and contracts 2021/22	£1,069,000 (0.7% of total annual income)	£30,164,000 (10.6% of total annual income)	£551,823,000 (24.6% of total annual income)
Total annual expenditure 2021/22	£131,920,000	£326,120,000	£2,320,359,000
Total annual staff costs 2021/22	£42,871,000	£198,067,000	£1,305,173,000

	(32.4% of total annual expenditure)	(60.7% of total annual expenditure)	(56.2% of total annual expenditure)
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Employment conditions (Table 3) highlight significant differences in employment conditions across the three institutions when focussing on contract type and funding structures. The University of Suffolk has a relatively small academic workforce, mainly employed on open-ended contracts (87%) and majority wholly funded by their institution (90.9%), which suggests a stable, teaching-focused staffing model. In contrast, the University of Cambridge has a much larger academic workforce with a substantially higher proportion of academics on fixed-term contracts (43.9%) and a much lower proportion of staff wholly funded by their institution (25.5%), suggesting a strong reliance on external research funding and project-based employment. Again, the University of Essex occupies an intermediate position, with a moderate proportion of academic staff on fixed-term contracts (27.6%) and a high percentage of staff wholly funded by the institution (85%).

Table 3 – HE Staff Number by Employment Conditions 2021/22 (HESA, 2023c)

	University of Suffolk	University of Essex	University of Cambridge
Total number of academic staff 2021/22	275	1500	6130
Number of academics on open-ended/permanent contracts 2021/22	240	1085	3435
Number of academics on fixed term contracts 2021/22	35 (12% of total number of academic staff 2021/22)	415 (27.6% of total number of academic staff 2021/22)	2695 (43.9% of total number of academic staff 2021/22)
Number of academics wholly general financed by the provider 2021/22	250 (90.9% of total number of academic staff 2021/22)	1275 (85% of total number of academic staff 2021/22)	1565 (25.5% of total number of academic staff 2021/22)

These patterns suggest that academics across the three institutions operate under very different conditions of job security, funding dependency, and career structure, and so their institutional contexts likely shape how they experience and enact job crafting, as well as how they construct and negotiate their academic identities.

Chapter Synopses

The structure and overview of this thesis is presented as follows:

In Chapter 1, I outlined my personal motivation for the research, as well as the rationale for the research, the research questions, and the contextual basis for this study. This study begins from the position that academic identity cannot be understood as separate from the wider historical, social, institutional and sector conditions in which academics work. I provided an overview of identity theory, and how the emergence of the individual as the focus of society in the post-Enlightenment era has impacted the relationship between individuals and knowledge, drawing on Beck's theory of risk society and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's theories of reflexive individualisation and altruistic individualism. I also established the context of higher education (HE) for examining academic identity and job crafting as increasingly shaped by neoliberalism, managerialism, marketisation, performativity and uncertainty (Henkel, 2005; Harris, 2005; Clegg, 2008; Deem et al., 2010). These changes have altered not only the structure and governance of universities, but also the conditions through which academics construct, sustain and negotiate their identities. I concluded with a summary of the institutional profiles of the three universities drawn on for this study, Suffolk, Essex and Cambridge, as these profiles play a role in shaping academic identity.

Chapter 2 moves on to review the literature on academic identity. Rather than treating the literature on academic identity as a set of gaps to be filled, the chapter seeks to problematise how academic identity has been conceptualised in relation to structural change, institutional constraint, values, meaning and agency, and considering alternative views. Existing scholarship largely focuses on how academic identity has been shaped by neoliberalism, managerialism, performativity, precariousness and changing institutional demands, however, these understandings, whilst valuable, can risk positioning academic identity primarily in terms of loss, crisis, reaction or constraint. This chapter therefore builds on the

existing scholarship, and seeks to shift the emphasis towards how academics actively construct, negotiate and sustain meaningful academic identities within the constrained institutional conditions of HE. I therefore put forward an understanding of academic identity as crafted through a wide range of activities, providing the foundation for exploring how individuals reshape their roles through job crafting.

Chapter 3 reviews the literature on job crafting, focussing on the job crafting framework conceptualised by Wrzesniewski & Dutton (2001). Job crafting focusses on activities individuals undertake in the tasks, cognitive approaches, and social networks in their work. The outcome of job crafting is that individuals alter the boundaries of their roles and create new meanings and new identities for themselves. This chapter highlights the significance of job crafting for exploring academic identity, enabling a focus on individual activities that are often hidden (Smith, J., 2010). I consider the scholarship on changes to academic tasks and values, in particular for Heads of Departments, and how individual academics have navigated these in their roles. This chapter therefore presents job crafting as both a mechanism through which academics reshape their work and a valuable practice for higher education workplaces that require adaptability and negotiation.

Chapter 4 outlines the conceptual and philosophical framework underpinning this research and how these approaches are suitable for the research aims. This research is qualitative, drawing on a social constructionist ontological and epistemological approach (Gergen, 2001). Knowledge and its creation is understood as an inherently socially constructed phenomena (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 2001, 2009; Burr, 2015). This theoretical position is significant for understanding academic identity, as it recognises identity creation in the context of both individual experience and social contexts (Clegg, 2008; Harris, 2005; Henkel, 2005). By integrating social constructionism with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) theory of altruistic individualism, this study provides a theoretical framework for exploring academic identity through individual, social and structural factors. This perspective enables a nuanced understanding of how academics use job crafting to negotiate boundaries, maintain autonomy, and build meaningful identities in challenging and constrained higher education institutional environments.

Chapter 5 sets out the research methods used in this study and explains how they align with the conceptual and theoretical framework underpinning the research. This study adopts a reflexive qualitative approach informed by a social constructionist

perspective, where knowledge and meaning are recognised as being co-constructed through the interactions between researcher and participants. Reflexive thematic analysis is used to interpret the data, so the themes that emerged are considered to not have been discovered, but rather actively developed through an iterative process of engagement with participant narratives. The findings of this study therefore reflect a co-produced account of meaning, shaped by both participant experiences and the researcher's interpretive lens. Particular emphasis is placed on how the study seeks to foreground the voices and experiences of individual academics, ensuring their visibility throughout the research process in order to gather "detailed and rich data" on the phenomenon of academic job crafting (Barrett and Twycross, 2018, p.63).

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 present the findings of this study, grouped around three key themes: academia as a game (Chapter 6), ambition and altruism (Chapter 7), and reimagining academic identities (Chapter 8). Across these chapters, participants describe academic job crafting as a socially and contextually embedded process, and not just as individual strategies. Three key themes emerge - firstly, participants experience their academic identity most positively when they view academia as a game and actively engage with its demands. Secondly, participants find the greatest meaning in relational job crafting, building supportive networks and engaging in socially beneficial work, rather than from task or cognitive crafting alone. Thirdly, participants overwhelmingly reject the term "academic," preferring intellectual descriptors such as "scientist" or "researcher," reflecting a shift toward personalised academic identities.

The findings of Chapters 6, 7 and 8 demonstrate that social considerations are central to career progression and meaningful work, with ambition often framed through collective success rather than individual competition. Participants also describe negotiating risk, precarity, and institutional challenges through job crafting strategies such as maintaining collaborative projects and creating new opportunities. This highlights that job crafting is not merely a reaction to institutional and external pressures, but is a proactive and reflexive process of reshaping academic work in order to create spaces for meaningful work involving others, echoing Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) concept of altruistic individualism. Overall, participants describe not simply reproducing the systems and structures of HE, but through their job crafting, creating new ways of working, new meanings, and

new identities that are in turn subtly altering the boundaries of their working environments.

This thesis concludes in Chapter 9. This chapter explores the impact of the findings, summarising the theoretical, conceptual and empirical contributions made. Overall, this study demonstrates that academics engage with multiple games in order to craft new spaces for meaningful work that are socially-focussed, and through which new academic identities can be created. Academics are therefore shown to be not either neoliberal or altruistic individuals, but a blend of both, taking a bricolage approach to their academic identity construction (Feather, 2016).

Introduction and Background - Summary

In summary, the contexts of HE, HEIs, neoliberalism and risk society are key to understanding the experiences of academics with job crafting and academic identity, but that academic identity cannot be seen solely as passive or reacting to these contexts. The emergence of neoliberal practices has created significant consequences for academic identity, shifting universities from being “ivory towers” to “public institutions”, and inviting a level of scrutiny and accountability of the academic workforce that is unprecedented (Watermeyer, 2015, p.331). By outlining the institutional contexts of Cambridge, Essex and Suffolk, this chapter highlights that the three universities are significantly different in history, resources, research intensity, funding structures, staffing profiles and institutional priorities, providing a basis for examining how academic identity and job crafting are shaped by contrasting higher education contexts.

In the next Chapter I build on this background and rationale to explore the literature on Academic Identity. I explore how early 21st century research into academic identity has shifted from a focus on academic groups to a focus on individual academics. Considering how understanding academic identity as a practice provides the potential for insight into new academic meanings and activities, and how academics are engaging with being an academic in constrained institutional settings, is critical for being able to identify new forms of academic identity. It is also key to providing new insights into how academics are now experiencing Winter’s “academic identity schism” (Winter, 2009, p.121).

Chapter 2 - Academic Identity: A Review of the Literature

Academic Identity - Overview

This chapter explores the literature on academic identity drawn on to inform this study. As discussed in Chapter 1, identity and how people self-regard is a reflexive, individual and social process shaped by people and structures (Stryker & Burke, 2000). I focus on the scholarship that conceptualises academic identity as a distinct facet of both individual identity and workplace identity, drawn from self-concept, practice, social and institutional structures. I draw on Barrow and colleagues' (2022) mapping of academic identity scholarship that highlights an increasing focus on the individual in academic identity, and academic identity as a practice. This understanding of academic identity is key - recognising academic identity as constructed through activities enables a challenge to understandings of academia as drawn from on mainly teaching and research duties (Henkel, 2005; Watson, 2011). This understanding also enables the recognition of individuals employed on academic contracts to self-identify as academics, even when their roles include activities not typically falling under the academic remit, such as managerial, administrative and entrepreneurial duties (Henkel, 2005; Rosli et al., 2018; Preston & Price, 2012; Bentley and Kyvik, 2011). This chapter therefore recognises academic identity as both reflexively and socially constructed.

In this thesis, academic identity and HE identity are regarded as related but distinct concepts. Academic identity refers to how individuals understand, construct and negotiate their sense of self as academics. This includes the meanings they attach to their work, roles, values, relationships and disciplinary or professional commitments. HE identity, in contrast, refers to identities shaped by HEIs and/or sector, including formal roles, organisational categories, performance expectations, career structures and institutional priorities. Whilst academic identity is always shaped by HE contexts, it is not reducible to institutional identity. This distinction is important because the thesis explores how academics construct meaningful academic identities within, alongside and sometimes beyond the formal identities made available by HEIs.

The chapter is organised around the concepts of boundaries, meaning and change. Challenges to academic identity are explored, where academics have shifted from a working life of secure employment and a relatively high social status, to becoming socially-scrutinised self-styled experts who must navigate a “supercomplex” world whilst also navigating values incongruences (Barrow et al, 2022; Winter, 2009; Barnett, 2000, p.409). Moreover, the structures in which academics work have repositioned academics from being scholarly professionals to “knowledge workers” (Briziarelli & Flores, 2018, p114). It defines academic identity and distinguishes it from higher education or institutional identity. It then considers academic identity as socially constructed and socially conferred, drawing on Lawler’s work on identity and recognition. I then discuss resistance, negotiation and intersectionality before turning to the central themes of boundaries and the academic profession, meaning and academic freedom, and change and the academic identity schism. This establishes the conceptual basis for Chapter 3 and job crafting as a mechanism through which academics actively construct meaningful academic identities.

What is academic identity?

The origin of the word “academic” has a basis in both in Latin and French, drawing from the ancient Greek that was used to identify, “An ancient philosopher of the Academy, the school of Plato and his followers; an adherent of the philosophical school of Plato; a Platonist” (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2021). The word academic, therefore, in its earliest recorded sense, carries a broad understanding, spanning an intellectual vocation, physical location, social grouping, cognate area, and individual identity. This definition also presents academic identity as drawn from different contexts - an academic discipline, a physical structure, and a social network.

Whilst there is no agreed precise definition of academic identity in the literature on HE, there is a broad consensus amongst scholars on what it means to be an academic. Henkel, credited as being the most cited author on academic identity in Barrow and colleagues (2022) mapping of academic identity to date work defines academic identity as communities of scholars organised around cognate areas with shared practices and values and with the purpose of intellectual progress; *“At the core of academe are the systematic pursuit and the creation, transmission and validation of knowledge by largely self-regulating communities, among which the disciplines have long been recognised”* (Henkel, 2012, p.157). For Henkel, until the

1980s, the understanding of academic identity had remained fairly consistent and *“for most of the twentieth century it was plausible to think of academics as members of interconnected communities...disciplines and higher education institutions”* (Henkel, 2005, p.155). However, as neoliberal values have permeated academic life, the primacy of the discipline in academic identity has been eroded and been replaced by the institution as a key influencer of academic activity in the workplace, resulting in “fragmentation, conflicting meaning, loosening boundaries” for academic identities (Henkel, 2005, p.173).

Feather (2016) makes the point that in workplaces where academic identity has no clear status or support academics approach their workplace identities as bricoleurs. Academics do still draw their academic identities from academic sites, such as teaching and pedagogy (Kreber, 2010), research and knowledge production (Deem et al, 2010), collaborative activity and collegiality (Whitchurch, 2008), academic values such as academic autonomy and academic freedom, and work that pushes the boundaries of knowledge (Slaughter & Roades, 2011). The range of activities from which academics can locate their academic identities has expanded to include institutional duties, such as administration, participating in committees or undertaking marketing duties (Clegg, 2008). Academics find they are able to maintain and progress their academic careers when they engage in activities that are favourable to their annual appraisals, such as securing research funding, publishing and winning awards (Henkel, 2005). However, Henkel (2005) makes the point that as a result of neoliberalism, academics no longer see themselves as members of interconnected communities *“belonging to a distinctive and bounded sector of society, the normative power of which has been sustained in part by a nexus of myths, socialisation processes and regulatory practices”* (Henkel, 2005, p1.58).

Henkel's scholarship on academic identities therefore raises that when academic communities are eroded, and academic activities are changed, academic identity is threatened. For Clegg, academic identity itself has been eroded, becoming a phenomenon that only exists within workplaces, and is “almost invisible when you get outside” (Clegg, 2005, p.335). As a result of this, “academic” has become a term that encompasses multiple “and not necessarily positive connotations” (Clegg, 2005, p.335). Consideration of Lawler's (2005) work on class, culture and identity is useful here because it highlights that identity is not only individually felt or self-defined, but also socially produced and conferred by others. Identity is not reducible

to subjectivity or self-identification, but is a practice shaped through social recognition, class and the power of others to recognise, value or devalue. Although Lawler's focus is on class and identities, this insight is arguably relevant to academic identity as a self-concept of being an academic does not only come from self-understanding, but also from academic colleagues, disciplinary norms and institutional recognition. Henkel's point is that two of these have been eroded, threatening academic identity as both self-constructed and socially-conferred. Academics may craft meaningful identities through practices around their work, values and relationships therefore, but those identities are also shaped by whether institutions, disciplines, colleagues and wider higher education systems also support their sense of self.

Academic Identity Literature - An Overview

Taylor (2008) outlines a historical view of academic identity construction across four chronological stages. For universities in medieval times, academic identities were formed around shared practices between scholars and students. Then, in the Middle Ages, shifts in the relationship between society and knowledge, such as with the Renaissance, occurred, meaning academic identity was drawn from critiquing new claims to knowledge by non-academic authorities. During the early modern period, academic identity focussed on co-construction of identities between academic colleagues with shared areas of work recognised as sources of identity construction. The final stage, the late modern phase, identified a focus around the practice of continuous identity construction and reconstruction by the individual academic seeking to navigate the complex environment of the modern world and HE sector.

Building on the work of Taylor, Pick and colleagues (2017) focus on the development of academic identity scholarship since the 1990s, highlighting three distinct conceptual frameworks for understanding academic identity construction. The first is academic identity in terms of navigating increasing values incongruence with HE and institutional environments, the second is academic identity as a social construct, and thirdly individual constructs of academic identity. Crucially, Pick and colleagues identify these shifts occurring because individual academics themselves changed the focus of their academic identities when experiencing considerable challenges from their working environments. Despite this, it is worth noting that Pick and colleagues identify the current body of work on academic identity to be an optimistic one. By focussing on the individual, this recognises academic identity to

be an adaptable self-directed project where individuals themselves have the potential to mitigate the issues of creating academic work in the neoliberal and precarious world of HE employment. The question is what price this self-directed mitigation comes at.

Focussing on early 21st century scholarship, Barrow and colleagues (2022) map the academic identity literature, highlighting three challenges that individual academics negotiate in order to build their identities. The first focuses around the work of Henkel (2005), academic freedom as a value and a practice, and how this has been eroded. The second is based around the work of Winter (2009), highlighting the challenges created by neoliberalism and how this has impacted the values of individual academics. The third is based around the work of Gill (2010) and the idea of rethinking academic identities in terms of individual agency, exploring how individual academics are seeking to mitigate higher education reforms in order to grow new academic identities.

Academic Identity, Resistance and Negotiation

An important body of literature has emerged that considers academic identity through the lens of resistance. This work is important because it challenges accounts of academics as just compliant with neoliberal, managerial or performative higher education systems. However, resistance in academic work is also shown to be rarely straightforward. For example, Lucas's (2014) analysis of academic resistance to quality assurance processes in UK higher education highlights that academics may challenge particular forms of audit, authority and implementation, without necessarily rejecting the broader principle of quality assurance itself. This suggests that academic resistance is often responsive and shaped by institutional context as well as the individual academic's goals.

Bristow and colleagues (2017) highlight that the relationship between resistance and compliance is complex, making the point that academics can understand themselves as being in conflicting roles as both resisters and participants in the systems they critique. This raises the importance of negotiation to academic careers, and that academic resistance and academic compliance are not binary opposites, but rather co-exist through multiple diplomatic, combative and values-driven modes of engagement.

Webb's (2018) discussion of academic resistance as the creation of compartmentalised spaces is also useful for this thesis. Webb's work suggests that resistance may involve creating spaces that are temporary or fragile, but where academic values, pedagogies or forms of social engagement that are not explicitly supported by the employing institution can be sustained. This is relevant as it suggests that academics do not always resist institutional demands through direct opposition, but rather create hidden spaces for work that reflect their own values and that are able to be protected, even if temporary.

The literature on resistance therefore supports a nuanced account of academic agency, where resistance is not understood as being positioned outside of the system, but rather that it can be part of the everyday negotiation of academic identity within constrained institutional contexts. In turn, this then enables an understanding of job crafting as a form of agency, where academics reshape tasks, relationships, meanings and boundaries in order to pursue meaningful academic work, whilst also still remaining embedded in the institutional systems they navigate.

Academic Identity, Inequality and Intersectionality

Existing research shows that academic careers and academic identities are shaped by inequalities linked to gender, class, race, ethnicity and other social positions, and that access to academic belonging, legitimacy, progression and recognition is unevenly experienced across the sector (Chellappa, 2023). These perspectives are important because they show that academic identity is not experienced universally, but is shaped by wider social structures and institutional inequalities.

This thesis does not take gender, class or intersectionality as an analytical focus. This is not because these factors are not important, but because this study is focussed specifically on how academics construct and negotiate academic identity through job crafting, meaning-making and institutional context. The concern here therefore is how participants craft meaningful academic identities through tasks, relationships, boundaries, institutional expectations and social value. By not including in the analytical focus gender, class or intersectionality, this does not deny their significance, but in order to meet the research objectives this study, instead places the emphasis on job crafting as a mechanism of academic identity construction.

There were also ethical and methodological reasons for the decision to not include gender, class or intersectionality in the research design. The study draws on a small sample of 24 participants across three identifiable universities. Participants discussed current roles, working relationships and institutional conditions, and the depth and candour of their accounts depended on robust anonymity protections. For this reason, identifying characteristics such as discipline, department, age and other potentially traceable biographical details were removed from the analysis. An intersectional analysis would therefore have risked compromising participant anonymity. Future research could build on this study by examining how job crafting and academic identity construction are experienced through gendered, classed and intersectional positions.

Academic Identity - Boundaries, Meaning and Change - An Overview

Henkel (2005) characterises academic identity in terms of boundaries, meaning and change. Her work calls for academics to rethink their academic identities in line with changing boundaries around academic disciplines, changing meanings in academic work, and a change of academia from collective to individual activity, in order to maintain academic standards in the modern world (Henkel, 2009). This thesis draws on ideas of boundaries, meaning and change as themes in the literature, and as organising concepts for understanding how academic identity is constructed through job crafting.

Henkel's work arguably suggests that academic identity need not necessarily be viewed as a phenomenon in decline. Shifting boundaries, for example, can create opportunities as new spaces open up. For example, Clegg (2005) makes the point that institutional spaces are imaginary as well as lived, and so how academics cognitively construct their identities can provide a counterbalance to neoliberal constraints. Harris (2005) notes that universities in the UK remain sites of "exclusion, elitism, and power", but as Clegg puts it this does not prevent academics identifying their own boundaries within their institutions, creating spaces to "read and think" and to engage with knowledge in line with their academic values (Clegg, 2005, p.339). Academic identity can therefore be a potential site of opportunity, both proactive and reactive, individual and social, and consciously and coercively formed

by individuals in their work, departments, institutions and academic networks (Henkel, 2010; Clegg, 2008; Jonsas, 2016).

Academic Identity and Boundaries

A key change to academic boundaries since the late 20th century is that the institution has replaced the discipline as the main site of academic identity (Henkel, 2010). This has resulted in core academic activities expanding beyond teaching, research and administration to include activities and responsibilities around management tasks reflecting institutional priorities, student recruitment, and engagement with industry (Winter, 2009). Academic identity has therefore become a site through which individual academics can be controlled, and a way in which HEIs can seek to align individual academic priorities with overall institutional ones (Whitchurch, 2012; Smith, K., 2010; Loveday, 2021).

The second key area where the boundaries of academic identity are perceived to have significantly shifted for academics is around the concept of academic autonomy (Henkel, 2007). Neoliberal accountability, and the drive for increased transparency and regulation of academic work has eroded individual and professional accountability, replacing it with institutional scrutiny (Harris 2005). Academic autonomy has been so significantly impacted as a result of performance management measures, which appear to have no external scrutiny themselves meaning they easily become unwieldy, so that *“It would be quite easy to generate a list of over 100 different (nested) measures to which each individual academic in the UK is now (potentially) subject”*. (Burrows, 2012, p.359). In line with this, even the activities seen as core to contemporary academic identity, research and teaching, are affected, with the concept of “strategic research” as a means to bring income into the institution, through the REF, TEF, or grant awards, now dominates (Henkel, 2005, p.167). As a result, the limits on research are narrow and defined by institutional leaders and funding bodies, rather than at the level of the academic. Moreover, academics are increasingly forced to understand their own success in terms of institutional rather than academic metrics (Archer, 2008).

Universities now require their employees to participate in a wide range of activities, in effect making them “boundaryless individuals” (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010 p.129). Academic workplace activities have changed considerably to the extent that “academics no longer work in a bounded space” (Henkel, 2005, p.173). The

environment in which academics work, what they do, and even how they do it, has been re-shaped as universities have re-organised around financial priorities and quality assurance (Edwards, 2022). Institutions demand an influence that is unprecedented on academic working lives, with teaching and research being relegated in importance (Henkel, 2005). Academics have been compelled to understand their own success in terms of institutional goals (Archer, 2008). In short, the link between institutional identity and academic identity has never been greater, but the priorities between the two groups are seen as being largely at odds, and this has had a significant impact on the space academics have in the workplace, as well as the duties they are required to undertake (Clegg, 2008).

As boundaries have shifted across HE, this is seen as having some benefits for academics. For example, bounded space has been linked to knowledge becoming outdated and which academics historically protected by creating a hierarchy of knowledge and taking an elitist view on knowledge generated outside of itself (Clegg, 2005, p.338). Moreover, boundaries with others in knowledge spaces outwith the institution, for example on a global scale such as with research, Journal Editorship, Conference panels, can enable spaces of autonomy not confined by institutional priorities (Henkel, 2005). However, boundaries with others, and connections and collaborations, are seen as potentially being a weakness as well as a strength (Henkel, 2005). This is an interesting point, and Barrow and colleagues (2022) call for work into relationship management as a core feature of current academic identity formation. It is notable therefore that research into how academics impact each other in the workplace has been little explored to date (Cannizzo, 2018).

The Academic Profession

The idea of an academic profession is problematic (Beck & Young, 2005). In the literature on higher education, "professional identity" is a term loaded with significance for academics. Professions and professionals in general face significant challenges as a result of the demands of modern working norms and values (Gleeson & Knights, 2006). The competing pressures of globalisation and individualisation have created complex relationships between states, institutions and individuals (Harris, 2005; Beck, 2000). Under neoliberal values, the rise of the customer, and the frequent restructuring required to deal with marketisation, together with the increasing need for accountability and efficiency, has meant that

core professional qualities such as autonomy, legitimacy, and claims to expertise have been significantly eroded (Beck & Young, 2010; Harris, 2005).

However, there is a general acceptance in HE literature that academia does qualify as a profession, and “professional identity” is often used interchangeably with “academic identity” (Williams, 2008). The incorporation of the term “Professional” is now included in HESA’s definition of academic, as *“contract activity can be categorised as Managers, directors and senior officials’, ‘Professional occupations’ or ‘Associate professional and technical occupations”* (HESA, 2021). Academia is seen as a distinct type of profession, however, as academics have traditionally looked to their disciplines as a focus for creating their academic identities, creating a fragmented academic workforce in silos with little cohesion, in contrast to the other standard professions of medicine and the law (Harris, 2005; Henkel, 2000).

That academia in the UK can lay claim to being a profession is considered to be borne out of a legacy of two inherent features that are considered fundamentally professional in nature, in that academia has provided for centuries education as a service, and that since the 1900s academics have held a high social status in society (Williams, 2008). Moreover, a feature of professional life is the ability to take on new activities and values in order to stay relevant, and the changes academics are experiencing to their roles as their employing institutions merge their academic duties with neoliberal and managerial ones allows academics to make a credible claim to the affiliation of professionals, albeit isolated ones (Fitzgerald, 2020).

The clearest indicator that the challenges to the academic profession have had a significant impact at the level of the individual academic is the increasing number of academics on temporary contracts (Fontinha et al., 2018). Academics who lay claim to professional identity through the expertise and autonomy traditionally associated with their professional status have had their professional identity fundamentally challenged by neoliberal drivers, and so rather than their work being defined in terms of specialisms, it is now “increasingly based on market definitions” (p 424 Harris, 2005, p.424). Stronach and colleagues (2002) argue for moving away from defining professions by innate features to examining the practices in and around professionalism to determine who qualifies as a professional is an important position for studies on academic identity. This enables a more dynamic understanding of what an academic professional constitutes, and provides an important area for

research as there remains little work to date into how professional identity is formed for academics (Tomo, 2019).

Academic Identity and Meaning

In this thesis, meaning refers to the significance academics attach to their work, why particular activities matter, how they connect to personal and professional values, and how they contribute to a coherent sense of academic self. Values are a central part of identity, and Winter (2009) notes it as a point of interest that the body of work focussing on the relationship between academic values and academic identity remains relatively small. In this study, academic values are understood as the norms and meanings of academic activity and academic identity, from the perspective of individual academics, their social networks. They are also a point of tension between academics and their institutions in the context of the changing nature of higher education in the UK, (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010; Winter, 2009; Clegg, 2008; Henkel, 2005). Harris (2005) argues that core academic values, such as academic freedom, autonomy and purpose are no longer able to be central to academic identities. Despite this, work shows that academics are still seeking to act in accordance with their own values, and in fact it is the retention of academic values that is seen as going part of the way in understanding how academic identities are surviving despite the dominance of neoliberalism in HE (Clegg, 2005).

For academics in the UK, the literature on academic identity highlights that there are layers of values that academics need to negotiate. As well as individual values from their academic background and training, organisational values as put forward by their institution, there are also the values seen as part of the wider academic profession that are present in academic networks and wider interactions that exist globally and across disciplines (McCune, 2021). For academics who have backgrounds in industry or healthcare, there are also additional layers of professional values to negotiate (Yang et al., 2022). This raises potential problems for academics, as whilst changing values in professional contexts are highlighted as essential to the ongoing success of the workforce, new values embraced by individuals can be detrimental if they are predominantly reactionary responses to changing workplaces, or direct challenges to existing professional ideas taken in by individuals in isolation, without wider guidance (McCune, 2021).

Academics operate within multiple value systems and identities (Boyd & Smith, 2016). Becher & Trowler (2001) identify meaning as situated in disciplines and academic networks, and focussed on localised differences, highlighting that as academic institutions in England vary ideologically, financially, politically and socially, the disciplines that they house contain different and often conflicting academic drives and priorities. Much of the literature on academic identity reflects the idea that academics draw meaning from a variety of sites and activities, and so are flexible and open to new meanings and values, such as new subjects, social groupings, and professional identities for example when those from industry join academia (Stronach et al., 2002). Meaning derived from traditional academic sites does however remain, and Henkel (2005) notes that whilst disciplines are challenged as a focus for identity formation under neoliberalism, they persist as a source of academic identity and site where individual academics derive meaning and self-regard from.

For academics, motivation to pursue meaningful work is evident in the literature. Around a quarter of all research in UK universities is estimated to be unfunded, meaning academics are operating outside of financial priorities, possibly as a form of dissent but also possibly as an expression of support for core academic activities (Edwards, 2022). As well as this, research shows that academics deviate from undertaking activity solely directed by their managers, choosing to work on teaching, research, and in particular collaborative research, driven by their own goals (Winter, 2009). Individual values in the workplace therefore can clash with organisational values, and it is notable that little work has been undertaken in the area of imposed and voluntary changes at work in the context of values (Aireli et al., 2020).

Values are therefore seen as a key driver of activity, in that they identify for individual academics the activities they want to proactively pursue. Schwartz's theory of personal values sets out that values are a key component of an individual's sense of self, their identity work, driving how they interact with others and their workplaces, and remains the dominant theory in research on values (Schwartz, 1992; Aireli et al, 2020). In the workplace values are recognised as carriers of meaning, representing the goals individuals see as desirable, underlying how roles are viewed by individuals for example jobs as a calling or jobs as a career (Aireli et al., 2020). Crucially, in the workplace, individual values are seen as operating outside of organisational parameters, meaning they are usually consistent

across time, are situation independent, and drive how individuals want to undertake the activities they are employed to do (Berkman et al., 2017).

Academic Freedom and Higher Education Institutions

Academic freedom remains the dominant, and “most discussed” academic value, in work on academic identity (Henkel, 2005, p.169). Across the literature, academic freedom encompasses the key academic values of self-regulation (Allen-Collinson, 2004), academic authority and academic standards (Clegg, 2008), equality and community (Edwards, 2022), and the pursuit of truth (Winter, 2009). For Henkel (2005), academic freedom is an ambiguous concept and a value that has a variety of meanings on both an individual and social basis. Academics draw their meanings of academic freedom based on how they understand the freedom and autonomy to pursue their teaching and research, as well the space they have to manage their own working life. Despite this ambiguity, Henkel notes that ideas on the extent of individual control is key, and autonomy is a cornerstone of academic freedom and “integrally related to academic identity”. (Henkel 2005, p.172).

As the priorities of institutions and academia have clashed, academic freedom has been a tension point for academics (Billot, 2010; Clegg, 2008; Harris, 2005). Academic freedom is seen as a driver governing how academic networks interact, through academic authority to set and uphold academic standards, but also as encompassing the key values that individual academics should hold at an individual level, namely individual autonomy and agency (Clegg, 2008). Conversely, academic freedom is being used by institutions as a unifying force to encourage academics to support changes to their roles, on the basis that measurable teaching, research and administration outputs could be facilitated through allocations of time, personal autonomy, and self-regulation (Henkel, 2000). However, the trade off of academic freedom with limits for outputs that meet institutional goals is seen as not working in practice, resulting in an erosion of overall academic autonomy where academics no longer have the right to define what academic excellence is (Evans & Nixon, 2015).

The erosion of academic freedom from a spatial and temporal perspective is seen as critical - as the values around academic work under the remit of academic freedom include the pursuit of truth and the expansion of knowledge, there is inherently a great deal of risk involved in academic work, as in the purest sense the outcomes of this should not be known in advance of active research, analysis,

discussion and peer review (Hedgecoe, 2016). However, instead of enabling a wide range of academic outputs and accepting that some will fall short while others will surpass in excellence, the HE system is seen as creating conditions where academic work can only result in “predictable mediocrity” (Henkel, 2010, p.3). As Gill (2010), Henkel (2000), Harris (2005), and Clegg (2008) argue, the disconnection between academic values and institutional priorities means that even recognised academic success can be precarious, vulnerable to shifting metrics, funding pressures, and organisational restructuring, meaning that academics on occasion raise the importance of luck in building meaningful careers.

In order to retain spaces for academic work that are not wholly driven by financial or reputational goals, scholars from Henkel (2005) through to Barrow (2022), have called for new understandings of academic freedom realised and obtained through the management of relationships. This shift from discipline to relationships as a source of academic freedom arguably recognises the importance of others, and collaboration, in the creation of academic meaning. Academic relationships have widened, and as well as being situated in institution, department and discipline, are now being formed with groups outside academia such as policy makers, funders and industry (Barrow et al., 2022). Given this recognition of academic freedom as requiring social input in order to be maintained, this arguably provides a more nuanced view of contemporary academic identity scholarship, in that whilst the focus is on the individual, the extension from this is to consider how the individual is contributing to others, rather than focussing on the individual in isolation themselves.

Academic Identity and Change

Change is seen as a dominant feature of the academic experience across the 20th and 21st centuries, with many different priorities and groups shaping academic work, meaning there are now “multiple gazes that create the sense of being an academic” (Clegg, 2005, p.335). Many of the changes experienced by academics have arisen from the reshaping of the HE sector and the impact of institutional identities on academic identities (Henkel, 2005). Barnett and di Napoli (2008), emphasise that academic identity in HE in England is rooted in the individual’s institutional as well as academic environment, and, crucially, that this environment influences the identity construction impacts the individual, *“Identity is always located. One cannot have an identity in the abstract. Identity is formed, or ill-formed, in certain situations”*

(Barnett & Di Napoli, 2008, p.21). Changes have permeated further than established academics though, occurring for all levels of academics including at the level of traditional academic training, the PhD, shifting it from being an advanced step in a serious research trajectory to the first rung in the ladder, “*the doctorate... reconceptualised as a training period for future researchers, rather than a piece of work that changes the course of human knowledge*” (Park, 2005, p.190).

The literature highlights that the impact of changes in HE on academic identities can be variable, and is mediated by the discipline (Henkel, 2005), the nature of the academic role (Winter, 2009), and whether the individual themselves can draw on additional identities, such as professional or familial, for a sense of stable and coherent identity (Harris, 2005). That academic identities have fragmented and drawn on multiple sources is in practice creating more angst than it is security. This may be no accident, and for example Loveday (2021) argues that anxiety for academics is a deliberate tactic by HEIs to ensure compliance with changing institutional priorities. The idea that there is a “correct professional identity” for academics is not a new concept, but the idea that institutions and not academic disciplines or groupings define it, is (Brooks, cited in Harris 2005, p. 426).

Changes to academic identities have had a personal impact, and for example due to increased demands on time, family and friendships are affected, with individual academics being coerced into situations of hyper-mobility and long working hours (Leisyte, 2015). The precariousness of academic contracts has not been experienced evenly, affecting in particular early-career and female academics in ways that not only threaten mental and physical wellbeing and economic stability but also disrupt work-life balance and future planning, especially in relation to maternity (Gill, 2010). As a result, female academics have been shown to delay having children through the fear of being unable to maintain the work pace and performance expected by institutions; they are very likely to have to work more hours to cater for academic labour, housework and childcare (Gill, 2010).

Overall, the consequences of the changes in HE has meant academic staff becoming largely responsible for their own careers, their own wellbeing, and for dealing with the risks around working as an academic, despite their limited influence over their working conditions, terms of employment, and mechanisms for success (Gill & Donaghue, 2016). Viewing academic identity in the context of changes in HE as being constructed across multiple domains and networks therefore enables not

only a nuanced consideration of how academic identity is being created and maintained in challenging and constrained environments, but also enables consideration of how changes in the broader environment that individuals operate in have an impact on their capacity for agency when seeking to create and maintain their academic identities (Sutton, 2015). One significant area of work focussing on the consequences of HE changes to academic identity is Winter's (2009) "academic identity schism", is explored in the next section.

The "Academic Identity Schism"

Winter (2009) makes the point over the past 30 years in England managerialism has reshaped the boundaries not only of academic work, but through its challenge to academic values, academic identity also. The need to align academics around institutional business and financial goals has meant a serious reduction in the space that academics have to pursue their own academic identities, leading to a crisis of values. Academics are seen as having two options - to operate within "congruent" spaces where they are "academic managers" or in "incongruent" spaces where they are "managed academics" (Winter, 2009 p 121). Crucially, academics are expected to adhere to managerial considerations, for example around commercial, financial and efficiency practices in the workplace, creating a situation where they are expected to take on values that are at odds with academic meaning, resulting in an "academic identity schism" (Winter, 2009, p.121). The "academic identity schism" therefore not explores the extent to which the boundaries of academic identity have been breached, but also highlights how academic roles have broadened under neoliberal priorities and managerialist processes (Rosewell & Ashwin, 2019).

Identity schisms between managerial and academic identities has been largely explored to date at the level of the Head of Department, a role which has itself experienced considerable change over the past three decades, transitioning from amateur administrator to professional leader (Floyd & Dimmock, 2011). Head of Department roles are complex, multifaceted and controversial, representing the conflicting worlds of the institution and the Department, academia and management, with very little actual power over decision making or resources, and expected to implement without question institutional strategy that often sits at odds with their own drivers and values (Winter, 2009). To be successful as a Head is seen as improbable and is defined by the near impossible task of preserving academic values in a market driven and managerial environment (Sotirakou, 2004). It should

be noted that Heads of Department can still achieve levels of job satisfaction, but that this is dependent on institutional contexts and how changes are managed between universities and staff (Hare & Hare, 2002). It also depends on whether the Head is content to put their academic career on hold as their managerial role requires (Henkel, 2005).

The academic identity schism therefore comes at considerable potential cost to the professional identity of the role holder (Winter, 2009). The work of Burrows (2012) echoes this, highlighting that as a result of values clashes, academics have been negatively impacted, and are “exhausted, stressed, overloaded, suffering from insomnia, feeling anxious, experiencing feelings of shame, aggression, hurt, guilt and “out of placeness”, in their work (Burrows, 2012, p.355). Academic values are therefore seen as a key tension point for academics, impacting their ability to construct coherent and enduring identities (Pick et al., 2017). The impact goes further than academic identity, and although outwith the remit of this study, it is worth noting that despite the engagement of academic managers to promote institutional priorities, in many universities the goals of academic staff have been erased from view and are no longer featured in any way in institutional mission statements (Deem et al., 2010).

Academic Identity – Summary

In summary, this chapter argues that academic identity is a complex, situated and contested phenomenon, constructed through meanings, practices, relationships and institutional contexts. Existing literature demonstrates that academic identity has been significantly reshaped by neoliberalism, managerialism, performativity, precariousness and changing HE policy. This has impacted academic autonomy, academic freedom, disciplinary belonging and professional values, eroding the ability for academics to create academic identities strongly linked to academic work. However, this chapter has also problematised work that positions academic identity primarily through loss, crisis or constraint. Literature on resistance, negotiation and identity as socially-conferred highlights that academics are not simply passive recipients of institutional change, but rather that academic identity is constructed through ongoing negotiations between self-understanding, social recognition, institutional expectations and meaningful work. This framing is important, and opens space for a more agentic, relational and meaning-centred understanding of academic identity.

This chapter therefore builds on the existing literature on academic identity by positioning it as a practice, realised through social networks as well as individual activities, and understood in terms of boundaries, meaning and change. This provides the foundation for a key aim of this study - to explore academic identity through the lens of job crafting. The contribution here is not just to fill a gap in existing research, but to reframe academic identity as something actively crafted through everyday practices of boundary negotiation, meaning-making, change, and social investment. In particular, this thesis examines how academics create, protect and sustain spaces for meaningful academic work within, alongside and where possible beyond formal institutional structures.

Chapter 3 now considers the literature on job crafting, exploring how individuals proactively reshape tasks, relationships and ideas of work. This provides the conceptual basis for understanding how academic identity is constructed in the constrained and challenging institutional settings.

Chapter 3 - Job Crafting: A Review of the Literature

Job Crafting – Overview

As discussed in Chapter 2, this thesis draws on the concept of academic identity as a practice (Barrow et al., 2022). Exploring the activities that individual academics undertake to construct their academic identities is therefore a key focus of this research. This chapter now focuses on Wrzesniewski and Dutton's (2001) job crafting framework. Job crafting describes activities undertaken by individuals to make changes to their work in three areas; workplace duties, or task crafting, perceptions of work, or cognitive crafting, and relationships at work, or relational crafting. This framework views the motivation to engage in job crafting as driven by a desire to align work with personal preferences and values. This does not require management buy-in or formal processes, and job crafting activities are subtle and often hidden from others. Despite the private nature of job crafting, the consequences of being a job crafter can be significant, and Wrzesniewski and Dutton highlight the outcomes of job crafting as the reshaping of roles, and creation of new meanings and new identities for individuals in their work (Wrzesniewski Dutton, 2001).

As this thesis is concerned with both academic identity and job crafting, it is important to distinguish between job crafting and identity work. Identity work refers to the practices through which individuals construct, maintain, repair and present a coherent sense of self, including through language, relationships, values, narratives and social positioning (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Tomkins and Nicholds, 2017). Job crafting, by contrast, refers more specifically to the ways individuals alter the task, relational and cognitive boundaries of their work in order to change how work is experienced and enacted (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). The two concepts therefore overlap, because changes to work can also reshape how individuals understand who they are. However, they are conceptually distinct as identity work focuses on the construction and maintenance of selfhood, while job crafting focuses on the active reshaping of work. In this thesis, job crafting is treated as the mechanism through which academic identity work takes place, because

academics construct, sustain and revise their identities by reshaping their tasks, relationships and understandings of meaningful work.

It is also important to clarify the relationship between identity work and identity construction. Identity construction refers to the broader process through which individuals develop, negotiate and revise their sense of self over time. Identity work refers to the active practices through which this construction is undertaken, as individuals draw on narratives, relationships, values, roles and organisational expectations to produce a coherent sense of who they are. Drawing on the work of Alvesson and Willmott (2002), identity construction is understood in this study as inseparable from meaning-making, because individuals construct identity through the meanings they attach to themselves and their work. For academics, this means that academic identity is not constructed only through formal role titles, outputs or institutional categories, but through the meanings attached to the work that they do. In this thesis, academic identity construction is therefore understood as a meaning-making process, and job crafting is understood as the mechanism through which academics engage in this process.

This chapter explores the literature on job crafting in terms of how task, cognitive and relational crafting is understood. It then moves on to exploring literature on academic identity and where other studies highlight activities that could be viewed as academic job crafting. By drawing on job crafting, this chapter builds on Chapter 2 by highlighting the importance of exploring academic identity not only in terms of the activities individual academics engage in, but also how they undertake these activities and what they perceive the outcomes to be. This chapter recognises job crafting therefore as a mechanism by which identity and meaning-making is crafted in the context of a changing and challenging work environment (Berg et al., 2013). This then establishes the conceptual basis for Chapter 4, which sets out the philosophical framework underpinning this study for viewing academic job crafting not as the activities of neoliberal individuals, but rather as the activities of individuals operating in neoliberal contexts and being both neoliberal and social, aligning with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) concept of "altruistic individualism".

What is Job Crafting?

The introduction of the concept of job crafting in the early 21st century (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) marked a new and critically important field of investigation for occupational psychologists. Rooted in theories of job design (Oldham & Fried, 2016) and in particular Job Characteristics Theory (JCT) (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), the job crafting framework recognises that an individual can independently and proactively undertake activities that change tasks, cognitive approaches and relationships in their work. Job design theory pioneered significant theoretical frameworks for understanding how jobs are formed, noting job design as a top-down action and bringing into the process key concepts such as motivation and autonomy (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Job crafting, in contrast, sought to reframe this by highlighting the agency of the employee themselves as influencers of their working practices and placing motivation and opportunity as the instigators of job design rather than the result of it (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

This thesis draws on Wrzesniewski and Dutton's (2001) original qualitative framework of job crafting. A second, more quantitatively-oriented branch of job crafting research exists, which draws on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, particularly through the work of Tims and colleagues (2013). In this approach, job crafting is conceptualised as employees' proactive attempts to increase job resources, increase challenging demands, and reduce hindering demands. While this approach has generated valuable evidence about work engagement, performance and wellbeing, this thesis draws primarily on the original framework because it foregrounds meaning, identity and the alteration of work boundaries. This distinction is important because this study is not primarily concerned with measuring job resources or outcomes, but rather with interpreting how academics reshape their work in ways that sustain, revise or challenge their academic identity.

Wrzesniewski and Dutton's (2001) paper on job crafting proposes a framework that recognises three key components to job crafting - task crafting, cognitive crafting and relational crafting. When individuals engage in task crafting, they change the tasks they carry out at work, or they change how they carry out tasks at work, for example to include or alter tasks to better reflect their interests and strengths. When cognitive crafting is enacted, individuals change how they perceive their work, for example focussing on their value to an organisation, or thinking about the wider

purpose of their work. For relational crafting, individuals change the relationships they put energy into in the workplace, for example seeking out new contacts in order to develop new skills or reducing contact with co-workers whom they perceive to have a negative impact. The outcome of job crafting activities is that the individual alters the boundaries of their work and creates new meanings and new identities for themselves in their workplace. A key focus of job crafting therefore is individual agency, and a focus on the idea that individuals will proactively seek meaningful work.

Wrzesniewski and Dutton's (2001) framework of job crafting is situated in the field of positive organisational scholarship (POS) (Mukherjee & Dhar, 2023). The motivation for job crafting for individuals is better personal control over what they do at work, improved self- image, and better connection to others. In Wrzesniewski and Dutton's paper, one key example of job crafting is hospital cleaners who choose to add into their daily routine visits to patients who do not receive regular visitors (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). By adding a new task to their existing work they add new meanings to their roles, alter the relationships they cultivate at work, and cognitively craft, reframing their work from cleaning to one where they are supporting the healing of people. In subsequent work, job crafting has been linked with positive outcomes for individuals in the workplace, including better workplace engagement, increased motivation and job satisfaction, and improved workplace performance (Slomp et al., 2015; Tims et al., 2013).

Lazazzara and colleagues (2020), meta-synthesis of qualitative job crafting research proposes that there are five stages to job crafting, including individuals identifying job components, imagining changes to their work, assessing how likely change is, planning changes and then integrating changes. Task, cognitive and relational job crafting activities therefore overlap, do not require large scale changes to work, and have an antecedent of both perception for opportunities to job craft, and individual agency to job craft. More recently, work on the positive impacts of job crafting has focussed on its impact on increased employee adaptability - arguably a key skill in modern day academia (Berg et al., 2010). Strategies for job crafting therefore require individuals to have or develop skills in key areas, including planning, negotiation, reflection and adaptability. Crucially, therefore, this review also highlights that individual differences are also a key component of job crafting, that individuals in similar circumstances may experience differences in their

perception and efficacy to job craft, and that organisations being favourable to job crafting may make job crafting more likely.

Task Crafting

Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) describe task crafting as when individuals change task boundaries, alter the tasks they carry out, or change the way they undertake tasks at work. The motivation for task crafting is for individuals to better align what they do at work with their individual goals, interests and strengths. For example, individuals task craft at work when they either increase or decrease tasks or the time they spend on tasks or add or remove tasks to try and align what they do at work with their goals and values. When individuals task craft, they are also altering the boundaries of their work through altering what they do, making their working experiences more aligned with their preferences, needs and values.

In the context of modern universities academics are required to continuously demonstrate institutionally defined rather than professionally defined outputs (Archer, 2008, Winter 2009). This suggests that in the context of academic work, task crafting is particularly relevant because academic identity is often attached to the kinds of work academics prioritise, protect or avoid, such as research, teaching, administration, leadership, impact or external engagement. In turn, changes to task boundaries can, therefore, also be understood in terms of changes to academic identity. However, despite institutional priorities leading to an increased homogeneity in academic duties across HEIs in the UK today, there is still considerable variation of experiences across academia as academics engage with a wide diversity of strategies across their careers (Clegg, 2008). Task crafting therefore provides an opportunity to explore how a common academic activity, such as publishing, can be understood and engaged across a wide range of different experiences.

Individuals need the buy-in of others that they work with if they are to be successful in their task crafting strategies. Task crafting can therefore influence cognitive and relational crafting, and vice versa. The need for involving others in individual strategies however has been shown to have a potentially negative impact on the individual, as the divide between the actual self and projected self is difficult to manage (Bolino & Grant, 2016). Moreover, the idea of needing to perform at work can also have an impact on the capacity to undertake relational job crafting, as

relationships formed from non-genuine interactions are less likely to be as invested in as those that are authentically meaningful (Shoshan & Venz, 2021).

Cognitive Crafting

Cognitive crafting occurs when individuals change the cognitive boundaries of their work, for example by altering how they understand the purpose of their work, their role within their workplace, and their perceptions of their work. Cognitive crafting is especially important for this study because it connects directly to meaning-making. Within job crafting theory, individuals are understood to have the capacity, irrespective of the constraints of their working environment, to craft their roles to better reflect their own individual goals, motivations and needs (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Meaningful work has been shown to have a positive link with enhanced job performance in general (Allan et al., 2018). Meaning-making as part of identity construction is a key work skill, in particular as it gives the individual a means by which to mediate challenges at work whilst maintaining their own sense of self (Petrou et al., 2016). When academics cannot easily change the formal structure of their roles, they can still reinterpret the value, purpose or significance of particular tasks. This suggests the possibility of job crafting being used to create and sustain a coherent academic identity under constrained conditions.

As with task crafting, the motivation to cognitively craft is at the level of the individual and is prompted by a desire to better align work with interests and goals. Cognitive crafting implicitly includes creating a positive sense of self, and for example occurs when an individual repositions their work to have meanings that have value for them. For example, a doctor can think about themselves as just a prescriber of medicine, or as a healer of people. Values are often treated in the job crafting literature as relatively stable orientations, while meanings are understood as more open to reshaping through crafting activities (Letona-Ibañez et al., 2021). Values are a key part of identity at work as they provide the central facets of self-determination (Winter, 2009) and self-guidance for how to align their own principles with workplace identities (Foreman & Whetten, 2002). Values occur on many levels in the workplace, and values incongruence can have a social basis (Soltani and Wilkinson, 2010) as well as an organisational one (Winter, 2009). Values in job crafting are seen as a key driver, motivating individuals to undertake cognitive job crafting activities in order to align their personal values with the activities that they undertake as part of their roles (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). This reflects a key

motivation to job craft as coming from a position of dissatisfaction, for example through values incongruence or workplace insecurity (Urbanaviciute et al., 2021).

Another key strategy that Wrzesniewski & Dutton (2001) suggests for cognitive crafting is when individuals rethink their own goals, or the goals of their organisation, so that they better align with the individual's own values. The result of this is that new meanings are created for the individual in their workplace around their work, their place in their work, the work of their organisation, and the organisation itself, and so in turn new identities for themselves and their organisations are created.

Relational Job Crafting

In Wrzesniewski and Dutton's (2001) seminal job crafting paper, proactive activities at the level of the individual to alter their social experiences in the workplace are identified as "relational job crafting" and occur through individuals "changing either the quality or amount of interaction with others at work, or both" (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Relational job crafting is therefore an ongoing and fluctuating process, where individuals undertake activities in response to demands as they arise and is a key activity for individual employees adapting to changing workplaces, as organisations grow and contract, or new technologies are introduced for example (Petrou et al., 2015). Relational crafting is central to academic identity because academic work is socially validated. Networks, collaborations, mentors, managers, students and disciplinary communities all shape whether particular forms of academic work are recognised as legitimate. Identifying strategies for relational job crafting, and those that are less helpful, would therefore be highly beneficial to studies on academic identity.

Relational job crafting is seen as spanning two broad categories, as activities that seek to increase social interactions at work of "approach" crafting, and secondly, activities that seek to limit interactions with others at work, or "avoidance" crafting (Bruning & Campion, 2019). Relational job crafting is a key area to create new meanings at work, for example interacting with others outside of the standard workplace network of an individual can create new ways to cognitively frame the work being undertaken (Wrzesniewski et al., 2013). Social interaction in particular is highlighted as one of the key areas of the workplace in which individuals can undertake job crafting activities to build new meanings and identities at work

(Wrzesniewski et al., 2013). This engagement has been experienced, not only at the level of the individual employee with their own work, but also as a motivator to employees seeking to have input into improving how their organisation is functioning overall (Bolino & Grant, 2016). This therefore is the key differentiator between relational job crafting and organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB), as although OCB has increasingly recognised a benefit to the individual, this falls short of the meaning-making potential highlighted in job crafting theory (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001)

The motivation to increase social resources in the workplace has also been recognised to be a response to aims outside of individual goals, for example with individuals choosing to engage in expanding relational job crafting for social reasons, as well as seeking to support others (Grant & Berg, 2012). Relational job crafting around mentorship or supportive activities is also used in teams to help maintain good relations around project working, for example by asking colleagues for advice or feedback (Petrou et al., 2016). Indeed, the approach to relational job crafting seeking to engage with managers as a way to craft meaningful roles at work has been identified as a strategy in academia, where constant development and the need for frequent outputs is part of the workplace environment (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2017). In this regard, Managers are seen to play a key role in motivations to job craft, as perception of autonomy and opportunity to craft are key antecedents of relational job crafting activities occurring (Lazazzara et al., 2020).

Decreasing social resources at work is shown in the literature to not necessarily be a negative strategy, and for example reducing social interactions can create time for personal targets and goals to be fulfilled (Rofcanin et al., 2019). However, the majority of the literature does highlight avoidance relational job crafting as reactionary to unfavourable workplace conditions, and for example when competition is acutely being experienced, avoidance relational crafting has been shown to be used to protect resources and reduce information sharing (Meged, 2017). It has also been shown as a way to negate the negative impact of approach relational crafting, indicating that maintaining a sustainable balance of workplace interactions is complex and difficult. For example, prosocial motives, whilst contributing to a socially positive workplace experience, have also been shown to require substantial time and energy from individuals when needing to support colleagues on a consistent basis, resulting in stress and fatigue (Rofcanin et al., 2019; Bolino & Grant, 2016). Also, a lack of civility in interactions at work has been

linked to experiences of isolation, where isolation has been sought as an avoidance strategy when amicable resolution has not appeared possible (Cortina et al., 2001).

Agency and autonomy in Job Crafting

Agency is a core component of job crafting, (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Job crafting is an autonomous (Slomp et al., 2015), creative (Demerouti et al., 2015) and proactive (Vanbelle et al., 2017) action which can result in higher levels of work engagement (Bakker et al., 2007) and new work identities (Fuller & Unwin, 2017). Job crafting theory presented a major change in the literature on job changes by focussing on individual agency and self-initiated reshaping of work, noting that all employees irrespective of industry or position are potential job crafters (Oldham & Fried, 2016). Even with jobs limited in cognitive, physical and social space employees can exert influence over what they do and how they do it at work, and that any employee regardless of role power can shape their jobs through their tasks, cognitive approach and/or social interactions (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

In practice, the research on job crafting and autonomy has demonstrated mixed results. Higher levels of autonomy are linked with higher instances of job crafting and the hypothesis has been that managers are more likely to engage in job crafting activities than their employees (Tims & Bakker, 2013). However, it is also considered increasingly in management's interest to enable their staff's autonomy as flexible roles are essential for navigating modern workplace challenges and rapidly changing working environments (Brenninkmeijer & Hekkert-Koning, 2015). This is reflected in the scholarship exploring academic manager identities. In terms of existing scholarship presenting academic identities that could be perceived as job crafting, research has been undertaken mainly around the role of Head of Department in pre-1992 institutions (Preston & Price, 2012; Hare & Hare, 2002), post-1992 institutions (Floyd & Dimmock, 2011) and a mixture of HEIs (Henkel, 2000; Deem, 2010). This work shows that experiences of the role of Head varies considerably depending on the core values of the individual, type of institution, department, discipline, priorities of the institution and factors affecting career trajectory such as gender, age and race.

This literature on Heads of Department is drawn on in the next sections to explore job crafting and academia not because this thesis is concerned only with formal academic managers, but because this body of work makes visible the task,

relational and cognitive boundary work involved in academic roles. Heads of Department occupy a particularly clear site of tension between academic, managerial and institutional identities, and therefore provide useful evidence of how academic work is reshaped under conditions of institutional change. Conversely, literature (such as the work of Archer) is also drawn on although it is primarily concerned with academic identity rather than job crafting, as it provides evidence of the kinds of meaning-making practices that this thesis interprets through a job crafting lens.

Job Crafting and Boundaries in Academia

Heads of Department have been shown to reshape their roles around their own goals and situations, changing the boundaries of their roles (Creaton & Heard-Lauréote, 2021). Some of these changes have been responsive, as as the Head of Department role is the link between senior management and academics, it is pivotal in the processes of dealing with student recruitment, teaching, research and administration, however most Heads report functioning with minimal support and very little training despite the fact they are having to navigate new and changing environments (Pihie et al., 2011). Reported methods to mediate these difficulties do involve moving the boundaries of their own roles and identities, such as utilising multiple identities, creating support groups and maintaining influential internal and external networks (Creaton & Heard-Lauréote, 2021). However, more work has been called for in understanding the range and variety of academic management roles (Preston & Price, 2012) as well as how the Head of Department role impacts academic careers in pre and post 92 institutions (Floyd & Dimmock 2011).

In terms of social boundaries, when managing other academics, Heads of Department report that they rely considerably on goodwill and personal authority therefore maintaining their academic credentials remained essential if they wanted to be successful (Henkel, 2000). In some instances, Heads of Department were given minimal administrative support with no recourse to obtain more and so reported that this rendered them only able to be “caretakers” of their department at best. (Hare & Hare, 2002). One viable solution was seen as the Head of Department being assigned a sub manager either to lead on academic or entrepreneurial activity as it was impossible for the role to perform both those duties successfully. (Hare & Hare, 2002). Heads of Department also report that their external social networks are more important than their knowledge of their role for

progress (Deem, 2010). Heads of Department reported that perception management between their staff as well as to themselves was a core duty, for example in addressing the balance between research and teaching and minimising negative views such as that academics who predominantly taught saw research as a “skive” and academics who mainly undertook research saw teaching as lacking academic credibility (Henkel, 2000).

In terms of their own career boundaries, in their managerial duties Heads of Department report an absence of training meaning the need to create their own support structures, demonstrating that they had to job craft with their social dimension also (Preston & Prince, 2012). For their academic identities, Heads of Department have found that their role inhibited their ability to engage in research therefore making them at risk of losing career capital unless they were able to connect with research groups (Preston & Price, 2012). One Head of Department reported that they were able to enhance their performance when they were provided with dedicated research support. (Hare & Hare, 2002). Some demonstrated agency and negotiated an intense period of research engagement before their role as a Head of Department started (Preston & Price, 2012). Others negotiated sabbaticals for once their role had concluded, but this was only for those in rotational posts and so a significant number of Heads of Department reported that as a result of their role and the inability to undertake research they felt that their felt academic identity was being eroded (Floyd & Dimmock, 2011). For Heads then, academic identity is conceptualised in terms of focussing on projects rather than on coherent academic careers (Cannizzo, 2018).

Job Crafting and Meaning-Making in Academia

Heads of Department report a variety of experiences around meaning-making in their work, often shaped by institutional contexts and priorities. Viewing research as meaningful work for themselves and their staff can be problematic. Some note that research career capital is valued more highly than departmental leadership by their institutions, (Floyd & Dimmock, 2011), as well as by their academic staff, with one Head reflecting on the shared idea that their managerial role limits their ability to be a serious academic as “the real work is done by others” (Henkel, 2000). This is in part because their managerial roles are seen as bringing non-academic priorities into the research space such as income generation, even though Heads are seeking to boost resources in response to this such as through developing a

stronger research culture in response to pressures from the (RAE) and Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise (Henkel, 2000). Implementing research strategies is not seen as straightforward and for example one Head of Department in a pre-1992 institution reported frustration and a lack of success when trying to encourage cross-departmental research as this had caused destabilisation in their department (Henkel, 2000). Also, pressure from institutions to change the scope of research has also been reported by Heads, requiring them to only support research that is considered of current social value (Deem, 2010). Moreover, in the case of Heads of Department from post-1992 institutions research management is recognised as a futile task as when looking at research funding it is clear that the two academic cultures still persisted as 91% of funding awarded to pre-1992 universities (Henkel, 2000).

Heads of Department are described by the academic staff they manage as potential blockers or enablers to the ability to pursue meaningful work. A drive for achieving values congruence between new and established colleagues is demonstrated within diverse academic groups, for example with new academics striving for legitimacy and recognition by their older colleagues and undertaking identity work such as focussing on the way they dress to give across a more conservative and traditional academic demeanour than their individual preferences (Archer, 2008). Furthermore, those from diverse backgrounds undertook identity work to bridge any perceived class, gender or race divides with their already established academic colleagues (Archer, 2008). This scholarship is valuable, and challenges the idea that meanings within academia are being eroded and not replaced (Taberner, 2018). Moreover, it suggests that academic identity schisms are seen as being mitigated in identity work by the extent to which the academic separates their inner self from their professional world, through affiliation to an academic discipline rather than the institution that they work for (Henkel, 2005).

Job Crafting and Change in Academia

Middle management, and Heads of Department in particular, play a key role in implementing and mediating the changes to HEIs (Preston & Price, 2012). Change is a focal point for conflict between academic managers and leaders and other academics, varying considerably by discipline, purpose, and funding (Deem & Brehony, 2005). For example, the role of the Head of Department has been described as a key agent of change in implementing institutional priorities that are

academic in nature, such as with research, but that this is considered to be one of the least popular duties (Preston & Price, 2012). Moreover, with the introduction of the RAE and then REF, research is regarded as a highly competitive “game” for modern institutions (Deem & Brehony, 2005).

The direction of the departments and the strategies for dealing with changes have been linked to the Head of Department’s understanding of their own identity, meaning that those who had come from an idealist academic background were resistant to adopting managerialist strategies and so were criticised by their superiors for not being strategic enough (Henkel, 2000). When training was provided for Heads of Department it was criticised for being too basic and too general and so not relevant for the specific problems of the departments (Preston & Price, 2012). Furthermore, training was not given a great deal of importance unless the Head of Department had a social sciences background which could be a reflection of the regard that different disciplines have for each other (Deem & Brehony, 2005). Moreover, Heads of Department are seen to be actively resisting a move to evidence-based practice to the point that they are unwilling to engage with the findings of research in relation to their own work (Deem & Brehony, 2005).

Heads of Department themselves have expressed frustration in response to their institutions expecting them to implement wide-ranging policy changes without granting additional authority or the opportunity to contribute strategically (Preston & Price 2012). This is in part due to changes in academic contracts. In general, although there are exceptions, Heads of Department in pre-1992 institutions report being appointed on fixed term and rotational bases from the academic members of staff within that department, aligning themselves to the idea of the reluctant manager (Deem, 2010), preferring to call themselves academic leaders than managers, and whose motivation to take the role is linked to the idea of the common good and wanting to contribute strategically (Preston & Price, 2012).

However, some Heads of Department have reported being able to use the minimal tools available to them and demonstrating resourcefulness when engaging with their staff to implement changes, citing tools used for negotiation as those within their remit as Line Manager such as appraisals, peer scrutiny, target setting and mentoring (Deem, 2010). This is seen as not effective however when dealing with significant changes and redefining the academic agenda of the department, for example in refashioning a unit from applied to academic orientation even though

this is congruent with perceived academic values (Henkel, 2000). The failure to garner collective support for changes can alter trajectories, and for example despite several key drivers for the promotion of Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) the lack of uptake in universities is noted as being a consequence of the lack of academic engagement (Walker, Voce & Jenkins, 2016).

Job Crafting - Summary

In summary, this chapter argues that job crafting is a meaning-making process through which individuals negotiate their roles, relationships and working environments. Wrzesniewski & Dutton's job crafting framework recognises that individuals proactively undertake job crafting activities when they perceive that the existing context in which their work takes place conflicts with their own personal values and goals. Therefore the challenges to academic identity, explored in the previous chapter, are a motivation for job crafting (Niessen et al., 2016). Academia is theoretically positioned as ideal for job crafting, as meaning-making is a core driver of both academic identity and job crafting (Hakala, 2009; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Job crafting is linked with academic identity as a way of understanding how academics develop agency and shape their identities both within and beyond their institutions (Jones, 2022). This is supported by work to date on Heads of Department, which suggests that despite the challenges to academic identity from neoliberalism, academic managers are employing strategies to maintain, defend and promote their own and others academic identities (van Winkel et al., 2018).

This chapter therefore builds on the existing literature on job crafting by exploring it in the context of academic identity. Whilst job crafting is generally associated with positive outcomes, such as fostering a strong professional identity, aligning work with personal values, and building career capital (Bakker et al., 2007), the evidence from academia challenges this assumption, suggesting that job crafting can result in positive outcomes when the activities undertaken reduce clashes and conflicts with the individual's social and workplace contexts. When academics experience limited capacity to craft their roles, or encounter tensions as a result of doing so, the benefits typically associated with job crafting may be diminished. Two key challenges to academic identity emerge when job crafting is considered. Firstly, that pessimism surrounding academic identity stems in part from the constraints, such as limited time, space, and autonomy, imposed by the neoliberalism of UK higher

education, which restrict opportunities for meaning making. Secondly, academics can craft identities that diverge from institutional priorities, positioning identity itself as a site of tension.

Job crafting therefore provides a framework for examining how academics navigate shifting institutional demands by reshaping aspects of their roles, relationships and understandings of work, even when autonomy is perceived to be restricted (Billot, 2010). Chapter 4 now builds on the two literature review chapters by situating academic identity and job crafting within the conceptual and philosophical framework underpinning this study. It sets out the study's social constructionist and reflexive qualitative approach, before drawing on Beck's concepts of risk society, reflexive individualisation and non-knowing, and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's concept of altruistic individualism, to examine how academics construct meaningful identities within conditions of uncertainty, institutional constraint and social commitment.

Chapter 4 - Conceptual and Philosophical Framework

Conceptual and Philosophical Framework – Overview

This chapter sets out the conceptual and philosophical framework underpinning this research. I begin by outlining the study's ontological and epistemological position, locating the research within a reflexive qualitative and social constructionist approach. I then explain how social constructionism aligns with the study's conceptualisation of academic identity as socially and reflexively constructed, and with job crafting as a meaning-making process through which individuals negotiate their roles, relationships and working environments.

This chapter then develops the theoretical framework through the work of Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim. In particular, I draw on Beck's concepts of risk society, reflexive individualisation and non-knowing, alongside Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's concept of altruistic individualism, to understand how academics construct academic identities within conditions of uncertainty, institutional constraint and social commitment. Finally, I chapter outlines the three institutional contexts included in the study: Cambridge, Essex and Suffolk. This provides the contextual basis for examining how institutional setting shapes academic job crafting and the construction of academic identity.

Epistemology and Ontology

This research is grounded in a social constructionist understanding of knowledge as socially produced and situated (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 2001, 2009; Burr, 2015). It adopts a reflexive qualitative approach in which knowledge and meaning are understood as co-constructed through interaction between researcher and participants. Within this framework, research data are not treated as objective accounts of reality, but as produced through this dynamic relationship. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019) is therefore employed as an interpretive method that acknowledges the active role of the researcher in the development of themes.

In this study, consistent with a social constructionist perspective, knowledge is understood as situated and interpretive. Subjectivity is therefore recognised as being both an inevitable and a valuable part of qualitative inquiry. As researcher, I therefore do not attempt to bracket myself out of the analysis or claim a detached, neutral position. Rather, my experiences, assumptions, and theoretical commitments are understood as shaping how I engage with participants, interpret the data, and develop the research themes, and the research themes are understood as being co-produced between myself and the participants. Subjectivity is understood as part of the production of knowledge, rather than treated as a problem to be removed. Reflexive transparency, methodological coherence, and critical engagement with the interpretive process ensure that this research is academically robust.

Positionality is central to this research. This study is informed by my position as a professional services member of staff working within UK HE, with an extensive experience of academic environments, but not as an academic practitioner. This position provides both access to, and familiarity with, the contexts explored, while also requiring reflexive awareness of how my assumptions, experiences, and interpretations shape the research process. Consistent with this approach, I do not position myself as a neutral observer, but as an active participant in the co-construction of the themes presented in this thesis. These themes are understood as not objectively residing within the data to be discovered, but as co-produced by myself and the research participants through the interaction between the participant narratives, my interpretive engagement, and the theoretical framing of the study. As a result, the themes were developed iteratively through the stages of data collection, coding, and conceptual reflection. I maintained ongoing reflexivity with the data and the themes through my notes, dialogue with peers, and critical engagement with emerging themes, ensuring that subjectivity - from myself as researcher and the research participants - was used as a resource within the research rather than as something to be bracketed out.

Social Constructionism

This study draws on the theoretical lens of social constructionism. Social constructionism views academic identity not as an essential phenomenon, but as co-created through social interaction (Barrow et al., 2022). Job crafting also engages with the social constructionist approach, taking the position that individuals

draw on resources from social contexts in order to help build their experiences of work.

This study draws on social constructionism, as described in the work of Berger & Luckmann (1966), Gergen (2001, 2009), and Burr (2015). Whilst there is no universally agreed definition of a social constructionist approach, social constructionist research typically adopts a sceptical approach to knowledge, "*Social constructionism insists we take a critical stance toward our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world and ourselves*" (Burr, 2015, p.2). Social constructionism recognises knowledge of the world as being created by social groupings in social settings, within definable paradigms that are created from, and in turn then create, the individuals within them (Gergen, 2009). Social constructionism therefore also recognises that identity and meaning are social constructs, as individuals draw meaning and identity from their social interactions and require the recognition and validation of others in order for their meanings and identities to have salience (Gergen, 2011).

Social Constructionism, Academic Identity and Job Crafting

Social constructionism provides a framework for understanding how identity is experienced by individual academics. Academic identity is a phenomenon that is pluralistic and fluid, enacted through practices that are far from fixed or linear, and is situated in multiple domains (Winter, 2009). Social constructionism highlights that the social dimension to identity construction is key. An audience is required to buy into the individual's portrayed identity (Goffman, 1959), with the individual creating their own identity from ingroup and outgroup affiliations by identifying who they are from who they are not (Tajfel and Turner, 1985).

Activities are therefore a key part of the construction of identity (Collins, 2017). This is important for understanding academic identities, as tasks required to be undertaken by academics have shifted boundaries into new and often non-academic spaces (Henkel, 2009). If an individual is a member of several groups with paradigms that conflict with each other, then they are likely to strongly resist the group perceived as the outgroup and strongly affiliate with the group seen as the ingroup (Tajfel and Turner, 1985). This can have significant consequences for individuals whose roles require the holding of multiple identities, such as Academic Managers (Heads of Department, PIs, Course Leaders, Heads of Division,

Research/Teaching Leads, Group Leaders to name a few), as the tensions created as a result of conflicting priorities at best results in cognitive dissonance, and at worst as a fundamental workplace identity crisis, such as academic identity schism (Winter, 2009). As well as this, there is a danger in being an active member of multiple groups, as this could result in alienating the individual from their chosen ingroup (Goffman, 1959).

Social constructionism, as a theoretical lens, does highlight possible strategies to mediate problems around academic identities. For example, a fundamental premise is that to sustain tradition requires a transformation of the individuals engaging with it. Norms and values important to a group can be sustained through active repositioning by individuals into new paradigms (Gergen, 2009). This means that the blocker or enabler to shifting to new paradigms therefore lies with the individuals within it, a position supported by the meaning-creating premise of job crafting. The question is raised, therefore, of to what extent academics are able to create paradigm shifts in their workplace? In order to enact this, academics would need to be able to exert positive influence on the structures that they operate in. The current culture of neoliberalism and performativity, however, deliberately and explicitly prohibits such influence (Ball, 2003; Deem & Brehony, 2005). Job insecurity, erosion of autonomy, heavy workloads, and competing and conflicting demands, have become standard features of working in academia, reducing the autonomy and agency of individual academics (Henkel, 2007). Moreover, the focus on performance metrics rather than the performance itself has arguably created a system which not only promotes activities which sustain that system, but also prevents the creation of new meanings - extrinsic value has entirely superseded intrinsic value.

Viewing academic identities through the lens of social constructionism, therefore, suggests that individual academic agency is being limited by academic workplaces. Theoretically, social constructionism suggests that to enable academic identity work to incorporate the creation of new paradigms, arguably essential in a working life which is subject to regular change in order to avoid identity crises and enable successful working and allow new meanings creation, HEIs must support adaptable and flexible ways of working - or as Barnett puts it - to embrace an environment grounded in "an epistemology for living amid uncertainty" (Barnett, 2000, p.409).

Social Constructionism, Structure and Reflexivity

Giddens and Beck's concepts of the individual within modern society reflect on how social constructionism can be understood to operate when society has organised itself in a way where its basic unit is the individual, and where its energies are almost entirely focussed around a singular goal; risk (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; 1996; Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994). Giddens' (1990) highlights that the actions of individuals both create, and are influenced by, the social structures that they exist within. Crucially, Giddens made the point that the duality between agency and structure is artificial, and in fact individuals can exercise a high level of agency, even in the modern world, for example by altering their place in structures through self-knowledge and "social reflexivity" (Giddens, 1990; Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994). Giddens also argues that in the later modernity of the twentieth century, identity has become the responsibility of the individual, as identities can no longer draw on meaning from traditional sources such as familial roles or professional status, and therefore individuals become compelled to build their own identities (Giddens, 1991). The individual therefore is regarded as both a product and a producer of their roles and identities within their social contexts (Seymour-Smith et al., 2017).

Building on the work of Giddens, Beck takes a more pessimistic view, highlighting that the scope individuals have for their own identity are limited by the characteristics of modern society. Beck is critical of neoliberalism (Beck, 2008; 2002; 2000; 1994). Describing it as a "fair-weather philosophy", Beck and Beck-Gernsheim writes that neoliberalism is a system unable to deal with the problems it has created, which in turn are now defining how societies are organising, as "*the seemingly irrefutable tenets of neoliberalism - that economics will supersede politics, that the role of the state will diminish - lose their force in a world of global risks*" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.47). The key problems created by neoliberalism are around an over-abundance produced by a system dominated by finance and markets, the unforeseen and critical global problems such as climate change that have arisen as a result of this over-abundance, and the homogenisation of societies vulnerable to threats, creating the conditions for risk society to emerge (Beck, 2008; 2002).

For Beck then, individuals are complicit with the risk society because the "promise" of potential happiness brought about the freedom of living in the second modernity outweighs any potential disasters brought about by that same society (Beck, 2008,

p.6). However, Beck also argues that the potential freedom promised by administering society around risk is in fact increasingly inhibited as a result of risk, and the “impenetrability, omnipresence and undesirability” of the risks that society is seeking to mediate at any given time (Beck, 2008, p.6). A distinction is therefore made between the neoliberal individual, and the individual within risk society, arguing that the neoliberal individual as autarkic and self-sufficient is a myth (Beck & Gernsheim, 2002). The negative impacts of the risk society end up being “hoisted” onto the individual, and significantly defines social relations, in that individuals have an impact on each other through the decisions they make (Beck, 2008, p.117).

Beck’s concept of the risk society raises the important question of how social constructionism can be understood to operate when society has organised itself in a way where its energies are almost entirely focussed on a singular goal (the avoidance of risk) (Beck 1992, 1996)). It seems illogical, for example, to suggest that the identity problems experienced by academics are a failure of individual agency. Academics are trained to disseminate, critique and further knowledge as part of an academic community, and are then employed to perform a role in a university where they experience blockers in their ability to build their academic careers (Henkel, 2006; Clegg, 2008; Whitchurch, 2012). Examples do exist where academics negotiate or challenge their workplaces to try and undertake activities that relate to their academic identity, but this nearly always comes at a cost (Winter, 2009; Hakala, 2009; Loveday, 2018).

Beck, Risk Society and Reflexive Individualisation

Building on the discussion in Chapter 1, this section develops Beck’s concepts of risk society, reflexive individualisation and altruistic individualism as part of the conceptual framework for the thesis. Beck’s theory of the risk society aligns with social constructionism in that it emphasises the contextual and socially constructed nature of identity. Beck’s concepts are useful here because they extend the analysis beyond micro-level meaning-making to the wider social and institutional conditions in which identity construction takes place.

Beck’s work, and the social constructionist approaches, both agree that identities are relational and contingent on broader social narratives and interactions, with Beck’s theories providing a lens to understand academic identity that incorporates both micro and macro views. Moreover, Beck’s paradigm has an impact for

academics, as it recognises knowledge in the modern world is socially problematic, experts are viewed sceptically as enablers of modern problems and placed in competition with one another, and as a result of this the freedom of research is shaped by the public perception of risk (Beck, 2009; Burrows, 2012).

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim: Individualisation and Altruistic Individualism

Beck's concept of individualisation recognises that as contemporary society is focussed on the individual, this has by extension actually created a collective experience that unites individuals socially. For Beck, the process of individualisation sets out that in the current world - the second, "reflexive" modernity - individual identity is constructed around doing, not around being, and that the individual themselves is required to undertake this doing and to bear any consequences as a result of their actions taken (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Individuals are responsible for their own workplace identities, for example, needing to construct "tightrope biographies" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1996, p. 25).

Other theorists have aligned their work on the individual in late modernity with the work of Beck, and for example Elliott & Lemert (2009) have identified a "new individualism" resulting from the rise of globalisation across the 20th century. Defined as, "a relentless emphasis on self-reinvention; an endless hunger for instant change; a preoccupation with short-termism and episodicity ; and a fascination with speed and dynamism", new individualism reflects a search for meaning in a largely meaningless world (Elliott & Lemert, 2009, p.11). However, unlike new individualism, Beck's individualisation aligns with Winter's work on academic identity schisms, setting out that the individual's pursuit of meaning is shaped by the structures they operate in, and so just as managerialism has reduced the space for meaningful academic work, as the risk society has reduced the space for individuals to create and act in meaningful ways that reflect their identities (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

For Beck and Beck Gernsheim therefore, cooperation between the self and others is the means to individuals thriving in the modern world. They recognise individuals as contextually aware agents who have awareness of the role of others in the construction of their own identities as a means to mitigate conditions of uncertainty and risk, and also that their own personal choices have impact on others. Beck and

Beck-Gernsheim highlight this recognition as “altruistic individualism” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p22). Altruistic individualism conceptualises that in order to be individually successful, the individual must also “live for others” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p22). Altruistic individualism provides a theoretical lens by which how academics construct meaningful identities in a context increasingly defined by external pressures can be understood (Henkel, 2000; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). It presents an alternative approach to the neoliberal lens when exploring academic identity, highlighting the relationships between individual agency, social responsibility and institutional structures that academics are navigating in higher education in order to create their academic identities. The idea that the space to create your identity requires heightened social awareness, raises that academic identity requires negotiation, collaboration and buy-in from academic and higher education communities. It provides an interesting theoretical approach when considering the tensions for academics explored in Chapter 2 between institutional and academic priorities, as well as the importance of collaborative work for academic identity, and the limits of job crafting as a mechanism to create meaningful work explored in Chapter 3.

Beck, “Non-Knowing” and Academic Identity

Beck’s work provides a theoretical lens for viewing uncertainty as a key facet of academic identity and academic work (Fuller et al., 2003). For Beck, late 20th century and early 21st society has shifted to become conditioned by “non-knowing” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.xxi). Some of the greatest threats to human existence, such as climate change and nuclear disaster, are both man-made and significant enough to challenge traditional societal boundaries, such as around wealth and nations (Beck, 2005). Crucially, Beck recognises these “manufactured risks” as the unintended consequences of advances in knowledge, particularly in science and technology (Beck, 2009, p.291). Beck emphasises that there are “social goods”, such as wealth generation, employment and healthcare for individuals and “social bads”, such as terrorism and hazards, around the distribution of benefits and risks associated with the modernisation of society (Mythen, 2005, p.191). Society has tended to only focus on the goods, and not the bads, meaning that the negative consequences of modernisation have not been predicted, and so risks are in general considered to be not predictable (Rasborg, 2018).

For Beck, the problem is then that society perceives knowledge advancement as the creator of problems, and so rejects areas such as science and technology as being the means to address these manufactured risks “...it cannot be overcome by more and better knowledge, more and better science, rather precisely the opposite holds, it is the product of more and better science” (Beck, 2009, p.115). Beck therefore sees society as critical to the expansion of education and its consequences (Beck, 2009, p.222). Moreover, where the greatest advances in knowledge are being made, society is even more sceptical of those working in it, “Paradoxically, however, the more science and technology permeate and transform life on a global scale, the less this expert authority is taken as a given” (Beck, 2009, p.6). As risks are unintended and invisible, for Beck the reflexivity in modern society is therefore around unawareness and non-knowing (Rasborg, 2018). For Beck then, risk society is a “non-knowledge society”, which presents major challenges for institutions engaged in knowledge creation and dissemination (Beck, 2008, p.115). Risk itself is a “mediating issue” between science, politics and the economy, and one which Beck is optimistic about, advocating that innovative approaches can improve this non-knowing approach of society, and he calls on societies to “renegotiate” the role of risk in their thinking (Beck, 2009, p.6).

Beck’s optimism extends considerably into his later work on non-knowing. Rasbourg (2018) groups Beck’s work into four stages, the risk society, the world risk society, cosmopolitanism and metamorphosis. Metamorphosis goes further than the principles of the risk society, as under metamorphosis, Beck advocates that the bads can have positive side effects and create social goods from engagement and dialogue (Mythen & Walklate, 2016). For example, under metamorphosis, institutions are required to be more open and to engage with those who are affected by the risks that they are involved in, described as a type of “emancipatory catastrophism” (Mythen & Walklate, 2016, p.411). This has significant implications for research into individuals who work with knowledge, as the impact of non-knowing, and the methods suggested by metamorphosis that could mediate non-knowing on individuals, are underexplored (Mythen & Walklate, 2016).

According to Beck, risk has been politicised, as it is a core “mediating issue”, impacting how society progresses (Beck, 2009, p.6). The reflexive individualisation that accompanies risk, where non-knowing creates a heightened awareness of risk, has meant that the burden of risk management has now moved to individuals. Overabundance, and the negative consequences of this, have moved individuals

from the position of “I am hungry!” to one of “I am afraid” (Beck, 1992, p.49). Beck therefore sees risk as a shaper of individual agency, influencing the perception of and opportunities for individuals. This echoes Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2002) notion of altruistic individualism, where individual agency is expressed and realised through commitment to shared values and the thriving of others. Debates around risk management and risk in general have become a central feature of political discourse (Beck, 2009). Crucially, this political discourse for Beck is not contained within a country’s borders, and as problems such as climate change are global, which is why Beck shifted away from the theory of risk society towards a cosmopolitanism, global concept of risk (Blok, 2015, p.111).

Mythen & Walklate (2016) see the failure of humans to acknowledge and accept change as a key driver behind Beck’s movement into the theory of metamorphosis. Fundamentally, risk society and the state of non-knowing and uncertainty renders individuals unable to act, and actively encourages them to do nothing for fear of creating new problems “The problem is not only that we are confronting challenges on an undreamt of scale but, more problematically, all attempted solutions contain the seeds of new, more difficult problems” (Beck, 2009, p.113). Beck sees the current situation, for example where climate change is stuck in the debate of whether or not it is real, as an ongoing reproduction of a stagnated social and political order, whilst in order to successfully move forward as a society, a transformation is needed, “metamorphosis is about the transfiguration of the social and political order’ (Beck, 2015, p.77).

Beck sees the existing political discourse as underpinning an erosion of public trust in institutions and experts. Non-knowing and risk have created a situation where the threat of risk is sufficient to place restrictions on the activity of knowledge creators (Beck, 2009). Beck’s risk society therefore has great implications for academia. For example, the “freedom of research” is being significantly impacted by the public perception of risk, for example influencing how strategy and operational practices around medicine are administered in society (Beck, 2009, p.6). Moreover, the influence of experts on society, despite the social progress that has been achieved by these experts, is increasingly being marginalised (Beck, 2009, p.6). For example, if a group is considered to become a risk, then all other characteristics of that group are removed and it becomes solely defined in terms of the risk attached to it (Beck, 2009). In turn, expert knowledge is seen as being utilised to increasingly group people, especially marginalised groups, by risk, causing Beck and Beck-

Gernsheim to call for “otherness” to be taken more seriously by experts (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.47).

Conceptual and Philosophical Framework - Summary

In this chapter I have set out the conceptual and philosophical framework for the study, positioning this research within a social constructionist and reflexive qualitative approach, where knowledge is understood as situated, interpretive and co-constructed between researcher and participants. This means that academic identity is not treated as a fixed or essential category, but as something constructed through social interaction, meaning-making, institutional context and everyday practice.

I have also developed the theoretical framework through the work of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim. Beck’s concepts of risk society, reflexive individualisation and non-knowing provide a way of understanding academic identity within conditions of uncertainty, institutional constraint and shifting expectations. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s concept of altruistic individualism is particularly important for this thesis because it enables academic identity to be understood beyond the figure of the neoliberal individual, highlighting instead how self-directed identity construction may remain deeply connected to collaboration, social responsibility and the wellbeing of others.

Taken together, these concepts provide a framework for exploring academic identity as constructed within conditions of uncertainty, constraint and social commitment. This is important as job crafting is used in this study to examine how academics respond to the constrained conditions of HE in practice. Job crafting therefore provides the empirical and conceptual lens through which the thesis explores how academics reflexively reshape tasks, relationships, meanings and boundaries in order to construct meaningful academic identities. Chapter 5 now considers the methods used in this research, reflecting the conceptual and philosophical framework, and how they address the research questions.

Chapter 5 – Methods

Methods - Overview

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the methods used in this research, how they relate to the conceptual and philosophical framework that underpins it, and how they address the research questions. This study recognises research data as deep, rich and embedded in the context of my experiences as researcher and the participant experiences (Mason, 2018). The goal of this chapter is to provide research transparency as well as to enable replication for any future studies wishing to use these methods. As this research is qualitative in nature, this section also includes a discussion of the capacity for credibility and trust in qualitative approaches to research as well as the limitations of this research.

Research Questions

This qualitative study explores the experiences of academics in the job crafting activities that they undertake, highlighting the task, cognitive and relational job crafting activities that are discussed and how these activities relate to experiences of academic identity. The research methods of this study have been designed to meet the aims of the research by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do academics reflexively construct and negotiate their academic identities through job crafting?
2. How do academics interpret and reshape the boundaries of their roles within different institutional contexts?
3. How is meaning constructed in academic work, and how does this shape the construction of academic identities?

These research questions are underpinned by the conceptual and philosophical framework explored in Chapter 4 that brings together academic identity and job crafting as inter-related and mutually constitutive processes. Within this study, academic identity is understood not as fixed or given, but as continuously constructed and negotiated through everyday work practices. Job crafting provides a lens through which these processes can be explored, particularly in relation to how academics actively reshape their roles, relationships, and working

environments. Central to this framework is the role of meaning as a key organising principle of academic work. Meaning is not treated as an individual or static attribute, but as socially and contextually constructed, emerging through interactions between individuals, institutions, and broader sectoral pressures. A reflexive qualitative approach enables these processes to be examined as co-produced, recognising the active role of both participants and researcher in the construction and interpretation of meaning.

Study Design

The purpose of the methods used in this research is to highlight and explore experiences, feelings, thoughts and beliefs about academic identity and job crafting.

This research draws on one-to-one semi-structured interviews with academics from the three institutions: Suffolk, Essex and Cambridge. The institutions were selected as they are representative of the diverse HE topography in Britain – Cambridge, an ancient university, Essex, a post-1960s plateglass university, and Suffolk, a 21st century new university. The institutions were also selected for reasons of geographical practicality.

A total of 24 participants took part in this study. Participants were recruited through a call for volunteers holding an academic role across three institutions, and a snowball sample was used where contacts forwarded on the participant information to colleagues they thought would be interested. Participants were all interviewed face to face. There was no time limit on the interviews, and they lasted between 45 minutes to two hours. A semi-structured interview format was used in order to facilitate the space to provide rich dialogue from the participants. Interview questions were therefore used to guide discussion rather than direct it (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

In order to avoid what Clegg (2008) refers to as “false essentialism”, questions posed by the interviewer were general and open-ended (Clegg, 2008, p.333). Notably, the terms “job crafting” and “academic identity” were not explicitly stated. Each interview started with a question about how the participant came to be in their current role and moved through their experiences of their role in terms of their tasks, the way they think about their work and their relationships at work. While Slemp and Vella-Brodrick’s (2013) Job Crafting Questionnaire was drawn on, since this

questionnaire is a quantitative tool, the questions were used to guide conversation rather than rigidly applied, and guiding principles were drafted for each area of job crafting as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 - Interview Questions

The Job Crafting Questionnaire (JCQ) Slemp and Vella-Broderick, 2013

- Task Crafting*
- 1 Introduce new approaches to improve your work*
 - 2 Change the scope or types of tasks that you complete at work
 - 3 Introduce new work tasks that better suit your skills or interests
 - 4 Choose to take on additional tasks at work
 - 5 Give preference to work tasks that suit your skills or interests
 - 6 Change the way you do your job to make it more enjoyable for yourself*
 - 7 Change minor procedures that you think are not productive*
- Cognitive Crafting*
- 8 Think about how your job gives your life purpose
 - 9 Remind yourself about the significance your work has for the success of the organisation
 - 10 Remind yourself of the importance of your work for the broader community
 - 11 Think about the ways in which your work positively impacts your life
 - 12 Reflect on the role your job has for your overall well-being
- Relational Crafting*
- 13 Engage in networking activities to establish more relationships
 - 14 Make an effort to get to know people well at work
 - 15 Organise or attend work related social functions
 - 16 Organise special events in the workplace (e.g., celebrating a co-worker's birthday)*
 - 17 Introduce yourself to co-workers, customers, or clients you have not met
 - 18 Choose to mentor new employees (officially or unofficially)
 - 19 Make friends with people at work who have similar skills or interests

Questions used in this interview derived from the JCQ

1. Task Crafting (Modifying job tasks):

Objective: Investigating how academics balance competing demands in their roles.

- Can you describe how you manage your different roles as a researcher, teacher, and administrator?
- Have you ever adjusted the type or amount of work you do to align more with your interests or strengths? If so, how?
- How do you prioritise tasks in your role, and what influences these decisions?

2. Relational Crafting (Changing interactions with others):

Objective: Understanding how academics set boundaries in their professional relationships.

- How do you manage your relationships with colleagues, students, or administrators?
- Have you ever had to set boundaries in these relationships to protect your time or energy? What strategies have you used?
- How have these relationships shaped your sense of professional identity?

3. Cognitive Crafting (Reframing job perceptions):

Objective: Exploring how academics draw meaning from their work.

- How do you personally find meaning in your academic role?
- Has your view of your role changed over time, and if so, what influenced that change?
- How do you cope with changes in your job or the broader academic environment that may challenge your sense of purpose?
- How do you define yourself professionally?

4. Responding to Change:

Objective: Examining how academics adapt to change and how job crafting fosters resilience.

- Can you describe a time when changes in your institution or discipline impacted your work? How did you respond?
- What strategies have you used to adapt to changes in your role over the years?
- How has adapting to change affected your sense of who you are as an academic?

Participants were provided with information prior to interview which included information on this research and the interviews, the right to withdraw, signposting information to the participant's HR department if any concerns with their work emerge, and a consent form. The interviews were recorded with participants' consent using an EVISTR Digital Voice Activated Recorder and transcribed using F4 Transcription Software. In line with the participant information provided prior to interview, transcripts were anonymised, removing any reference to name, department, colleagues, discipline or any other specific information which could make the participant identifiable. Participant names were pseudonymised throughout as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 – Participant Pseudonyms and Institution

Marcus	Cambridge
Harvey	Cambridge
Leah	Cambridge
Del	Cambridge
William	Cambridge
Naomi	Cambridge
Tara	Cambridge
Ezekial	Cambridge
Tim	Suffolk
Lucian	Suffolk
Liam	Suffolk
Sam	Suffolk
Arial	Suffolk
Sean	Suffolk
Kevin	Suffolk
Edmund	Suffolk
Daniel	Essex
Yasmin	Essex
Yolanda	Essex
Eleanor	Essex
Nicholas	Essex
Nina	Essex
Reece	Essex
Aurora	Essex

In line with Clegg (2008), each interview was analysed independently. Reflexive thematic analysis was drawn on to identify codes and themes from the transcribed interviews in the context of the literature review and theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Participants themselves reflected on their responses throughout the interviews which highlights the importance of reflexivity in identity for individuals (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Drawing on the qualitative and social constructionist approach to data, the analysis was undertaken with the aim of seeking to understand the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of the participants on their own terms. I, as the researcher, am therefore

positioned closely to the transcribed interviews, with commitment to an inductive and data driven approach to the analysis.

A second key aim of the research analysis was for all the interview and participants to be analysed in a consistent and reliable way, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis which recognises qualitatively generated data as being rich, complex and within a context understood by the participants.

The selected extracts should be “used to illustrate/support an analysis that goes beyond their specific content, to make sense of the data, and tell the reader what it [the extract] does or might mean” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 94)

The interview analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six key stages of thematic analysis, namely gaining familiarity with the data, generating codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining themes and locating examples (Figgou & Pavlopoulos, 2015).

Familiarity with the data was sought by re-listening to recorded interviews and re-reading the interview transcripts, without taking notes. The next stage was to generate codes draws on Braun & Clarke's (2020) approach to thematic analysis, reflexive thematic analysis, and using three levels of coding (Braun & Clarke, 2020). In line with the social constructionist approach, experiences in the interviews that were highlighted by the participants as being meaningful were considered significant in forming and developing codes (Byrne, 2021).

Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, was used in this research to enable systematic management, coding, and analysis of interview transcripts. The software was chosen for its capacity to enable research analysis of large volumes of qualitative data by including functionality to support the iterative processes of coding and thematic development. Using Atlas.ti enabled efficient data organisation, facilitated complex coding strategies, and ensured a transparent audit trail, enhancing the overall rigor and validity of the analysis.

The 24 semi-structured interview transcripts were uploaded into Atlas.ti. Each transcript was assigned a unique identifier corresponding to the participant's pseudonym. Atlas.ti's document grouping features were used to label each

transcript based on institution which supported cross-sectional analysis across various demographic and professional variables.

The coding process was carried out iteratively. In the first phase, descriptive coding was assigned to words and phrases in the transcripts that described job crafting activities and ideas of academic identity. In the second phase, interpretative coding was assigned to the first phase of coding in order to identify themes raised by the participants and how the codes and the themes relate to the research questions. The third phase of coding was analytical, where the boundaries and quality of the themes were explored and the relationships between the themes, the codes and the research questions were mapped out (Byrne, 2021). Each transcript was assigned several codes, using Atlas.ti's "Code Manager" feature to keep track of code frequencies and overlaps. As coding progressed, a second round of focused coding was undertaken to refine and merge codes, eliminating redundancies and ensuring coherence in the application of the coding scheme. Following the coding process, Atlas.ti's query tools were used to identify patterns and relationships between codes, which informed the development of higher-order themes. Co-occurrence tables were generated to visualise connections between key codes, such as "collaboration," "precarious working" and "finding your place," facilitating the identification of core themes and subthemes. The software's "Code-Document Table" was employed to cross-reference coded segments with document groups, allowing for comparison across participants.

Themes were then systematically reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and were supported by a sufficient number of coded segments. Through this iterative process, three primary themes emerged: (1) Academia as a Game, (2) Ambition and Altruism in Academic Work and (3) Reimagining Academic Identities (Table 6). Each theme was subsequently mapped back to the original research questions to ensure alignment and relevance to the overall study objectives.

The final themes and sub-themes form the basis of the three results and discussion chapters. In these results chapters examples from the participant interviews are highlighted, with the purpose of highlighting academic job crafting that contributes to the theme.

Table 6 – Reflexive Thematic Analysis Overview from Atlas.ti

Code	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Results Section Heading
Academic autonomy and freedom			Reimagining Academic Identities	Negotiating Autonomy: Crafting the Boundaries of Academic Freedom and Academic Independence
Academic performers	Academia as a Game			Performing Academia: Appearance, Persuasion and the Work of Being Seen
Beyond academic labels			Reimagining Academic Identities	Rethinking Academic Identity: The 'academic with a small a'
Collaboration		Ambition and Altruism in Academic Work		Academic Altruism: Selfish by Design, Collaborative by Choice
Finding your place		Ambition and Altruism in Academic Work		Physical and Intellectual Spaces: Crafting Your Place
Luck				Specialists and Generalists: Luck, Resources and Academic Job Crafting
Managing Relationships		Ambition and Altruism in Academic Work		From Individualism to Connection: Relationship Management in Academic Identity
New ways of working	Academia as a Game			Enduring or Innovating? Academic Job Crafting and “The System”
Playing the game	Academia as a Game			Reluctant Players and Willing Competitors: Job

				Crafting and the Game of Academia
Precarious working		Ambition and Altruism in Academic Work		Job Crafting for Risk: Uncertainty and Precarity in Academic Work
Risk & uncertainty		Ambition and Altruism in Academic Work		Job Crafting for Risk: Uncertainty and Precarity in Academic Work
Specialists or generalists?			Reimagining Academic Identities	Specialists and Generalists: Luck, Resources and Academic Job Crafting
The game of funding & publishing	Academia as a Game			Publishing and Funding: Job Crafting Academic Reputations
Academic Careers			Reimagining Academic Identities	Shaping Academic Careers: Job Crafting New Pathways
The system	Academia as a Game			Enduring or Innovating? Academic Job Crafting and “The System”

Ethical Considerations

Participants were recruited as volunteers responding to open calls put out by email within their institution and circulated by academic colleagues. Potential ethical issues identified were that as participants were discussing their current roles the need to ensure anonymity and confidentiality was paramount, as well as the need to provide signposting information should any disclosures be made during the interviews. This was particularly important because I was a colleague or former colleague of some participants and held a professional services role connected to management within some of the universities included in the study.

Anonymity and confidentiality were therefore included in the research methods through the removal of any identifying information from the verbatim data. This

anonymity was ensured from the point of transcription, at which point pseudonyms were used when writing up the findings and presenting the data in the thesis. Only the researcher had access to the research data and personal information of the participants, and these were stored on a personal laptop protected by a password. Transcriptions included no identifying characteristics such as name, department, age, academic discipline.

Any issues arising from my professional services role and the potential for disclosures were mediated through several stages. Firstly, a safe space for conducting the interviews was provided by booking small meeting rooms at each institution at the preference of the participant. Secondly, I emphasised in the participant information sheet that I am conducting this research as a PhD student for the purpose of undertaking fieldwork and collecting data for their PhD thesis. Any disclosure of sensitive information will, therefore, be outside of the power of the researcher to address and the participant would be signposted to their relevant HR office to raise all issues. If the researcher felt there was any serious cause for concern such as a disclosure of bullying/serious mental health concern then the participant would be signposted to the relevant institution's whistleblowing policy. This was verbally reinforced at the start of each interview.

Methods - Summary

In this chapter I have set out the methodological approach used to explore how academics construct and negotiate academic identity through job crafting. The study is grounded in a qualitative, social constructionist and reflexive approach, which understands meaning as situated, interpretive and co-constructed through the interaction between participant accounts, researcher interpretation and the conceptual framework of the thesis. This approach is appropriate for the research questions because the study is concerned with how academics understand their work, how they describe the meanings attached to that work, and how they negotiate their roles, relationships and identities within different institutional contexts.

This chapter explains the use of one-to-one semi-structured interviews with 24 academics across three contrasting universities: Cambridge, Essex and Suffolk. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they enabled participants to provide detailed accounts of their academic work, career pathways, relationships,

values and experiences of institutional change, while allowing the discussion to remain responsive to issues participants identified as important. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to co-produce themes between myself as researcher and the participants. Analysis moved iteratively between the data, the research questions and the theoretical framework, resulting in three overarching themes - academia as a game, ambition and altruism in academic work, and reimagining academic identities. These themes provide the basis for the three findings and discussion chapters that follow. Finally, this chapter addressed the ethical considerations arising from the study, particularly the importance of anonymity and confidentiality given that participants were discussing current roles, relationships and institutional contexts. Overall, this chapter shows how the research design, data collection, analysis and ethical approach are aligned with the study's aim of exploring academic identity as a situated, reflexive and meaning-making process.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 now present the findings and discussion of the thesis. Chapter 6 examines academia as a game, Chapter 7 explores ambition and altruism in academic work, and Chapter 8 considers how participants reimagine academic identities through job crafting.

Chapter 6 – Visibility and Credibility: Navigating “The Game” of Academia - Findings and Discussion

Visibility and Credibility: Navigating “The Game” of Academia - Overview

Participants in this study raise the idea of “the game” when discussing their academic work. This chapter explores how participants engage with the idea of academia as a “game” and how this shapes their job crafting. It draws together this study’s findings around competition, reputation and performativity, focusing on how participants describe their job crafting in terms of navigating performance metrics, publishing and funding and academic systems. Participant accounts of “playing the game” draw on their approaches to academic work and job crafting that reflects their experiences of structures in HE, but, interestingly, also that demonstrates examples of how their job crafting is creating new structures. As discussed in Chapter 2, neoliberal ideologies and managerialist practices have contributed to the marketisation of higher education and a performative culture within academic institutions (Deem & Brehony, 2005). In this context, job crafting is raised by participants as a way to safeguard their careers, prioritise tasks that enhance visibility and meet institutional expectations, but also as a way in which they can craft new ways of working that better reflect their own academic goals and values.

The first section, *Reluctant Players and Willing Competitors: Job Crafting and the Game of Academia*, explores the ways in which participants describe and draw on the idea of their work as playing “the game”. At Cambridge, participants tend to frame “the game” positively, as a strategic choice, and so something they proactively opt into to support their goals. In contrast, participants at Suffolk, describe games as both inescapable and a necessity for academic survival, with little space to opt out or for individual values and agency. At Essex, participants present a multifaceted perspective that acknowledges the competitive nature of games, describing them as both a catalyst that enhances the quality of academic work, as well as a mechanism that pits colleagues in competition with each other.

The second section, *Performing Academia: Appearance, Persuasion and the Work of Being Seen*, focuses on how participants raise their job crafting in the context of feeling the need to be visible. Their accounts raise how performativity shapes job crafting, with participants at Cambridge linking how the changes to research and publication funding is awarded has had a direct impact on how they frame and present their work. The need to be performative is also drawn on as a catalyst to proactively take on new duties, outwith formal roles, in order to help ensure personal success and meaning in their roles can be achieved. Participants describe taking on whole-course leadership and managing student and family expectations, framing this as part of being seen as a credible academic. Performative work can therefore be seen not only in terms of metrics and being driven by institutional demands, but also by creative approaches to academic work and the drive to create meaningful work for individuals and their students.

The third section, *Publishing and Funding: Job Crafting Academic Reputations*, looks at how participants strategically navigate academic, institutional and funder systems in regard to publishing and funding with a goal of building their academic reputations. Publishing and funding are seen as areas of constraint and opportunity, as whilst time-consuming and often limiting, they are also seen as being a key route to recognised academic credibility and autonomy. Drawing on Beck’s theory of reflexive modernity, this section therefore explores how participants reflect critically on these systems, recognising how the “bads” of institutional demands can also produce “goods” in the form of meaningful work and academic career capital. Participants describe engaging with creative job crafting activities, such as co-creating an online academic journal to create opportunities to publish. Participants at Cambridge frame the Fellowships funding system as risky but providing significant academic rewards in terms of providing space for autonomy over their academic work. Job crafting around publishing and funding is therefore described by participants in terms of creating new ways of working that expand existing boundaries to include their own goals and values in their work.

The final section, *Enduring or Innovating? Academic Job Crafting and ‘The System’*, presents participant descriptions of “the system”, highlighting where job crafting is situated within systems and where it is drawn on to work outside of systems. Where “the system” is viewed as inescapable, this is linked by participants at all three institutions to financial priorities. Participants crafting outside of “the system” highlight two key motivators - where they reject certain academic identities, and

where they are seeking to create more meaningful work. For participants at Suffolk and at Essex, crafting outside the system is about proactively creating new ways of working that seek to create meaningful work around their teaching, through student-centred approaches that are personally and professionally fulfilling. The idea of a workaholic academic is rejected, whilst for some meaningful academic work can only happen outside the system altogether. Interestingly, when reflecting on systems, Tara at Cambridge raises that she does not consider herself to work within or outside of systems, but rather reflects that for academic success universities and academics should embrace layered systems that are distinct but complementary, and where academics are not required to do academic work and then have to sell that academic work to governments, society or industry.

The participants of this study are therefore broadly approaching the idea of academia as games through job crafting that draws on Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) concept of reflexivity. Participants do not simply reproduce HE, academic and institutional norms, but rather they are aware of the games in academia and the systems they are operating in critically engaging with them, and where they identify opportunities are creating new meanings, and new identities through their job crafting. Institutional settings do influence the perception of job crafting around academia as games, and experiences are multifaceted both within and between institutions. These findings therefore contribute to the literature by supporting the premise that job crafting is positively linked to the creation of new identities and new meanings at work, and also by highlighting experiences of academic work where individual academics both feel restricted and where they are able to break free from the structures that they work in.

Reluctant Players and Willing Competitors: Job Crafting and the Game of Academia

Despite the differences between the three institutions that the participant pool came from - at the time of data collection Cambridge, an ancient and predominately research-focussed university, Essex, a post-1960s teaching and research focussed university, and Suffolk, a modern and predominately teaching focussed university - many of the participants from all three universities describe approaching their work and their job crafting activities in terms of “playing the game”. As discussed in

Chapter 2, neoliberal ideologies and managerialist practices permeating HE means that academics are required to think less like academics and more like strategic gamers (Frost and Brockmann, 2014). The participants in this study describe prioritising the tasks they focus on, as well as strategising the next and future stages of the work they do, in terms of playing games. The accounts captured here arguably suggest a more nuanced experience than Frost and Brockmann’s (2014) concept of the strategic gamer and the idea that academics are finding their activities are being predominantly shaped by the need to meet strategic institutional, funding and career-driving priorities. There is a general consensus amongst the participants of this study that in order to be successful in general requires work to be approached as “a game”. Participants at Cambridge describe “the game” of academia in positive terms and describe proactive and self-driven job crafting. Participants at Suffolk discuss “the game” in terms of being inescapable and a negative experience with reactive job crafting or disengaging from the perceived game of academia all together. Participants at Essex demonstrate a range of experiences and approaches, some self-driven, some institutionally or funder-driven, to navigate their job crafting in terms of playing games. Participant accounts show that for those interviewed as part of this study, how willingly they engage with game-playing across all three institutions does have commonality, reflecting how they use job crafting to navigate working in a competitive environment.

The participants from Cambridge who characterise their work as a “game” draw on this concept to shape their approach to their task, cognitive and relational job crafting. Harvey at Cambridge highlights how his thinking of his work in terms of a game meant he was able to plan his activities around a goal of crafting a research profile that is “distinct” and so unique to him.

“I think half of winning at the game is recognising that it is a game, and I am pleased that I thought, in advance, and put the wheels in motion to make sure I was making things distinct...”

For Harvey, the goal of being “distinct” is key as he planned to pursue Fellowship funding, and so he needed to demonstrate both a track record in his research area as well as independence as a researcher in his own right. Harvey achieved this by setting up a work placement overseas to learn a new skill and to distance himself from the work of his colleagues. This strategy was successful, and he obtained intermediate Fellowship funding, and planned to go for Senior Fellowship funding

using the same approach. Harvey explicitly says that recognising obtaining Fellowship funding as a game has been helpful to his career, and that he takes pride in recognising this approach and how he has chosen to play it.

“I am actually quite pleased with the way I have played the game, and it is a game”

Harvey’s positive self-reflection suggests that when academics engage with the game, they expect that doing this well will increase their prestige and their space to self-direct their own work, which makes their efforts worthwhile (Annala et al., 2022). Leah at Cambridge also reflects that thinking of her work in terms of playing the game has been helpful to her career. Like Harvey, Leah draws on the idea of the game as a way to conceptualise her approach to her work. She draws a parallel between academia and industry to justify how she feels that selling her work is now an important part of academia. Leah uses her job crafting to improve her writing in order to communicate the headline benefits of her research as clearly as possible and increase her success in getting journal articles published. Leah is less enthusiastic than Harvey about the way she plays the game, suggesting that unlike Harvey who crafted his work to meet the goals of the game, Leah sees the game as distinct to her work, and a mechanism she has to engage with in order to meet her own workplace goals.

“It is a game, I guess it is the same as in industry where you know the marketing of the product means a lot, the marketing of your research is a big thing...”

In contrast to Leah, but similar to Harvey, William at Cambridge, talks about the game as a way to shape and prioritise his academic work. For William, in his previous role where he was in an academic contract as a full-time researcher, he felt that he had the autonomy to craft his work in order to achieve his goals. In his current role, which is project managing the work of other academics and so is academic related and so has no direct research or teaching responsibilities, William raises as having no clearly defined goals, or “end game” and so is therefore difficult to manage. William is openly nostalgic for the control and space to job craft that he experienced as an academic and where he could approach his work as a game where he was a player rather than just a spectator.

“...now we are on the start line, the gun is fired and it is like how the heck do we get all this stuff with no end game in sight... I guess the difference with my current job is that everything here is reactive whereas I suppose in the research side of stuff I was kind of proactive, so I was thinking of the ideas and then thinking the routes to that...end point...and if something didn't work, I knew where we were going, so I could plan and try different routes...but now...I am at a loss...”

William's position suggests that working to an “end game” is a useful approach to research in academia, and that proactive strategising is integral to his academic identity. William's experiences have parallels with the work of Henkel (2005), who highlights experiences of academics with a research background and whose roles have changed and so they are no longer able to pursue research. Where academics have taken on administrative roles that have no research capacity, this is shown to have an impact on identity where academics feel “deeply their loss of a research identity”. (Henkel, 2005, p.166). William's account therefore suggests that for some academics, the game is an important part of their academic identity and a useful way of conceptualising a career with changing priorities and goals over time. William's point also suggests that approaching academia as a game has not permeated non-academic identities in universities.

Naomi at Cambridge echoes William's position and talks about competition as an integral feature of academia. Naomi says the end game of academic work is “getting to the top”, which she sees as being the consequence of academia attracting competitive people, who would create conditions for academic competition even if universities became completely egalitarian.

“Even if you make universities a level playing field, people would find ways to compete...you basically have a lot of ambitious people with pointy elbows trying to get to the top...”

Leah at Cambridge echoes the idea of inescapable competition, raising that institutions themselves game play and compete. She observes that universities have “got to play”, as to not make you vulnerable to losing good staff because of the game-playing of others.

“...at Cambridge you are not outside of the game you have still got to play it...myself and colleagues, we are receiving job opportunities from other places frequently...many have already gone as these are good offers”

Naomi and Leah’s reflections highlight that competition seems to be ingrained not only in the structure of academia but also within the institutions within it and the types of people who are drawn to it. Even in a theoretically level playing field, the ambitious nature of individuals in academia perpetuates competition at individual and institutional levels. This suggests that it is in part the workforce, and not the workplace conditions created by neoliberalism and managerialism, that has caused competition has become a dominant feature of academia. Viewing academic work through the lens of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) also reflects this, suggesting that academic activities stem from the need to reconcile institutional and societal expectations with individual goals. The participants from Cambridge in this study can be seen as not only tolerating but embracing the idea of competition and the game of academia. This is reflected in their job crafting, with the taking on new skills to target the requirements of academic funders and publishers.

William at Cambridge also depicts a form of competitive job crafting, noting how he makes sure when people leave, he is first into their space to claim any remaining equipment, even though he does not directly need it.

“Yes so my grant funded all the equipment I needed, and also a couple of groups in the department closed down while I was there because people retired, so I made sure I was the first person in and nicked as much equipment as I could...and actually so I had a really nice group, with all the equipment that I needed...”

William justifies taking assertive action to claim equipment by raising that in the past he had been on the negative side of the competitive nature of academia. He depicts how in a specific scenario in the past he needed a piece of equipment that was present in the Department, but the academia colleagues refused to give him access to it.

“...there was one PI who had the equipment I needed to do this, he would not let me use his equipment...the only other person in the university who had a similar device was his wife, she would not let me use the equipment, so I contacted the company that sells the equipment and said look I have got this great project, this

is what it is, and one of the sales reps arranged for me to demo this device for three months...free of charge, I mean the guy pulled off a miracle for me...and it seems astonishing to me that two devices that were in 100 metres of my lab were not accessible to me because people would not support it...”

William directly relates the “astonishing” situation of twice being denied access to equipment to his taking action to ensure he is “first” to obtain unclaimed equipment, even if he does not directly need it. He notes how finding a solution for a trial was highly unusual, calling it a “miracle”, and suggesting that he cannot rely on this route again in future. William’s account reflects the work of Deem and Brehony (2006), discussed in Chapter 2, which argues that research is a highly competitive game, as resources become scarcer and competition for them becomes more commonplace.

Participants at Suffolk discuss approaching the game of academia in a more negative light in comparison to the participants from Cambridge. The Suffolk participants highlight that it is not just research that requires game-playing, but that playing the game has become integral to institutional recognition and reward for academics. For Liam at Suffolk, approaching his academia role as a game is important as it opens the door to progression in an academic career. Liam reflects that while he does not “enjoy” game-playing, the “quite significant” rewards of progression are only made possible by academics taking on institutional roles and duties, such as sitting on Committees or taking unpaid roles such as Course Leadership. Liam suggests as well that individuals do have a choice to not take on these activities and so not play the game, but this would mean they are not recognised for promotions.

“...it is a game, it is a game that I don’t enjoy playing, but if you play it right, the rewards are quite significant...if you don’t play the game you don’t progress...the game helps the university to some degree...there are clear routes how to progress, it is easy to progress in education as long as you are willing to put in the time...”

Liam highlights that in his experience, part of the routes of progression have been set by his institution, and so includes pathways that benefit his employer. Arial at Suffolk’s account supports this experience, and she outlines an example of how she does not always play the game, and how she feels that this has been directly detrimental to her career. Arial sees part of the game of academia as being able to

sell her ideas to others, echoing Leah’s interpretation at Cambridge. Arial details how her perceived inability to communicate well with colleagues meant she was not able to save a teaching module that was under threat of being cut, but which she saw as valuable. Ultimately, her failure to save the module meant she had to leave her current role. Arial highlights that part of playing the game is using “structured” communication, which she failed to do, but which she says her replacement did achieve and so was able to bring the module back.

“...so they cut for example one module, I said how can you justify that, it was integral to the course...and I had that argument with the Head of Department, and they said yeah yeah well we cannot do anything about it now.....but my colleague that has taken over my job who was an ex student, they do talk in a different way and they have got it through and it is coming back into the system...and I think they are actually building on it...and it is because my communication is not structured...I didn’t play the game...it does not go to the heart of the way people listen I do not think”

Arial’s account reflects that refusal by academics to game play has risky consequences, and individuals are compelled to engage with the game in order to obtain job security they must “pursue a gaming strategy and play safe” (Frost and Brockmann, 2014, p.25). This suggests that playing the game has pre-set parameters, where playing it safe is a means to ensure job security, and to not play it safe runs the risk of job insecurity. Arial’s account suggests a more nuanced view. She suggests that embracing the game of academia goes beyond needing to play it safe, and rather that she feels it is now an integral part of academic career security that the game is needed to be played.

Participants at Essex who raise the concept of the game in academia embrace the idea of the game of academia as more than just an approach to academic work. Nicholas at Essex describes the game as essential to excellent outputs in academia. He does admit that the idea of game-playing highlights how challenging academia can be, but goes on to justify it with the point that a non-competitive environment leads to a “comfortable” life and mediocre academic work.

“...there are two models for how you run academia, you either have a game...a hothouse where you treat everyone mean, keep them lean and they have to fight for their own survival, accepting that a lot of their energy and time will be eaten

up by having to jump through those hoops every cycle...the alternative is you tenure everyone, do not worry we will guarantee your salary, you can go for project grants, so it take the pressure off but then it will let people get comfortable and the quality of the work dips...”

Nicholas’ point on colleague conflict and that academics have to “fight for their own survival” reflects work that highlights the increasing experience of academics notes that in order for academics to undertake academic activities, they are compelled to compete with other academics for resources (Deem et al., 2010, p.37). For Nicholas, competition ensures the quality of academic research is high, and so removal of competition leads to mediocrity.

“...competition makes people work harder...without it no one tries, the quality of work suffers...now with everyone fighting hard for every win, this is what makes the quality of research in the UK so high...”

Nicholas’ account can be seen as suggesting that competition is a sort of great unifier for academics, and that if some colleagues are competitive this means that everyone has to be competitive. Yolanda at Essex also reflects this, raising that it is others who are behaving competitively, with resource constraints impacting colleague interactions. She presents playing the game in recognising the need to hide achievements, on the basis that peers competing in a finite pool of resources will seek to steal assets from others. For Yolanda, this meant holding meetings with potential external partners and collaborators off site and so colleagues would not be aware of ongoing discussions before they are finalised.

“You have to play the game...you have to build yourself your own microcosm...an empire...off radar, and then you can get on and do what you want to do...but getting funding is not easy, and internal competition means your fellow Heads are trying to get a piece of your success and they undermine what you are doing...”

Yolanda’s comments reflect the work of Clegg (2008) and Archer (2008), who emphasise that academics have been compelled to redraw the boundaries of academic success to align with success as defined by their institutions. In contrast to Nicholas and Yolanda’s inference that the game of academia is inescapable and a core facet to modern academic identity, Daniel at Essex suggests that resistance

is possible when it comes to game-playing. Daniel raises that institutions play the game of student recruitment since the student numbers cap has been removed, highlighting how entry requirements have changed, even though the courses themselves have not. Daniel notes how he leads on student recruitment, and explicitly states that he refuses to engage with game-playing around strategic student recruitment, in practice offering places to students on tariffs that he feels reflects a fair academic transaction.

“...one of the games that institutions play is raising the tariffs, so the degrees have not got any harder...but the published offer is significantly higher than it was before...and it is about playing that strategic game, and it is not a game that we are going to play...”

However, Daniel also admits that the space for disengagement is limited when it comes to academic manager roles. He states that when it comes to his own role in academic management, it is not possible to opt out of playing the game. He describes how his academic background has been in teaching management, suggesting he feels that if there were options to disengage from playing the game in his work, he should be able to find out, but that his job is inescapably as someone whom everyone else is out to “tag”.

“...I joke I have spent about 25 years explaining to students that managerial work is strange and distinctive, it is characterised by lots of tasks, lots of different kinds office fighting...lots of tasks of short duration, and having spent 25 years writing about that and reflecting on it and so on, you wake up one morning and then that is what you do...despite that I had sort of been aware of that on some kind of intellectual level...I do not think anything really prepares you for being...you are always it, do you remember playing tag at school, well I am always it, I am always the guy...”

Overall then there are institutional patterns in the participant accounts of game-playing, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7 – Overview of academic games by institution

Institution	Meaning of “the game”	Job crafting pattern	Examples	Institutional explanation
Cambridge	Strategic; building independent academic reputations	Proactive; self-directed	Harvey - placement overseas; Leah - need to sell research; William - need for end game to focus activities.	Research-intensive context sets clear career goals for prestige routes (Fellowships so your salary remains funded) and scope for self-directed research crafting (to gain research funding).
Suffolk	Inescapable; set by the institution, often negative	Reactive; constrained; sometimes disengaged	Liam - career progression requires taking on institutional priorities and unpaid labour; Arial - unable to communicate in institutional language to defend a valued course and so left.	Teaching-focused context ties recognition and progression more closely to institutional service and internal approval.
Essex	Mixed; competitive; defensive	Strategic; selective; defensive	Nicholas - competition linked to academic quality; Yolanda - need to build off radar microcosm to protect from internal competition; Daniel - can resist student recruitment game but harder to opt out	Mixed teaching-and-research context creates competing pressures around role, resources and management responsibilities, but also opportunities to make spaces for meaningful work.

Institution	Meaning of “the game”	Job crafting pattern	Examples	Institutional explanation
			of academic management game.	

Table 7 shows that although participants across all three institutions described academic work through the language of “the game”, the meaning of this game differed by institutional context. For participants at Cambridge, the game of academia was not generally raised as inescapable or as an imposed condition of academic identity, but as a strategic choice that enabled them to approach academic work intelligently and maximise success. This is reflected in Harvey’s successful pursuit of Fellowship funding and William’s ability to overcome barriers to accessing equipment. In contrast, participants at Suffolk described the game more negatively, as something they had limited autonomy to avoid. For Liam and Arial, not playing the game risked career progression, institutional recognition and even role security. Participants at Essex presented a more mixed account, where the game was framed both as integral to academic quality and as a source of defensive behaviour, internal competition and role-based constraint.

Nicholas’s comments on the need for academics to “fight for their own survival”, and Naomi’s description of academia attracting people with “pointy elbows”, both suggest that competition is experienced as an inescapable feature of academic work. However, participants often located this competitiveness in others rather than in themselves, suggesting that the game is reproduced collectively even when individual academics present themselves as reluctant players. Focussing on participant accounts of academia as game-playing suggests that academics describe often moving between operating as neoliberal subjects and altruistic individuals, engaging with performance demands, funding expectations and institutional priorities while also seeking to create work that has social, relational or disciplinary value. Neoliberalism and altruism can therefore be seen as not being mutually exclusive in these accounts, but co-existing strategies through which academics navigate academic games. Participants may play the game in order to secure career stability, credibility or resources, but these results are often used to create spaces for work that supports students, colleagues, disciplines or wider social benefit. Academic agency through academia as game-playing is exercised through the negotiation of multiple games, rather than through simple compliance with or resistance to institutional expectations.

Performing Academia: Appearance, Persuasion and the Work of Being Seen

When reflecting on their job crafting activities, participants in this study highlight experiences of feeling required to perform their academic roles, and to be seen to perform. As discussed in Chapter 2, neoliberal ideals and managerialist practices means that academic work no longer holds intrinsic value with a drive to expand the boundaries of knowledge and education, but rather has been reshaped into a performance culture where academics need to be seen and are required to market themselves to their colleagues, employers and funding bodies (Gendron, 2008). Academics are now required to be performative, demonstrating success by producing visible, measurable outputs that align with institutional priorities, and must navigate a “performance paradox” in their work (Frost and Brockmann, 2014, p.25). Academic performativity has created a system which focuses on performance metrics over actual performance, focussing on how academic work is seen and not how academic work is done, challenging academic-held concepts of academic identity (Deem, et al., 2010). Participants in this study reflect the literature, describing tensions between appearance and performance, giving examples where they have had to alter academic work, persuade colleagues to support their outputs, as well as take on institutional duties in order to progress. However, participants also describe examples of where they have created new ways of working, taken on new duties and created new opportunities as a result of the performance culture of academia. These experiences suggest that while performativity is playing a part in shaping the space for academic identity, it also provides opportunities for job crafting where academics can craft academic work that is both visible and meaningful.

Eleanor at Essex expresses frustration at how she feels that she has to continuously be seen to achieve and progress. She reflects that her job crafting has been shaped by the need to meet academic goals such as with academic qualifications and publications, as well as institutional goals and the need to go for promotions and achieve external accreditations. Eleanor links the need to be seen to be constantly progressing to the need to meet the demands of the market, student and financial, and that this makes it hard for her to have any sense of achievement.

“...I think it is because we work in a marketised environment...higher education has been marketised and it is managerialist...which means that...there are stepping stones and very clear stepping stones so have you got your masters, your PhD, been published, in a 4 star journal, have you got a fellowship in the HEA...work towards what you do not have...because there are steps after this, and we have got markers by which we have to judge ourselves, and I think one of the reasons I personally struggle with...feeling and having a sense of achievement, or having a sense of pride in my work is because as soon as you have achieved one level, you have got to be achieving the next...so you cannot sit in the bubble, oh I got senior lectureship this year...because as soon as I got that I started looking at Associate Professor and started thinking what do I need to do to get that...it is a treadmill”

Eleanor’s comment about the “treadmill” and the need to constantly demonstrate progress along pathways defined by institutions and the HE sector suggests that space for innovative and novel academic work outside of the recognised performance metrics has been eroded. (Smith, K. 2010). Drawing on the work of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), this suggests that as a response to academic performativity, rather than shaping their careers around creating new knowledge or academic values, academic work has become a site of strategic self-management, where being seen to perform is necessary for survival. Indeed, Ezekial at Cambridge discusses an example where he had to alter a research funding application to meet institutional expectations. Ezekial describes how he had identified research he considered to be enormously valuable to his field. However, when he approached his Head of Department and Research Office, he was told that the funding amount was too insignificant at £50,000, and that he would only be supported to submit the grant if it was financially increased. In order for the research to be funded, Ezekial felt required to inflate the grant amount, which then was approved for institutional support.

“I have just recently submitted a research grant...it is for a considerable amount of money, but to be honest the only part I care about...the only part which is of research importance...I could do that for about £50,000, but that is not sexy to the institution, so I add on things and then submit a grant for ten times that amount...”

Ezekial’s account of inflated research funding arguably supports Gendron’s (2008) point that performance has become a key aspect of the game of academia. The “rewards game” of performance management has led to academics pursuing skills that support them being performative in their work (Watermeyer & Tomlinson, 2022, p.9). Ezekial’s situation highlights that academics are experiencing a working environment that prioritises financial value above academic value. The impact of academic performativity being linked to financial outputs is considerable and has been shown as driving unethical academic activity (Kenny, 2017). Notably, Ezekial does not regard his work as unethical, but more that he has to comply in order to undertake meaningful academic work.

Work to date has also shown that academics who feel they have to perform in their roles are experiencing low authenticity, low trust of colleagues and ontological insecurity (Clegg, 2008; Harris, 2005). This is perhaps why Eleanor at Essex references feeling a disconnection between her academic activities and academic identity.

“...we are not given the opportunity to be academics any more... we have to jump through too many hoops...”

Eleanor’s idea that performativity is distancing academics from academic work is interesting and reflects Ball’s (2003) point that performativity is causing a state of ontological insecurity for academics. The need for outputs and to meet performance metrics is creating a state of anxious self-reflexivity where individuals are constantly asking themselves if they have done enough to meet institutional expectations, and where performance of the individual is explicitly linked to the performance of the institution (Ball, 2003). For participants at Cambridge, such as Ezekial, performativity is arguably described as a facet of academic work, rather than defining it. Similarly, Leah at Cambridge feels obliged to not only undertake good academic work, but to sell its importance to others. Crucially, for Leah, performativity is also required between academics, and she “unfortunately” needs to adopt a “flashy” approach, in order to persuade academic colleagues to support her work.

“...I mean I guess there are two aspects in terms of publishing and getting grants, it is the quality of the research but I guess, unfortunately the way I also kind of see it is that it is also how um...flashy it looks and sounds...so I mean,

you could do the most amazing research and you could sell it as a really boring story, or I mean I definitely have read papers where it is kind of using a new technique or a large sample or whatever but then really not showing any more than anyone else before, and then that gets published really highly so...”

Tim at Suffolk also feels the pressure of performance demands that places academic progress and personal ambition above good academic work. Like Leah, Tim does not see this as being wholly perpetuated by his institution, but rather sees his academic colleagues as both supporting and perpetuating this system. Tim explains how he feels there is a perception in academia that “good people move on” and that being happy is not recognised or valued by colleagues. As a result, Tim says that not going for promotion to date has caused him “angst”:

“...there is this view in terms of profession and there is a link...in terms of good people move on and promotion and stuff...some say what are you a senior lecturer, well should you not be more than that...ok well I have never been ambitious, never saw myself as a Professor, never saw myself, and probably not quite good enough to be one anyway, but yeah people are thinking well you cannot be up to much because you are still here...but I know there is a counter argument to that...well you must be happy...in one sense and...um...so that does cause me a bit of um...yeah...angst...”

Tim’s point that academic colleagues are driving what Eleanor calls the academic “treadmill” is worrying. Harris (2005), drawing on the work of Ball (2003), makes the point that performativity in academia can be understood as a mode of control where outputs have become more important than academic work and values. Tim’s account suggests that if academics are proponents of the system, then the space for academics to influence the performativity culture in HE has been seriously limited.

Daniel at Essex does indeed see that management of performance and outputs has been shifted to the responsibility of individual academics, making them responsible for their own compliance with this. As a result, Daniel feels that a large part of his role is now making sure he and his work is visible. He attributes this to the speed of changes in HE and how institutions have sought to manage this.

“There is also an issue for me...the pace of change within academia has been rapid and it has become more managed...you have to respond to and be seen to be doing...”

For Daniel, as this management has been devolved to the level of individual academics, he feels there is a demand to “have to manage”, and for academics to demonstrate their own good performance whilst presenting themselves to colleagues favourably.

“...this is what you have to manage, these are the indicators, versus how you conduct yourself...”

Daniel’s concept of having to manage suggests where he sees academic agency as being situated. Academics may be proponents of the performativity systems of HE, but Daniel’s account reflects the sense that there are multiple spaces in their work. Indeed, several of the participants describe directing their job crafting activities in order to create academic opportunities in part as a response to institutional demands for performance. Lucian at Suffolk describes how he now limits the time he spends on institutional priorities. He says that as a result of his experiences with institutional requests he has modified his preferred way of working which was to fully scope and plan projects before starting, to now wait until deadlines are due before he starts working on them, as a lot of the time even when institutional projects are given the green light this is no guarantee they will actually go ahead. For Lucian, this has actually freed up some of his existing time, and he has used it to engage in his own research.

“...what you learn fairly quickly is that there are a lot of good ideas in universities, and a lot of these good ideas go nowhere, and the vast majority of the time it goes nowhere, and occasionally you get something that works, they throw a lot at the wall and a bit sticks, and if you invest too heavily too early on you waste a lot of energy, and I am not saying do not invest, but wait and see whether it is going anywhere before you fully invest in it, and you can spread your labour, and not burn out...and so now I can prioritise my own work, and I am hoping to publish”

This willingness to increase the volume of work to pursue personal goals is also reflected by Nina at Essex. Nina relays how she took on the full duties of teaching

and moderation on a course she was involved in developing, as relying on others to contribute was proving to be a time and resource drain.

“...so I co-wrote a course...and it was an online course...but the others...we were a nuisance to them really, so it was difficult in getting stuff done and moving it along, so it was all quite painfully slow at times, and it would be waiting to get hold of the person who was looking after us.....so yeah after the initial development of the course and getting it accredited um...the role then was purely ...we took over all the moderation and the teaching, so we deal with the course delivery, under our own guise...”

This task expansion approach is not only for personal benefit, and Edmund at Suffolk raises how he redesigned part of the delivery of a course to reflect the performativity demands on students. Edmund discusses how taking on an academic programme in his experience has an impact on personal life for students.

“You begin to compartmentalise, you have to give up. Something's gotta give...so if you're, you know, you're trying to achieve work life balance, and then you throw an academic programme into the middle of it. Right... And what normally gives is your social life and your family life. That's where you have the greatest flexibility...”

As a result, Edmund says he implemented events and opportunities for families to become more involved in the course, from application to assessment. He describes how he sought to mitigate this by making the performance demands transparent, inviting the families of potential students in as part of the application process. This was to ensure that they were aware of the demands of the course and what time and resource they would be required to commit.

“Students are more demanding because you're more demanding, right? As an academic manager you're really sacrificing them... we had we had we had a couple of divorces in. Oh yeah, because of the programme we actually had one...so we would get in wives, husbands, children...everyone needed to be on board, and I wanted our students to come in eyes wide open”.

Participant accounts overall suggest that performance in academia can be understood in terms of a necessary vehicle to drive academic work, meet external

expectations, and contribute to institutional priorities, and it can also be drawn on to create new spaces for academic work. This adds to the existing literature by highlighting that despite the challenges of performance management, participants are crafting new ways of working and not just reproducing the performance management system. This may be a pragmatic approach to academic work, rather than a willing embracing of performative practices. Edmund’s example of creating new spaces for students and their families, and Nina’s experiences of taking ownership over the entire process around a course, suggest an alternative view to the discussions highlighted in Chapter 2 around how academics alter their work in line with performance metrics, even if the metrics are counterproductive to creating meaningful academic work (Osterloh & Frey, 2020). Ezekial and Leah at Cambridge, by recrafting their research funding applications and publications, arguably highlights examples of academics taking on additional tasks and values that meet performative goals, so performance management tasks are engaged with to assist with the success of their academic values and goals. Tim at Suffolk, Leah at Cambridge and Daniel at Essex all raise the idea that performativity in academia is in part being driven by their academic colleagues as well as by their institutions, as their colleagues regard visibly meeting performance metrics an essential contributing factor to the continuation of their academic careers. The link between performativity in terms of career progression, a balance for individual and institutional expectations, and a focal point for job crafting activities that contribute to strong and stable sense of academic identity is arguably a key contribution to the work on academic performativity to date.

Publishing and Funding: Job Crafting Academic Reputations

Publishing and funding are raised by participants as integral to building academic reputations. Publishing is recognised as key to the game of academia; the phrase “publish or perish”, coined by Coolidge in 1932 has “now becoming a harsh reality” (Rawat & Meena, 2014, p.87). The problems for academia that have been created by the focus on publishing are well discussed, including the negative impact of “good scholarship is in danger (Becker & Lukka, 2023, p.1), that the volume of publications have become a “disservice” to their fields, (Davis & Felappi, 2017, p.745), and that researchers are now driven to produce over discover in their research (Chambers et al., 2014). That academics willingly engage with the publishing game but do not self-reflect on the impact of its practices is highlighted

as problematic (Brabet et al., 2021). There has been a worrying rise in the number of “gap-spotting” journal articles published, where academics rapidly expand a field with new research irrespective of whether it is relevant and worthy or not (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2012). Academics themselves, when playing the publications game, are directly involved in the manipulation of impact factors, data manipulation and “p-hacking...for publishable results” (Edwards & Roy, 2017, p.52). In the literature then, if publications are the goal, academics appear willing to pursue them even if this impacts good academic work.

Despite the problems around academic publishing, it is interesting that Eleanor at Essex is the lone voice amongst the participants to this study in critiquing the value of publishing. Eleanor suggests that challenging the rules of the publishing system is possible if academics are willing to recognise alternative outputs as examples of academic achievement and excellence. This includes recognition for work that is considered to be academically good and not just work in high-ranking journals. Eleanor notes that high-profile academics would have to refuse to engage with the current publishing practices, which she reflects is unlikely.

“...and we have to make sure we only publish in certain journals and I think actually... there are ways and means to...we should not be beholden to the REF, so if you are doing some really interesting research and you only get published in a one star journal if that...it should not be a problems...I do not know if there is a solution to that particular issue...it would certainly require a UK wide movement, um of a large group, of fairly pre-eminent professors and researchers to be able to say...we are not playing that particular ball game anymore.....and I do not think that will actually happen, so I will think wistfully about that one..”¹

Leah at Cambridge also raises problems with publishing, but in the context of the role of academic colleagues in peer review processes. Leah argues that changes are needed to the peer review system in academic publishing is a priority to prevent academic peer reviewers obstructing publications. She explains that as timing is important to getting papers published in high impact journals, some academics use the review process to block the successful publication of papers that they feel are in

¹ Since the data for this study were collected, many UK universities have signed the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), which seeks to improve how scholarly outputs are evaluated by emphasising their intrinsic merit rather than the standing of the journal in which they are published.

competition to their own work, a by-product of the fact that peer reviewers are sought from the area the author is publishing in. Leah is explicit in citing academic colleagues as contributing to making the process problematic, citing a publications “mafia”.

“I think the next thing that will need to be tackled is basically the system for review of papers and grants...I mean in various areas you kind of have, like a mafia [laughs] who um, if you review a paper from someone that you know or like, then maybe you are more biased or more lenient, and if it is a competitor, then you could be really harsh, and in actually a lot of cases unfortunately um...for example if I submit a paper that would otherwise scoop a competitor, and it gets sent to that competitor to review, they can hold it up for months, and sometimes years, keep asking for more and more and more, and then um, and they have submitted and had their thing accepted”

Leah’s example arguably reflects the work of Chambers and colleagues (2014), suggesting that academics are not to be blamed for the publishing game as the practices affect all academics, noting that they are “as much victims of this system as they are perpetrators” (Chambers et al., 2014, p.4). For Leah, one way to mediate the issue of other academics blocking your publications is changing the system of reviewers from being anonymous. This would mean the peer review system for publishing in journals becoming transparent, and she notes that in some areas this is already happening.

“...there are now a few journals that basically um...so for example, the Reviewers are identified as well as the Editor when they upload the paper, and there are some papers now that actually show all of the reviewers' comments and all of the replies, so it is a changing model”

In contrast to Eleanor’s critique of the academic impact of publishing, and Leah’s critique of the system of peer review, the other participants discuss publishing in a positive context, linking it to crafting opportunities for funding and building academic reputations. Harvey at Cambridge sees the purpose of publishing as to ensure he can demonstrate having a track record in his academic area. He describes having a strategy when job crafting for publishing that reflects how the hierarchy of authorship on papers should be, and that whoever has had the ideas and driven the work should be senior author and so the last author listed. Harvey notes that his

approach challenges existing practice, where the group leader expects to be senior author because they have given him space and resources, with Harvey listing himself as first author and so the second most important contributor to the paper. Harvey therefore sees his job crafting around publishing as a series of focussed activities where he can demonstrate contribution to work that is being drafted into papers.

“...if I cannot say I was involved in the design or execution or analysis, then I should not expect to go on the paper...you know here is no doubt that I could not have done the stuff I have done if someone had not agreed to host me...and so from that side of things, yes the PI will be on the paper, but they will be a middle author on the paper having made contribution to the research by giving me space, and that is fine, and that is not what we are arguing should not happen, that is fine...it is the you go first and I will go senior, that is the attitude that people are fighting against um...and you know it is difficult...”

Harvey raises that the approach of Funders has supported his approach with their requirements to demonstrate research independence. He says he is thankful that funders stipulate the need to prove that your work is your own in order to secure the next round of funding as this compels his group leader, who should demonstrate support for Harvey’s career trajectory, to not place themselves as senior author on Harvey’s papers.

“...I think the one thing that has been very helpful is that the funder, these issues have been raised, have been...very very clear about what they expect... and they could not be more clear...it is very clear that simply holding the grant that funds the research is insufficient to take authorship, you need to be taking an active line in the execution or writing or analysis... for senior author on the paper...if they wish to demonstrate that they are driving the research...”

Harvey also reflects on how others were also establishing their own academic areas of work and the need to balance this with his own job crafting, in order to avoid clashes. Harvey notes that when he was in place in the new group, he left some discussions on the ownership of his work open-ended, as at the time he thought this would be best. In hindsight, Harvey feels it would have been better to have addressed this matter at the earliest point it was raised, noting that ambiguity

around key decisions should be avoided, and that actions around research independence should be raised as a priority.

“...there are a couple of things I wish I had not done, so early on when I was overseas I was having a discussion with the PI there who was saying oh yeah we can be co senior on this paper, and I said oh that definitely is an option and we can talk about it when we have a manuscript, whereas I should have just said...nice of you to think that but if this goes in the direction I think it will then, you know I will be the main driver of this, just to set expectations early on, rather than sort of lead people into thinking it is different from what it is going to be...”

William at Cambridge reflects Harvey’s proactive approach to publishing. William raises that he crafted a publications strategy for himself, using this to shape his work and build future opportunities.

“...and so I targeted the idea I would get publications within six months...and then would get one every two months thereafter and that is exactly what I did...and now I can demonstrate a track record in my area...but that was because my own efforts”

Sean at Suffolk also echoes the importance of academic publishing, and like William cites proactively crafting opportunities for him to publish. Sean describes creating an electronic journal for publishing in his academic area so as to make the game of publishing more favourable to him and ensure he himself can publish.

“It is publish or perish game isn’t it, so I set up a Journal, with a colleague...I tried to find a different approach to our area, people were interested and we have been sending it out by email every 3 months to date...”

Sean’s example suggests that the boundaries of academic publishing are being shifted by the activities of individual academics where institutions do not overtly support academic publishing. Adema and Stone (2017) highlight a recent increase in academic-led publishing, as well as an increase in the number of university presses in the UK. Thomas (2006) also highlights how institutions have used institutional repositories as a way to share academic publications, and that these repositories have begun to “ascend in prominence” (Thomas, 2006, p.33). Participants suggest that proactive strategies to publishing are as a result of its

wider importance to obtaining research funding. Reece at Essex notes that publications and funding are explicitly linked. For Reece, publishing is of key importance when academics are seeking to secure funding for their research. Reece makes the point that good ideas are not enough, and publications are a key means by which potential funders can see your research ideas have credibility.

“So people might believe in your idea, great, which is always a good thing, and they may think you are the guy to do it, but if you don’t have any papers, they are suspicious, they don’t fund it because they will think well why are there no papers, does the idea not work”

Reece at Essex reflects on his own task crafting strategies around achieving publications. He advocates for gaining credibility to publish through gaining experience, noting that changing how he crafted the start of his research trajectory would have been helpful.

“If I could go back...I would probably say find short-term research projects that can deliver within 3-6 months that you will complete that will result in a paper, something you can work on, and work alongside someone...”

Nicholas at Essex describes how he changed the way he works in order to build a research and research funding track record. Nicholas notes that there has been a change in how Research Councils award research funding across his careers, with funders shifting from funding academics to funding outputs. He describes this as significantly changing how he approaches his work, and that as a result he completes work in advance, having a project finished, and so the results known and guaranteed, before he seeks funding for it.

“...so it is not how it used to be, where a funder or a Research Council would say hey your work is interesting, we will give you funding for a few years to give you the space to see what you come up with...now we need to pursue research where we can demonstrate results and benefits from the start, or we risk losing future funding...so I now...we do the work, we get the results, and then I go for funding...and I do this each time, and it works...”

Nicholas’s strategy to ensure he can continue to research by having projects completed prior to applying for research funding raises an interesting point about

the changing landscape of research funding in the UK. Edwards (2022) estimates that a quarter of all research in the UK is unfunded, in part due to academics either failing to get funding or feeling that they are unlikely to be successful and so not pursuing the route of research funding in the first place.

One option for academics is to pursue different types of funding, such as through Fellowships. She reflects on how different funders can shape her academic autonomy in terms of the types of grants she can go after.

“...hugely, and disproportionately between different funders...and again this is a function of how you are funded, so some projects take up not much time because they basically...you apply for the money they give you the money you go away and you have more or less complete autonomy over spend, if you find after two weeks that the thing that you thought you were going to do, is either rubbish you know you were wrong or you find a better way of doing it, they will back you rather than the project, they bought into the idea that you knew what you were doing...by contrast the EU grants are the complete opposite, where they back the letter of the work you said you were going to do, you cannot deviate from what and how you said you would do, and that is just not how science works, you know you are, you will learn how to do it better after a process, and I think they need a bit more flexibility, and so some funders get this right...”

Watermeyer and Tomlinson’s work (2022) shows experiences for academics around navigating fixed term research funding and the need to secure ongoing funding to ensure continuity of work is seen as shaping the work itself, and “the rewards game of the UK’s performance-based research funding system” has created the demand for researchers to produce research that demonstrates impact for society, shaping the nature and scope of research in the UK at every level (Watermeyer & Tomlinson, 2022, p.92).

Participants at Cambridge raise that a key way of obtaining funding for your work is via the Fellowships route. However, McNay (2022) describes the academic competitive funding in the UK as the most intense in Europe, even though evidence suggests this has not improved research quality long term and the competitive environment has led to manipulation of submissions, conservative research focus and reduced collegiality. A key feature of the career through Fellowships is the need to demonstrate a movement towards total independence, meaning the process

arguably creates a situation where academics are constantly at odds with each other, even when they are not in direct competition.

Harvey at Cambridge discusses the benefits of securing a Fellowship as the academic freedom for his work and his ability to drive his own research agenda.

“Once you get into the fellowship system I guess so, I mean the nice thing about an intermediate fellowship, and a senior fellowship to the same extent sort of, is that with an intermediate you start with a pretty much blank piece of paper and you can do what you want”.

Harvey raises that whilst Fellowships are prestigious, he is not certain whether the risks make the process worth it, especially in terms of the potential impact on family through the nature of short-term funding for Fellowships.

“...supposedly it is a more prestigious way of going through and intermediate and senior fellowships are viewed very highly, um, I still sit at home sometimes and think, what am I doing, I have got...kids...and um you know a mortgage to pay and in two years’ time, I do not have a salary, and that is slightly tough...”

Harvey feels that a more secure, alternative route should be available to him via a university appointments system, but notes that “posts have not come up in Cambridge”. Although he does not allude to it, considering this point in light of the fact that HESA data discussed in Chapter 1 shows the majority of Cambridge contracts are fixed term suggests that Harvey’s Fellowships route may be through necessity rather than choice - although he does see the Fellowships funding as a way to task craft and pursue the amount of research he wants to do in this job.

“and there is a parallel tract that people go onto which through the sort of, university appointments so you start as say a lecturer and then a reader and then a professor, and what that would then mean is at least then your salary is covered by the university such that if your grant runs out it does mean you can still pay your mortgage that month...I have not at any stage moved into that tract, partly because some of the posts have not come up in Cambridge for those things thing, and partly because on a Fellowship I am very much able to do as much research as I really want to...”

Del describes why he took the decision to apply for Fellowship funding as the route for his academic career. For Del, task crafting in this way means expending a considerable amount of additional time and resources associated with this, but that he sees this as worth it as his goal is career progress which he sees will bring him increased future autonomy over his time and resources.

...I think that the massive challenges are that you have to get these fellowships...I would say...compared with some people here I am by no means a workaholic, but...in general I do not really like taking holidays [laughs] so I know that from feedback I get at home I do not have a particularly good work life balance...not terrible...but kind of...I am prepared to take the hit there, I can see the resource and career progression...”

The language that Del uses to justify his pursuit of Fellowships suggests that it is an all or nothing strategy, it is “compete or die”, where colleagues are both your competitor and your supporters.

“...when you go for Fellowships you see the people around you and you see how good they are... so I have to work, I have to be very competitive...you know it is complete or die...but I have always been very lucky, I have always worked with good quality colleagues”

Del’s acknowledgement of Fellowships as a high-risk strategy is reflected in the literature, and it is estimated that only around 20% of applications for Fellowships for those seeking independent research careers are successful. Moreover, ensuring that the work resulting from this funding, if successful, is meaningful is not necessarily guaranteed, as it is currently estimated that for example in Medicine, “£200 billion, or 85% of the invested money in research is wasted globally” (Fudulu & Angelini, 2021, p.1593). This waste is attributed to poor research design, failure to publish promptly, choosing the wrong research questions and bias, which could all be improved by transforming the research grant funding system (Chalmers & Glasziou, 2009).

Naomi at Cambridge reflects that whilst Fellowship funding is prestigious, the short-term nature of the funding means that she is regularly having to engage with task crafting strategies to create evidence for the next round of funding, which is at the expense of her dedicating her energies to her research.

“...and there is a prestige thing um...but it is high risk because if you go for the fellowship and it does not pan out you fall off a cliff at the end of the fellowship...on a personal level I have got a year left before I need to go for funding...so I have got a year left, but actually that does not mean I have got a year left because in order to get the thing after that I need to be applying for fellowships in about 3 months’ time...”

Naomi also refers to task crafting strategies around playing the game with progressing her academic career when discussing applying for Fellowships that will fund her salary and research costs. For Naomi, future planning is key in order to ensure the continuity of her work.

“...it’s tricky, so on a personal level I have got a year left before I need to go for funding...but actually that does not mean I have got a year left because in order to get the thing after that I need to be applying for fellowships in about 3 months’ time...so you need to be almost a year ahead of the game”

Despite her raising that going for external funding is “tricky”, Naomi does also consider the process to improve the quality of academic work, as it creates focus.

“I heard someone calculated the amount of money and time spent on getting grants, and totted that up and compared that to the amount of money given in grants, and by that metric supposedly, the academic community is in negative equity, so we spend more time going for money that we get money, because the success rates in grants is whatever it is, allegedly in the US it is 1-2%, so a lot of people spend a lot of time going for funding rounds that they do not get, so you can see that inefficiency, but yet that inefficiency requires people to focus their minds come up with grant proposals, and it is true that you do not sit down and think through projects in the same way unless you were made to by the funding process...”

As publishing and funding is raised by participants as key to the games of academia and as visible outputs in how academics are recognised and valued, by their institutions and each other, participants then are demonstrating activities that suggest acceptance and strategic navigation of these systems. Participant accounts of job crafting around publishing and funding highlight nuanced accounts of crafting

academic reputations, reflecting experiences of a working environment where being a good academic is no longer just about doing good work. For institutions, funders and academic colleagues, publishing and funding are seen as a proxy for academic credibility. In response to this, participants are describing job crafting activities that establish their independent academic reputations through ensuring lead authorship on papers and changing how they approach their research and publishing by advising others to seek small projects with a single publication at the start of a research trajectory, and having research completed in advance of seeking funding. Eleanor’s experience prompts her to critique the whole publishing system and recognition that there is no opt out as reputation has become tightly bound to the REF and journal prestige, is illuminating. However, some of the participant accounts draw parallels with the work of Beck (1996, 2009) and the theory of risk society, where engaging with the “bads” that emerge from reflexive modernity can in turn produce “goods” (Rasborg, 2018, p.157). For example, Naomi and Harvey at Cambridge both note the risks and precariousness associated with Fellowships funding and that failure in obtaining funding can be career-ending but highlight the rewards of diminished institutional demands and a “blank sheet” for their academic work. Participant job crafting with publishing and funding systems therefore can be seen as reflecting a reflexive negotiation of risk and reward, where navigating the pressures of academic credibility can be both a constraint and a creative opportunity for crafting meaningful academic work.

Enduring or Innovating? Academic Job Crafting and “The System”

Participants in this study refer to their work as being governed by systems. The concept of “the system” is broadly discussed in terms of rigid and inescapable structures that participants feel is shaping how they and their colleagues are having to approach their academic work. In response to “the system”, participants are job crafting in two distinct ways – either crafting within systems, seeking to align their tasks, cognitive approaches and social networks with the perceived boundaries of the system, or they are crafting outside of systems, finding new ways to work and crafting academic work that is not commonly recognised by existing systems. There has been relatively little research to date exploring how academics are implementing new ways of working in academia, in part because the increased scrutiny and the performance culture of HE has meant that academics are deliberately seeking to keep these strategies “hidden” (Churchman & King, 2009).

The existing literature suggests that most of the work to date has been how academics work within systems, and for example Tight (2019) suggests that academics are finding ways to work around neoliberal policies by modifying institutional priorities, adapting teaching methods and managing workloads so as to align their work with their academic values. However, this requires proactive and often additional work for individual academics (Watermeyer, 2014).

Several of the participants describe approaching their job crafting in order to work within the systems of HE, even if they see them as being at odds with academic values and goals. Across all three institutions, working within the systems of HE is presented as accepting the dominance of financial priorities above academic ones. Edmund at Suffolk raises “the system”, observing that across his career to date, institutional systems have eclipsed academic structures in providing the focus for his work. He notes that the drivers and priorities of academic work are now predominantly financial, but states that the only course of action is to go along with this.

“...universities...the system...is now a financial one...all you can do is follow the money”.

Edmunds’s discussion progressing from “universities” to “the system” suggests that he regards a state of homogenisation has occurred in that money has become the inescapable governing system of HE. This aligns with the themes explored in Chapter 2 that recognise academia in the UK as operating within neoliberal systems that dictate the processes and rules for academic activities in areas such as research, teaching, institutional governance, and funding (Henkel, 2005; Shattock, 2021; Collini, 2012). Interestingly, Edmund’s response that “*all you can do*” suggests he is choosing to reinterpret the purpose of his role around financial drivers, rather than resist them.

Nicholas at Essex, like Edmund also suggests an active repositioning of his academic identity in line with financial priorities, revealing that he approaches his course leadership “like a business”. Nicholas is more positive about this strategy, and laments that colleagues are not seen to be behaving in a similar way, describing that he chooses to approach his work in this way in contrast to Edmund’s suggestion of being compelled to prioritise finances.

“But this comes back to the system...if everyone was really energetic...I see my degree like a business, I run it like a business...and it is a shame that other people don’t see/do it like that...”

Eleanor at Essex describes the idea of the system in terms of prioritising financial interests on an institutional level, and how this restricts the autonomy of individual academics and their capacity to pursue “radical” work. Eleanor sees the system as a restrictor on sense of purpose and sense of belonging for academics to individual institutions.

“I think a lot of institutions are like that though, they like to think they are edgy they are bucking the trend, changing the system from the inside, but because of the way the system works, because of the marketisation, because of the tuition fees, because of the decrease in the market of students, no one can really be radical...”

Leah at Cambridge also reflects financial systems, raising the context of discussions around individuals obtaining research funding. Leah talks about how in her relational crafting academics outside of her university raise “a lot” that much of the grant funding goes to a small number of institutions, and that they are vocal about how they find this an unfair system.

“...if you look at where the funding goes in the country, a lot of it does go to Russell Group Universities...and I mean I have spoken to people at conferences who have moaned a lot about how difficult it is to get money when you are at other universities...”

Leah’s discussion reflects that the structures of academia have had a personal impact (Loher & Strasser, 2019). Yasmin at Essex also reflects this, lamenting that universities “playing the system” has had a direct impact on her work as an academic, to the level of dictating her student recruitment and shaping her teaching as an institutional response to feedback from the TEF and NSS. As with Leah’s example, Yasmin considers the system as unfair, where universities with more resources get a disproportionate amount of recognition. Like Edmund, Yasmin notes the unavoidable nature of the system, with universities themselves compelled to “have to” engage with game-playing and the system.

“...and now universities have to play the system...institutions that have got resources did go to town on it [TEF, NSS], analyses of data and things like that...work out how to optimise your performance, like with investment...and academics have had to go along with it, like with taking the cap off...you are now told who to recruit, you don't really have a choice over your students anymore”

For participants who describe job crafting outside the systems of HE, this is generally raised in terms of what the types of academic identities that they reject. For example, Eleanor at Essex raises that she refuses to be an academic who works the majority of the time. She explains how she is working through strategies for ensuring this with a coach, focussing on job crafting strategies around creating space for her work in order to manage her time well and maintain a good work life balance.

“...I am not...ever going to be one of those academics who works a 60 hour week, who works late, stays up late, works on a Saturday morning, I do not think you have to do that to be an excellent academic, but we...[long pause]...but colleagues, not just at this institution but across higher education seem to...the rhetoric seems to be that in order to fit everything in and be good at everything and be TEFable and REFable and you know do all the committees and sit on the, you know, and do all the administration, there is not enough time in a 37 and a half hour week to do that...and I am not sure I believe that...”

Henkel (2005) highlights that the REF is seen as a system that has compelled academics to move away from collegiate academic activity and to behave in self-interested, competitive and strategic ways (Henkel, 2005). In a similar vein, systems of teaching and student experience and the TEF are seen as being shaped by sector-wide performance metrics which “mismatches” expectation and reward, challenging academic identity (Perkins, 2019, p.297). Eleanor’s account shows she is seeking to move beyond reproducing these systems and to create systems for her work which prioritises a work life balance.

For Daniel at Essex, the concept of the system is raised in terms of the REF as a constraint to his academic work. He raises the contradictions between the REF system requiring academic outputs for submission, his role as a manager exempting him from making REF submissions, and his core purpose for why he became an academic.

“...you are looking for logic in the REF system [laughs] so there is one reading that suggests if I am on a particular grade and in a managerial role I would not necessarily, go into the REF um, that is as it may be, a key part of my identity and a key part of what I got into the job for um is...about researching and writing...”

Daniel therefore recognises researching and writing as a key part of his identity, but also how the boundaries around his capacity to do these are limited by role. This echoes the work of Henkel who highlights how the Research Excellence Framework, and its predecessor the Research Assessment Exercise, changed research into a strategic institutional priority. This has resulted in a landscape where individual academics who perform well in these assessments gain access to greater institutional support and prestige, while others face marginalisation or restructuring (Henkel, 2005, p.163).

Aurora at Essex also underscores a drive in her job crafting to create new systems of working that reflect her academic values and goals, and, like Eleanor, the type of academic she does not want to be. Aurora reveals that she did not want to be subject to the demands of the REF. As a result, she actively kept herself on teaching only contracts, explaining that this meant she could be exempt from having to contribute to her institution’s REF submission, and that she could focus her job crafting on creating new opportunities for students that she was proud of

“...I was always on teaching...so I didn’t have the stress of the REF...so I had time to...I implemented a project, and links with industry...I was able to facilitate students getting real world experience even as undergraduates...and no one was really doing that, and I was very proud...”

Lucian at Suffolk, like Aurora, demonstrates job crafting to make new ways of working around his teaching in order to make his role as a lecturer more meaningful, Lucian details how he has tried a new approach to his work that seeks to improve his teaching by moving away from generic information sharing, which he feels students can do on their own, to using his time for more bespoke feedback. Lucian also stresses that whilst this is more effective, it is also more time intensive for him.

“...actually I have worked tirelessly to try and reduce, I am thinking of smarter ways to deliver knowledge...you stand in front of a classroom, in front of a diagram and you stand and point, in fact for me it would be much more effective for someone to do that at home, they do not need me to stand there and point at labels...so I am trying to reduce that kind of teaching and that didactic load, but at the same time there is a lot of work going into making that viable, because you cannot tell everyone go away and find out for yourself that is a poor way of doing the flipped classroom, they need resources and to be directed, and once that is up and running it is much easier to keep things running...I do not think the teaching hours would be any less...because you would have to do a lot of work that was outside of that traditional, lecture from 9 to 10, but if anyone can contact you at any time, you need to monitor the work that they have done, and give them feedback...”

Lucian’s account has parallels with Kinman (2014), who highlights work describing how academics in the UK are experiencing increased workloads, and that burnout and job satisfaction are paradoxically, co-existing but in a strained balance. However, Lucian and Aurora’s accounts are arguably also providing a contrasting view to Slaughter and Rhoades (2011) point that academic capitalism has positioned students as consumers and academics as marketers. By providing examples of new ways of working focussed on meaningful work that has shared academic meanings for both academics and students, their accounts arguably demonstrate that their job crafting is shifting the boundaries of academic work beyond the remit of systems such as the TEF.

This idea of operating outside the system as a way to create new ways of working and meaningful work is echoed by Marcus at Cambridge. For Marcus, meaningful academic work can only take place “outside of the box”, and “outside the system”. He advocates new ways of working that mean a return to core values in both society and academia.

“...the proliferation of bureaucracy begins to invade every element of liberal thought and every element of how things need to be done, and how can you incorporate support for someone...to come up with brilliant originality, how can you do it, you cannot, it needs to be outside the box...we need people outside the system.....”

Marcus raises the example of notable former academic Frederick Sanger, who was awarded two Nobel Prizes. Marcus reflects on how there were long periods of time in Sanger’s work where he led his group without any visible outputs. In Marcus’ opinion, Sanger would have lost his job as his lack of measurable outputs would not be tolerated by the current systems of academia.

“Fred Sanger would never have got his second prize...even his first prize if he had been subjected to that, he never would have survived...he got two Nobel prizes...you know so he was completely unworldly, he did not publish anything for five years just before he found the method to sequence DNA, he never would have survived now...”.

Marcus’s example suggests that academic performativity is a mechanism through which individuals are required to craft and recraft their identities in response to institutional systems focussed on demands for visibility, productivity, and success. He argues that marginalisation is a method of ensuring academics align with the systems they work in, remembering brilliant academics who were able to be achieved because they stayed outside the systems of measurement and promotion in universities. However, Marcus also reflects that this capacity to operate outside of the systems in academia has been seriously restricted, in a large part by administrators within the institutions that they work for.

“....discoverers, it is kind of a real thing, they are not unique but they are...the answer is they are people who can live outside the convention, the requirements, the reporting, the five year you know grant renewal...eccentrics who do it on their own, eccentrics who escape the bureaucrats, no longer is that so easily possible, they find they get marginalised, they cannot survive..”

Marcus’ discussion reflects his experience that the space for distinct academic systems in academia is decreasing, and that like Collini, in order to continue to engage with meaningful work academics are required to “work the system” (Collini, 2012, p4). In this regard, working the system can mean creating alternative systems and ways of working. Tara at Cambridge refers to working the system, suggesting that to do this means challenging the intrinsic purpose of universities overall. Tara raises that it is not academics who need to work the system, but rather that this is the remit of the non-academic staff employed at HEIs. She makes the point that some academics are seen as working outside the system, but that she would

challenge this, raising that they are working wholly within the remit of academia and that it is not their responsibility to work out how their academic work fits institutional metrics or industry requirements.

“...so I can work the system, but I have been in industry...really universities, they are putting the focus in the wrong place, the point...the point of universities is to organise around academic work so all the needs...what governments and societies and even industry wants from academics, what academics can do for them...academics are not good at working that out and how to talk the talk...I work with great professional services people who can go into government and industry meetings and talk politics and business...and I work with academics who are brilliant and their work is brilliant but you just wouldn't put them in a high level strategy meeting where we are trying to sell what we do...”

Reframing the system, working the system, and creating new systems, are all suggested in the participants accounts therefore, suggesting new perspectives on the idea that the neoliberal drivers of finance, transparency, and efficiency have reshaped the social and physical structures of academia, limiting autonomy and embedding academics within multi-layered systems. The range of different accounts around “the system” demonstrate both compliance with and resistance to institutional and broader HE systems. For participants who raise their job crafting in terms of working within systems, this is broadly associated with alignment to financial priorities, where participants like Edmund and Yasmin describe systems as inescapable frameworks that now define academic work. However, Nicholas at Essex provides a more proactive approach, describing how he chooses to run his degree like a business and expressing frustration that colleagues do not adopt the same mindset. In contrast, participants describe working outside the system in two key ways. For Eleanor at Essex, working outside of the system is expressed in terms of rejecting a workaholic academic identity and seeking to create a new system with better work-life balance. For Lucian at Suffolk and Aurora at Essex, crafting outside the system is about proactively creating new ways of working that seek to create meaningful work around their teaching, through student-centred approaches that are personally and professionally fulfilling. Participants therefore can be seen as reflecting Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) reflexive individualisation where participants are not simply internalising the norms and demands of HE, but engaging with them critically, job crafting identities in ways that respond to, resist, and reimagine these systems.

Visibility and Credibility: Navigating “The Game” of Academia - Summary

The idea of academia as academic and institutional game-playing is a key theme emerging from participant reflections on their roles and job crafting. Participant accounts show that academic game-playing is not only a strategic response to institutional demands, but also a means through which academics create space for academic work. Participants engage with multiple games in order to secure resources, build credibility, develop autonomy and form relationships that enable new academic work to be created. In this sense, game-playing is connected to agency, and academics are not just constrained by institutional systems, but are actively negotiating these systems in order to create spaces to craft meaningful work and, through this work, craft academic identities. In this regard, crafting academic games can also be seen as a form of crafting academic identity.

Although much of the work on academia as a game has drawn on Bourdieu's (1998) concept of the social field, this study has drawn primarily on Beck (1995) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) to understand academic games as linked to academic identity construction. Bourdieu's concept of the game frames social life as a competitive field in which players have a stake in the game, where the rules are constantly shifting, and where individuals seek to maintain or improve their position. In higher education, this has been used to understand how academics compete for status, recognition and legitimacy, while also seeking to make meaningful work that is valued by their employers and disciplines (Bourdieu, 1998; Annala et al., 2020; Watermeyer and Tomlinson, 2022). By contrast, Beck's work is useful for this study because it focuses on uncertainty, individualisation and the pressure on individuals to construct viable biographies within institutional conditions they do not fully control. Participants in this study reflect the tensions described by Beck. They describe academic games as essential to career stability, but also as a mechanism through which academic identity can be built, protected and reshaped.

Patterns in academic game-playing can be seen across the three institutions. At Cambridge, “the game” is drawn on as an approach to academic work and as a

strategic choice used to maximise success, whilst at Suffolk it is viewed as an inescapable necessity, shaping academic work, with limited autonomy and negative consequences for opting out. Essex participants provide a range of experiences, describing the game as a core part of academic identity that improves the quality academic work, but also as an approach to work that fosters competition amongst colleagues. Participants' accounts of academia as game-playing arguably demonstrates self-reflexivity, with an awareness of the systems and structures that they are working in, and job crafting that does not just reproduce these contexts, but rather creates new spaces, ways of working, and for some new systems and structures.

Participant experiences of academic game-playing can arguably be seen as a means not just of surviving HE therefore, but as a way in which academics can reshape academic work. Some of the experiences do raise that there are barriers, such as with the systems around publishing and funding, but even here participants can craft new ways of working. Moreover, it may be that individual satisfaction in approaching academia as game-playing is possible if the idea of “the game” is drawn on to frame academic work, rather than to shape academic work itself. Butler and Spoelstra's (2020) work on academic game-playing is useful here because it highlights the need to understand academic games as layered rather than singular. Academics may believe they are playing the game in strategic or even subversive ways, while also being shaped by the game itself. This is important for this study because participants do not simply engage with, resist or disengage from academic games from a position outside of them. Rather, their accounts show that academic practices are already structured by game-like conditions, including competition for publication, funding, recognition, progression and institutional value. They are using game-playing to create new spaces and new ways of working. This means that academic game-playing should not be understood only as individual strategy, but as a set of layered practices through which academics negotiate the boundary between scholarship, career-building and institutional survival.

This chapter shows that participants are engaged in multiple and overlapping academic and institutional games. These games are not only experienced by participants as a cynical or performative response to institutional demands, but are a means by which academics exercise agency within constrained higher education environments. Participants describe securing collaborations, developing career capital and engaging with teaching, research, management, publishing and funding

as part of learning how to navigate institutional and disciplinary expectations. This reflects Gill’s (2010) argument that academics develop new identities in response to higher education reform, and Archer’s (2008) observation that academics may understand success through institutional goals while still negotiating these goals in relation to personal and professional aspirations. The findings of this study also show that game-playing is not only about visibility, recognition or compliance, but through job crafting participants create spaces in which meaningful work can continue, including work that supports students, colleagues, disciplines and wider social value. In this sense, academic games become sites where identity, agency and meaning can be crafted and negotiated. Drawing on Clegg’s (2005) understanding of institutional spaces as both imaginary and lived, this chapter therefore shows how academics use job crafting to create spaces of agency within their roles, enabling them to craft and sustain meaningful work, and through this craft and sustain academic identities.

The following chapter develops this argument further by examining how meaningful academic work is constructed, and how social value becomes central to the formation of academic identity.

Chapter 7 - Academic Ambition and Altruism in Academic Identity – Findings and Discussion

Academic Ambition and Altruism in Academic Work - Overview

The participants in this study consistently describe job crafting as a process rooted in collaborations and meaningful connections with others. Moreover, job crafting is not seen as a strategy for personal advancement alone, but rather participants describe a more nuanced picture that reflects a deep concern for shared academic goals, the wellbeing of others, and that collegiality is a source of meaningful academic work. Across the participant accounts from all three institutions, job crafting around both individual academic goals and career progress emerges not just as an individual activity, but also as a relational process that includes consideration of the goals and values of others, as well as the wider institutional environment. This Chapter therefore explores how participants engage with job crafting around several key themes raised in the data, namely ambition and collaboration, risk and precarity, crafting spaces and academic relationship management. Overall, participant accounts demonstrate job crafting that reflects sophisticated social beings, moving beyond the notion of the self-sufficient, competitive academic individual often associated with neoliberalism in HE.

The first section, *Navigating Individual Ambition and Collaboration in Academia*, examines how participants describe ambition not as an isolated or ego-driven pursuit, but as something that gains meaning through collaboration and shared purpose. Participants present a view of academic ambition as a socially embedded process, one that is driven as much by intellectual connection and collective success as it is by personal progression. Ambition is presented as a collective endeavour and being a source of fulfilment when outputs created benefit others, and individual progress is considered as difficult without the support of others. It is considered to be a market of competitive individualism when it is not collaboratively driven, and participants across all three institutions describe ambition as something

that can be justified, and even embraced, when it is aligned with mutual academic goals. These accounts raise a clear link between ambition as reframed when it is realised through the lens of relational job crafting, and where advancing one's own career is seen as strengthened by supporting others. This echoes Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) notion of altruistic individualism, where individual agency is expressed and realised through commitment to shared values and the thriving of others.

The second section, *Job Crafting for Risk: Uncertainty and Precarity in Academic Work*, explores how participants job craft in the context of increasingly uncertain and risk-laden conditions of contemporary academia. Participant experiences arguably demonstrate that even in the face of precarious contracts, their job crafting reflects the importance of connecting with and supporting students and colleagues. The insecurity of short-term contracts are reflected on, with participants raising the consequences for their academic identity of working without stability. Participant job crafting demonstrates that uncertainty and precarity in academic work are being challenged, for example where participants are deliberately choosing not to hire staff on fixed-term contracts even when this creates greater pressures in their work, and where approaches to work are altered in order to create continuity and protect both the research and colleagues continuing in their work. These responses arguably demonstrate how job crafting is being used not only for mitigating personal uncertainty, but also for upholding collective values, and so adapting to risk whilst also resisting it. This reflects Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) reflexive individualisation, building on the existing literature by showing that participants do not passively accept precarity but engage in values-led job crafting that aims to create more secure and sustainable academic environments for themselves and those around them.

The third section, *Physical and Intellectual Spaces: Crafting Your Place*, explores how participants navigate the important and complex area of academic space, physical and intellectual, in order to craft spaces for both themselves and their work. Participants describe job crafting in particular around external relationships, as these provide opportunity for work to continue, particularly when institutional support is uneven or absent. Cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional networks are key job crafting strategies, providing access to both intellectual capital and material resources. Examples of crafting for space involves exercising autonomy within teaching roles to find meaning outside formal performance metrics like the REF,

taking a slower and more reflexive approach, driving careful negotiation with institutional cultures and external networks. Poorly defined social and intellectual spaces are demonstrated to both hinder the process of crafting space in the long run, but in other circumstances spark unexpected opportunities. The findings here extend the existing literature by showing that crafting a place in academia is not a solitary pursuit, but a socially embedded process, suggesting that successful job crafting involves being aware of the needs of others, and that creating space for academic work is most effective when it reflects shared values, mutual investment, and collective adaptation.

The final section, *Academic Altruism: Relationship Management as Academic Craft*, considers how participants describe the management of academic relationships as a core part of their identity and the most meaningful aspect of their work, rather than as a strategic tool. Across all three institutions, participants consistently raise the importance of supporting others, and that being supported is central to academic life. Mentoring colleagues is seen as being more meaningful than publishing papers, likened by one male participant as “giving birth” to someone’s career. Senior colleagues are frequently cited as role models in how to build and sustain academic relationships, but participants also raise how managerial roles can complicate or even undermine relationship building. Despite this, participants express strong commitments to maintaining values-driven, collaborative ways of working, again reflecting Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2002) concept of altruistic individualism by highlighting that academic identity is formed through values-driven action in relation to others. Participants suggest that rather than being a transactional experience of relationship management, their approach is actually mutual and pragmatic, sustaining collaboration within constrained systems. The findings of this section therefore suggest that participants are crafting relational identities grounded in reflexivity, values, and collegiality, positioning academia as a space where individual success can only be made possible through collective effort.

Navigating Individual Ambition and Collaboration in Academia

Bell and Clarke’s (2013) work on researcher identities in UK business schools emphasises that the identity of the successful academic is linked to self-serving

behaviours, and that a “competitive, self-interested image prevails” (Bell & Clarke, 2013, p.266). As explored in the section *Reluctant Players and Willing Competitors: Job Crafting and the Game of Academia* in Chapter 6 of this thesis, the participants in this study raise competition as an inescapable feature of academic work.

Competition is positioned as a catalyst for conflict between colleagues, driven by those who have “pointy elbows” (Naomi at Cambridge). It is also presented as an instigator of quality academic work, but where participants distance themselves from colleagues who embrace competitive identities. This section explores accounts of participant job crafting that reflects valuing excellence in academic work, but without self-identifying as ego-driven, self-interested or competitive. Overall, it highlights participant accounts of collaboration as a mechanism for meaningful work and as a mediating factor preventing ambition from creating selfish academic identities.

Writing about collaboration in academia nearly 20 years apart, Smith (2001) and Lewis and colleagues (2012) highlight that collaboration in academia is complex, both calling for new approaches and new understandings of the mechanisms, opportunities and barriers for academic collaboration. For Smith (2001), collaboration has become a standard practice in academia due to policy and funder drivers, and has led to broadly three main types of collaboration in academia; namely inter-personal informal collaboration, team collaborations and corporate collaborations. For Lewis and colleagues (2020), collaboration can be recognised as being formal or informal, and as research funding policies use a one-size-fits-all approach aligned with work in the sciences, this results in an imbalance that privileges scientific research over the humanities and social sciences. Conversely, this has also broadened the scope for sources of identity for academics, for example enabling academics to be increasingly recruited from industry. However, where new disciplines, such as nursing, have been established from existing professions, boundaries for those seeking both a strong academic and practising professional identities are complex (Barrow et al., 2022). The fallout is that elitism is still able to exist, with some academics not regarding their industry colleagues as “serious academics”, and the perception that how to be an academic is now a “moving goal” (Clegg, 2005, p.336). The findings of this section therefore build on the existing work firstly by highlighting that participants conceptualise ambition as positive when it is linked to the ambition of others, and secondly that participants are open to behaving ambitiously themselves when they perceive a compelling academic justification for doing so.

Arial at Suffolk describes her ambition as changing across her career. She outlines challenges in her job crafting, raising that her self-initiated activities have increasingly diverged from the expectations her institution requires her to meet. For Arial, institutional demands on her and her colleagues' time have created an environment where she feels the need to be seen as highly ambitious. Arial suggests that her individual ambition and agency has had to give way in the fallout of tensions between individual academic goals and institutional goals, suggesting that to be ambitious in academia has become synonymous with institutional bureaucracy and "tick boxes".

"...if you are not...burningly ambitious, and not that I was not, I have been ambitious in the past but...you know it is difficult to transfer that commodity into what the university needs in terms of you know, the kind of bureaucracy, the way you tick boxes..."

Liam's account at Suffolk suggests that Arial's disconnection from her ambition may also be a response to the attitudes of colleagues. Liam recounts when took on a temporary academic manager role, emphasising strongly that his own goal was to do the best for the Department. Interestingly, Liam openly says that he enjoyed the "ego trip" and the status that this gave, but that he is self-critical of this, and then when reflecting on his colleagues' thoughts about his new role, wants to distance himself from seeming self-important.

"I did enjoy the kind of opportunity to shape the department, where it is going...and actually we made great progress in that time, improved the student experience...you know it was a successful timeline and I did enjoy it, I did enjoy the ego trip of it, I do not like that about myself um...I hope that people can see I was trying to do the best for the department and not trying to avoid work avoid teaching...not on an ego trip..."

Liam's account reflects a tension between ambition and ego, demonstrating a self-conscious awareness of how ambition is perceived in academic environments. This echoes the work of Gill (2010), who makes the point that academics must appear ambitious enough to succeed, but not so ambitious as to appear arrogant or egotistical. Tim at Suffolk also reflects this, raising that job titles are associated with "ego", and that this has influenced his own job crafting. Tim comments that ambition is linked to promotion, and that he has distanced himself from wanting to pursue

this, even though he sees this as a reason why his colleagues do not regard him as being successful. Tim does feel that he is accomplished in his academic discipline, but that this is not recognised by his institution. He presents that personal ambition is needed in order to drive job crafting that both enables his own goals and makes his work both more visible and shaped to meet institutional requirements for promotion.

“...so Associate Professor carries a different connotation from being a Senior Lecturer and being a Lecturer, so I am conscious of that and the ego thing...the secret to my lack of success then [laughs] but so I would not want that and I generally would not and...some individuals are very ambitious and they will, I work with some colleagues I am not going to name names, but are clearly ambitious, and there is nothing wrong with that, I like to do a good job a really damn good job and part of that is being all over my subject and stuff like that...”

Bureaucratic hierarchies in universities are shaping academic identity. Marcus at Cambridge goes further than seeing institutional culture as just impacting those seeking promotion, but regards the tensions between academic and bureaucratic goals as diminishing the status of all academics. Marcus uses strong language to express dismay at the attitude that he feels the bureaucratic part of the institution has towards academia, and how it has ejected academic work from the heart of the university.

“That the current regime is not something I find particularly pleasing or helpful or enabling it is like all really serious bureaucracies it is very self-serving, bureaucracies do not particularly like academics, they have a funny love hate relationship with them, they need them for marketing purposes, but they actually do not want them much and, they are rather inclined to think they are a liability rather than what the basis of the university is, so that is a perfidious and, hateful aspect of university bureaucracy all over now, I would say...”

Marcus' comments reflect the work of Clegg (2008) who points to the fragmentation of academic identities due to institutional changes, and emphasises the challenges faced by academics in adapting to new organisational demands. Marcus reflects on the contrast between selfishness and generosity in academia, suggesting that while all academics begin with collective ideals, these can be lost over time due to institutional pressures or lack of opportunity.

“...academics can be terribly selfish, but some can be very generous...personally I...I actually feel a little bit sorry for people whose ideals got beaten out of them along the way, because everybody has it in them at the start, and some people lose it quite soon in some circumstances, people never have a chance...creativity is wonderful, doing something for yourself is satisfying, doing something you can share, there is nothing like it...and some do not have the chance..”

Marcus' sympathy for colleagues whose values have been eroded, and his highlighting of the deep satisfaction that comes from creating meaningful academic work with others, is shared by Yolanda at Essex.

“Our greatest strength was always networking - creating spaces where people could connect and collaborate. In academia, the only real way to survive is to build those networks. But the system pushes us toward self-interest; it's so competitive, it's hard to compromise. The tick-box performance culture, dominated by the REF, makes it harder to create new meaning...and when you can't do that - when you can't create something meaningful or share it, the threat to your identity is massive. It threatens who I am.”

The benefits of collaboration are deeply felt by other participants also. For Eleanor at Essex, relational crafting ultimately gave her a place for research which made her work feel less isolated and opened doors to new opportunities.

“Yes, I have got no idea how I have fallen into this, and I find it really interesting, and because I have got these research things that I am working on with other people...I have managed to get a couple, work on a couple of projects with different people, so some of my research... I work with in little teams of people, which means that the research I do on my own does not feel as lonely...”

Eleanor's experiences reflect the work of Henkel (2007), who sees collaboration as the means by which modern academics are creating opportunities to pursue their own academic work. For Nicholas at Essex, collaborations are key to his job crafting around publishing, and this includes networking inside and outside his institution.

“It's very difficult to get papers alone. You need to work with people”

Leah at Cambridge also depicts collaborations as a way to pursue her academic work and that she seeks to identify colleagues for whom her work has mutual benefits. Leah discusses how part of her job crafting is to link with people looking to build their careers in areas that have overlap with hers. Leah recognises that these are short term opportunities, usually of a few years rather than long term, but acknowledges the importance of investing in others even on a limited basis in order to personally gain the benefits herself from collaborations.

“Yes...so, I guess there are different ways of doing it, so for example...I hope to get, fingers crossed, probably um...a Postdoc who has not, I do not know, who is hoping to develop their own career, and basically it would make an amazing team if we could basically work hard on various ideas, they would get lots of publications as well, and they can go off and that will help them with any applications anything like that so...you know I probably see it as maybe they will be there, they may want to only be there for three or four years, build up publications and things like that, um and for PhD students again just like try and train them up for whatever they want to do after, if they want to stay that would be great...”

Participants also raise collaborations as a way to job craft in order to address problems arising from insufficient staffing. William at Cambridge recounts how being on a short-term contract made undertaking his research difficult, as he was unable to recruit the staff needed to do this work. He describes drawing on his collaborations to get research assistants in a non-standard way.

“...because I was on a three year position, I was not allowed to take on staff, because their contract would extend beyond mine, so I had to come up with clever ways of getting around that, so I had collaborators all over the world, and those collaborators would send their students to me for a lot of time so we could work together, so it was effectively like me having a postdoc but not really having a postdoc...”

Interestingly, William also reflects on how he feels collaboration is a strategy cynically pursued by some Heads of Department to address gaps in outputs. William recounts how he found himself obtaining a research position as his research was key to growth in an area that the department was targeting. William had a track record in publications with several in the pipeline when he moved, so on reflection

he felt he was a useful resource rather than being recruited as a sign of support and commitment to his own academic trajectory.

“Yes, so part of the reason I was in that department [was] because there was a lady working there already as a senior lecturer, and her publication record had been poor over the last five years, and she had failed to get many...I think part of the reason I was invited to the department was as a stimulus to kind of get her work moving again...and I had published and was working on several at the time, which they knew...”

Daniel at Essex also views collaboration as a mechanism to publish. Daniel describes how he responded to a colleague reaching out to see if he could assist in getting a paper to publication by proposing if he did this then would the person consider doing the same for one of his publications. Despite the correspondent declining, Daniel still committed to working on the paper.

“I have not um...historically but I have done more so recently, that is not a pragmatic issue about my workload, it is just a number of collaborations that suggested themselves, so one that led itself to a couple of papers just being produced...I was writing a particular paper and it was suggested I should contact someone to get copies of their work, um and they sent me something they had not managed to get published as well, and I wrote back saying I know why you haven't got that published, try this, I will work with you on this paper if you work with me on that, they said great idea but I can't work with you on that particular paper because I am one of the reviewers, but nonetheless we continued to work on that so it was parallel work...”

Lucian at Suffolk is an outlier in the participant accounts on collaboration linked to publishing, viewing it as a hindrance for his own publishing. Lucian regards his academic specialism as having a small body of academic colleagues, and so any collaboration would require him to include another academic's focus, which he feels would be detrimental to his work.

“I...I mean I understand the wisdom of having kind of collaborative working, but actually it has not necessarily worked for me, because if I am publishing in my subject area there are not that many people I can collaborate with, and

collaborating with people outside takes away the focus on my particular area...so I think the answer is no [laughs]...

Tim at Suffolk posits that academics need to find a way to “enlightened self-interest” where they balance strategy with scholarly pursuits. He argues that there is a difference between networking for political gain and for academic goals.

“...the concept of enlightened self-interest, so one has to be politic in order to get things done, yes I get that, it depends on how it is defined on whether it is, in terms of making networks and you know, being political does not mean anyone is a bad person...or using others or anything like that...yeah, there are different kinds of, there is confluence going on here, there is the self-interested how do I get on, I get on all sorts of different committees, and they cosy up to certain individuals, and internally they may be thinking...politic...”

Participant accounts therefore suggest that ambition in academia spans a range of job crafting activities that go beyond the self-interested, ego-driven behaviours associated with neoliberalism. Instead, participants are engaging with job crafting that reflects ambition when it is collaborative, demonstrates shared values and goals, and provides mutual benefits for the individuals involved. These findings build on the existing literature by showing that participants conceptualise ambition as positive when it is linked to the ambition of others, and that they are open to behaving ambitiously themselves when they perceive their activity as having a compelling academic justification for doing so. This justification is, more often than not, the realisation of shared academic goals, such as publishing and funding that benefit more than just the individual. Ambition can therefore be seen as reframed by participants as a means of securing resources and as a motivator for creating academic spaces and outputs for others. This parallels the concept of “altruistic individualism” in the work of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), who argue that “thinking of oneself and living for others, once considered a contradiction in terms, is repealed as an internal connection” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, p.28). Participants in this study can therefore be seen as presenting real world experiences that move away from the idea of being self-sufficient neoliberal individuals, disconnected from others, and into a space where academic work thrives when it is recognised as being intrinsically linked to others.

Job Crafting for Risk: Uncertainty and Precarity in Academic Work

Participant accounts in this study raise job crafting as a way to navigate uncertainty in their academic careers in terms of navigating both institutional risk-management and short-term, precarious contracts. For participants, uncertainty and risk is positioned as a core feature of academic work, a driver of institutional policies and practices, and as a problematic feature of academic careers. Henkel (2007) notes that academics recognise that intellectual risk is a core component of academic identity. However, global events such as climate change are bringing intellectual risk under political and public scrutiny, and are a key cause of public scepticism towards academia (Deem & Johnson, 2003). As discussed in Chapter 4, Beck's theory of risk society conceptualises that tensions in academic work around risk are positioned on the shifting boundaries between knowing and not knowing, where the space for non-knowledge is decreasing, but where non-knowledge is also a fundamental component of academic work (Beck 1992;1998; 2009). Sørensen, drawing on Beck's theories of non-knowing and risk society, makes the point that as the boundaries of knowledge have shifted, academics have been put in an impossible position of needing to minimise uncertainty at a time when uncertainty is integral to knowledge, "...regardless of how much research we carry out, we will never be able to produce certain knowledge about the new risks..."(Sørensen, 2018, p.11). Furthermore, Gill (2010) makes the point that precarious contracts are one of the defining experiences of working in contemporary academia in the UK. Hadjisolomou and colleagues argue that precarious employment contracts and the casualisation of academic labour has only worsened for academics in the UK since the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 (Hadjisolomou et al., 2022). Despite this, participants in this study are finding ways to job craft in order to build their academic careers in the face of risk and uncertainty.

Marcus at Cambridge resonates with the idea of non-calculable uncertainty as being an integral feature of academic work (Sørensen, 2018). Marcus makes the point that in the true spirit of research, the outcomes of research cannot be known in advance. Moreover, if a research project fails, then the research project has still produced new knowledge. However, he reflects that failure is not tolerated by the current systems for supporting research, and academics are having to undertake cognitive work to manage this.

“...how do you know it is going to work? You do not know, but you need the funding to make a go and then you will know you will have a milestone a stopping point a no go area if it all fails, but you might learn something and you probably might learn a heck of a lot, so this new review process, it doesn’t allow this...academics have had to change how they think about their work...and that is an ordinary carb by academics...”

Daniel at Essex echoes this, outlining how he changed the focus of his work to avoid controversy. Daniel states that in his task crafting he has not engaged with a potential area of research because he did not want to get into the bureaucracy of undertaking work his institution would see as risky.

“...I am deliberately not doing risky work, I am not looking at gangs or cartels...”

Naomi at Cambridge also reflects deliberately shaping her job crafting to minimise risk, and for her this is through increasing the number of priorities that she focuses on. Naomi comments on how her role has been shaped by increasing the tasks she is involved in in order to maximise the chance of success, taking on multiple projects at once as a strategy to secure future research funding.

“...I suppose for the last four years or so I probably have been doing too many things, so therefore not focussing on one...that is a risky strategy...it might be generous to call it a strategy...”

That academics build a range of academic projects, rather than single focuses for their work, is recognised in the literature as a way to minimise the risk of uncertain outcomes and so potential threats to career continuity (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010; Clegg, 2008). Leah at Cambridge provides a contrasting view, noting that she tries to plan a single project rather than running multiple ones, but that her approach is “worrying” and she acknowledges the lack of a “back up plan” suggests she is taking all the risk of this approach onto herself.

“and that was, fun in the sense of trying to create new ideas, for projects you would be doing for years to come, also slightly worrying because if you do not get them I did not have any backup plans [laughs]...so I say it was fun, up until the last minute when you are trying to tighten the language and the figures and everything for the actual proposal...”

Arial at Suffolk also suggests that she feels the need to alter her job crafting as a response to frequent institutional restructures. Arial describes needing to direct her job crafting into language and behaviour that she perceives is institutionally valued, rather than in line with her own values.

“It is like that, there are colleagues you can see, they are focussed on their own research...their own agendas...um and they...they think they are student friendly but actually ultimately the important thing is their survival in the system, and I was very aware of...the fragility of my job, how many restructures have I been through, it must be three or four in the period that I you know...but ultimately every time there was a restructuring I was told we do not want to get rid of you because you are student focussed, that was the kind of unofficial line, but it does make you very nervous, and you know that if you do not toe the line if you do not speak the right language, I mean I did push the boundaries a few times with senior professional services colleagues, I was not pictorial, I asked questions that I think other people want to ask but they do not, so if I am in a meeting and I think hang on...and that does not go down well when you have got a heavily agendas meeting and you know, ultimately that is an irritation...”

The strategy of running multiple projects at once and concerns over only having a single academic focus, reflects the inherent risk in academic research and that the systems of HE do not provide much protection for academics (Clegg, 2008).

Nicholas at Essex interestingly approaches the issue of navigating uncertainty in his academic work by changing how he job crafts to seek external funding. Nicholas, outlines his strategy of a “project in the bag” as a way to mitigate the risks of work not being successful. Nicholas says that from early on in his career, he would complete research in advance of seeking funding for it, as this would mean that he is able to deliver the outcomes that he hypothesises in his work, linking it to real world benefits.

“So what I do is...I have the work complete and the data gathered and analysed...and then I approach the funder with the proposal...and then when it is awarded I move onto the next project...I know what I can deliver, how to sell it as benefitting society, and that it will be in time, and I haven’t found myself like others half way through a project desperately trying to secure funding to continue the work or it all stops...so I always have a project in the bag before acting on it,

so my group has been relatively secure, I have had one project manager work with me for 20 years...”

Yasmin at Essex comments on how risk has become a defining factor in university governance. She feels that external audits have caused universities to increasingly collect data on their academics, to the extent that even her social media has become a tool of data collection and assessment. Yasmin raises that this has caused her university to not value her leadership, but rather focus on her ability to present in a way that meets audit metrics. Interestingly, she feels that her university has decreased its own autonomy in the HE sector by altering its working practices to meet this “audit regime”.

“I think before you had an audit regime that came in once every five or six years, and took a look and you could control the process and provide the information, so in a way there was more emphasis on you taking leadership and, demonstrating that you are meeting the requirements, whereas now it is a much more risk based approach, they have got much more data on you, they have got lots more intelligence, and they are thinking of more ways they can get intelligence on you like through social media, things like that so, you know, it is almost like big brother watching you and they swoop in...”

The impact of risk and uncertainty on academic work is also experienced by participants whose roles focus on teaching, and for example Sean at Suffolk also raises how unknown outcomes, and institutional risk-aversion, has directly impacted his work as a lecturer;

“There is much less risk now...we are operating in a culture of fear...even with my teaching...if you take a risk and you get it wrong you are going to get shot”

Sean feels that the structures in his university overall have affected the capacity for academic risk taking. He raises that a flat hierarchy would enable more opportunities as individuals lower down would be empowered to make changes in their areas, without all activity needing to escalate up for sign off. Interestingly, Sean also reflects that although he feels there is a hierarchy in place, there is a lack of leadership, which he feels also contributes to aversion to risk.

“you can take more risk cause a bit bit flatter. You know, structure was a bit flatter...Now we've kind of gone with a bit of a pyramid, haven't we? So a bit more of a pyramid structure. So I think actually there's there's actually there's actually less risk taking...in a framework where you're being told when to do stuff and how to do stuff. And that's just administration. It's not leadership, there's no leadership there. So I think the risk taking is less”

Sean's observations reflect the work of Clegg (2008), and the idea that managers have replaced leadership in academia involves space for creativity, dialogue, and uncertainty, whilst managerialism reduces academic work to compliance and risk aversion. Lucian at Suffolk suggests that space can be crafted to mediate this, describing balancing his own goals against institutional priorities, noting that when work he does is not followed through he finds this frustrating. Lucian uses job crafting to reduce tasks assigned to him by his institution, as previous experience indicates that this is a good strategy in terms of his time management.

“...certainly there is always going to be that tension between your individual goals and the organisational goals, so I keep being assigned things and actually for me that is not my critical path, but of course it is what my employer wants so you have got to do that, and it is very frustrating when you find that your organisational goals change, so having poured a huge amount of work into a project you are told oh we do not want to do that can you now do this other project...I have had that happen to me a few times... if I had not done anything, no one would have known and I could have spent that time pursuing my own goals [laughs] and that would have been far more useful to me and in no way less useful to my organisation because they did not use that work anyway...”

Nicholas at Essex explains how he feels that the workplace culture around risk has limited the space he can create for his job crafting activities. The perceived negative outcomes from taking risks is described as a “culture of fear”, where getting it wrong has consequences.

“Because you then instil a culture of fear, or the a culture, then yeah, a culture can become fearful and listen...if you wanna take a risk and you get it wrong, you know you're just gonna get shot, you know, or you're gonna get penalised and then then you say you think, well, So what? What's the point?”

Nicholas echoes Beck's (2005) point that the risk society and the threat of risk actually renders individuals incapable to take any action. In this regard not taking action can also be a choice, and Tara at Cambridge echoes this, highlighting that she was given good advice to "stay in her lane" at the start of her career, which she feels has helped her considerably.

"So my first Professor, he said, it is not worth taking risks...that involve other people definitely...you might want to go out on a limb to help someone...do it if you can stay in your lane...otherwise if it goes wrong it will come back and bite you..."

That risk and uncertainty is shaping academic job crafting is also highlighted in participant accounts on precarious contracts. As discussed in Chapter 1, a significant number of employment contracts at the three institutions are fixed-term. Del at Cambridge describes his employment as "rent a seat". Del is employed on Fellowship funding and so not a permanent post, and so in his view failure to find someone else to pay his salary once his Fellowship ends will mean his place will pass to the next person who can get their salary paid through external funding for academic work that aligns with the institution's current goals. Although Del says he does not mind this approach, his account does suggest that he implicitly believes that good academic work, such as his novel research, is not enough to cause his institution to want to invest in him once his Fellowship ends. As a result, he confesses he is planning to change institution. Del also raises that his new institution offered additional financial incentives for him to move, which made the offer in his view too good to refuse.

"To move? Incredibly hard, incredibly hard...for all these reasons I was very happy here, and I do not really mind the Cambridge model which was you know a sort of...rent your seat basically...I do not mind that at all, but not minding it is different from someone saying we will give you a tenured position, here is your path to professorship, here are all these people who are going to work for you, here is the pay deal...you know on a personal level they are basically giving me a grace and favour flat, and I thought well no one is going to make me this offer again..."

Del explains that because of this awareness of risk in his academic career funding, a great deal of his energy around job crafting has been to keep himself as

competitive as possible. He reflects that he does not feel indispensable, no matter how successful he is.

“you know you are replaceable...the university does not really make much effort to keep you, ultimately I think that.. it does not matter how good you are, and there are a lot of good people at my level some of whom who are definitely a fair bit better than me...you are replaceable...there is someone who, you know you are 40 now there is someone who is younger who will come through...”

This sense of precariousness aligns with findings by Junker and colleagues., (2023), who note that job crafting, while often seen as a proactive and positive behaviour, can also be a precursor to job quitting, particularly in unstable or unsupportive environments. William at Cambridge underscores this broader institutional context, commenting on the high prevalence of fixed-term contracts in the sciences and estimating that as many as 94% of staff are affected. He highlights the profound personal and psychological toll that such job insecurity can have on academic staff.

“...it is unsustainable expecting people to work on three year contracts one year after the other...you are just bouncing around like a ball in a pinball machine never really knowing what is going to happen in a few years round the corner, and that has a huge impact on your life, on your family, your finances, wellbeing, self-value and there is a large number of people in that situation which is an insane situation, and it is not 10% of the university it is 94%, and that is unsustainable, although sadly it is Cambridge university and there will always be somebody who will take the job...it probably will be sustainable for a while [laughs]...”

For William at Cambridge, experiencing being on fixed term contracts has impacted how he sees himself, and he describes temporary contract academics as being like “ghostly figures”.

“I think the strange thing about the academic environment is that, there is this massive difference between someone who has got a permanent position, and someone who has not...people who have not are almost like ghostly figures that just sort of, drift through the wall and out again, I mean the Colleges do not want

anything to do with you, the university sort of...tolerates you for a while and then takes your equipment when you leave..."

Hadjisolomou and colleagues (2022) echo William's point, noting that there is a "deep polarisation" between temporary and permanent academics in the UK (Hadjisolomou et al., 2022, p. 569). Loveday (2018) makes the point that precarious working and the casualisation of academic labour has led to the creation of the "neurotic academic" (Loveday, 2018, p. 154). The precariously employed, neurotic academic takes on actions to deal with the anxiety and uncertainty they face in their work, making them different to their permanently employed colleagues (Loveday, 2018). William discusses the problems that come from being on a temporary contract, and that these problems actually inhibit academia from engaging with any sort of job crafting to improve their position.

"...if you have got a tenured position there are just an...incredible number of problems that just disappear overnight...anyone who is a postdoc and then gets a tenured academic position just does not understand the implications of that at all because there are problems that will simply never be on their radar, so if they have not worked for 15 years as a postdoc in an institution they do not understand they are there...the problem is it is such a massive barrier to transition from the sort of temporary job to the permanent..."

In contrast to Cambridge, only a minority of participants at Suffolk describe experiences around precarious working. Liam at Suffolk notes that in his experience the small number of fixed term academic contracts at Suffolk have put staff in a position where they are "lucky".

"...the other thing is about the precariousness of academic work...in a way we are very lucky here that we do not have as many people on short and fixed term contracts as other universities have..."

Liam discusses how in his view permanent contracts come with a greater expectation of contribution from academics to their institutions. Interestingly, despite this enhanced demand, Liam does not see this expectation as limiting. He highlights that whilst permanent contracts involve a greater sense of responsibility and enhanced commitment to the institution by academics, they contrast with the precarity of temporary contracts where employment can be more easily withdrawn.

For Liam, permanent contracts are framed as enabling longer-term development and institutional support, albeit alongside increased expectations.

“...and we are not here and not in that situation, so it points to a different set of expectations on the institution as to what you are able to do...if you want more flexibility you have to take on a much greater risk...the flip side of not having that precarious nature of employment is giving more to the institution, and a greater sense of responsibility, you know if we are going to be treated with respect then that needs to go both ways, so um...if you want a career that is, you know you come in do some teaching publish some research, that speaks of a short term contract very precarious nature, where we decide possibly term to term whether we want you, and that might be partly to do with the School, the research you are involved with, and if the research money dries up then your contract dries up...if your teaching scores dip we will sub you for someone who will get better ones...the roles that we have, by having permanent contracts on the whole, we are able to develop people and support them, and that is a really good thing, it makes employment in HE more accessible...so there is a responsibility issue there as well...”

Liam is reflecting Winter's (2009) point of the “academic manager”, in that his position has aligned with institutional priorities, and his use of “we” suggests he has aligned his identity with the “managerial discourse” (Winter, 2009, p. 121). Winter (2009) suggests that the “academic manager” is a legitimate strategy that academics are using to avoid experiencing an “academic identity schism” where their own academic values clash with the values of their employing university (Winter, 2009, p. 121).

This reflects the work of Musselin, who puts forward two key changes in the relationship between academics and their institutions, firstly that universities have become institutional actors, and secondly that universities have more control now than ever before over academic careers, but without the requirement to provide stable employment (Musselin, 2013). Sam at Suffolk discusses how he had personally experienced the negative impact of short term contracts, and as a result how he engages with job crafting activities to only recruit staff when he knows the position can be permanent. He does acknowledge that this strategy has raised problems in that as a result his own and his team's workload has increased.

"I have done that myself, I am not going to put anybody else through that...I do not like the idea of, we will recruit somebody to be a lecturer, and then a year later say sorry, the course did not recruit, see you sucker...but it means we have not recruited staff as fast as we potentially could have done, so we have put ourselves in a place where we are working too hard...maybe that was a decision that was wrong, maybe I should have been more profligate with peoples futures, to save everyone...to take that risk with people, that might be bringing them in only to have to fire them..."

Sam also does discuss how task crafting around his own work has been limited by the need to meet institutional priorities. This perhaps reflects that Suffolk management do feel there is a greater responsibility from their staff as a result of increased security in their employment contracts in comparison to the sector.

"...I have spent too much time teaching, building a portfolio of degrees for this place, so I have a long gap now of no journal papers published..."

Arial from Suffolk comments that risk is not an equal experience, describing layers of risk. She sees that institutional risk-aversion impacts individuals, but also explicitly separates the institution from employees, and employees from each other.

"...universities...but I think they are so very risk adverse.there are certain people that do not seem to be at risk, and there are other people..."

Tim at Suffolk also reflects that risk affects individuals differently. He notes that across several rounds of restructure at his institution, key individuals have been lost which was perhaps not the intended outcome.

"well there has been...numerous rounds of redundancies from way back when and...um...not all of them have gone to plan...you know from the organisation perspective um...in the past you know...redundancy is sometimes used ok in line with organisations structure and finance and so on so I am not saying that is not part of it but...also the means of hoping that some individuals will go anyway...that no longer fit...you know what it...what the organisations wants has never gone to plan...they have lost people they did not want to lose...and others are pissed off..."

The impact of precarious working, directly and indirectly, on personal academic work is reflected by only two participants at Essex. They both consider how fixed term contracts directly impact the scope of the research they have been able to take on. Nina at Essex sees her work as menial as a result of being on a fixed term contract in her previous role.

“I was on a temporary fixed term contract type of stuff...so yeah it was a pretty lowly sort of research related role really...”

Eleanor at Essex reflects on the fact that there are inherent risks in pursuing an academic career. She reflects on wanting to find an academic role after completing her PhD, and how she had been unaware that there are limited roles available especially compared to the number of PhDs.

“...because think about the number of PhDs that pass their Viva every year and the number of academic posts available, it is no longer the way to get into academia...and there is no longer a guaranteed income at the end....”

Risk and uncertainty can therefore be seen in the participant accounts as both intrinsic features of academic work, and as key factors influencing how academics are job crafting. This builds on existing work by highlighting participant experiences of how academic work has become increasingly governed by institutional cultures of surveillance, accountability, and precarity, narrowing the space for intellectual risk-taking (Beck, 2009; Sørensen, 2018). A range of experiences, often contradictory, highlights the profound identity challenges created by insecure contracts. However, having experienced this, Sam at Suffolk states “I am not going to put anybody else through that”, deliberately avoiding hiring staff on short-term contracts, despite the increased workload this creates for himself and his team, prioritising the stability and wellbeing of others over institutional efficiency. Moreover, Naomi’s approach “it might be generous to call it a strategy” of taking on multiple projects in order to limit the potential for failure, is counterbalanced by Nicholas at Essex “project in the bag” that provides enhanced stability in both the academic work and the employment of his team.

Participants therefore can be seen as finding job crafting strategies both to mitigate precarious contracts, and to maintain their academic work, despite operating in a context of risk and limited autonomy. Moreover, participant accounts reflect Beck

and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) concept of altruistic individualism, demonstrating consideration of others in their approaches to dealing with risk. The findings of this study therefore build on the existing literature by demonstrating that participants are not just adapting to institutional risk for self-preservation, but are reflexively engaging with forms of work that conflict with their values, focussing on job crafting that minimises risk for others as well as themselves.

Physical and Intellectual Spaces: Crafting Your Place

Participants in this study raise experiences of job crafting in order to craft spaces for their academic identities. There is surprisingly little work in the literature on academic spaces, intellectual and physical, despite that the space academics have for their academic identities is seen as being increasingly challenged by the HE environment (Deem & Brehony, 2005). Universities have become spaces that are "deeply ambiguous" for many academics (Clegg, 2008, p. 336). Harris (2005) raises that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's work (2002) suggest this ambiguity could provide opportunities for academics to create new democratic spaces, and "urge us to think creatively" about the potential that contradictory processes present for individuals to find new meanings and identities for themselves in (Harris, 2005, p. 431).

Participants in this study describe crafting spaces as a fluid process where opportunities and obstacles are unpredictably encountered. Strategies range from securing academic positions and building social networks, to changing institutions, and relocating to other departments and areas to learn new skills. The findings here then build on the existing work by showing that crafting your place in academia is a socially embedded process, shaped not only by individual goals but also by the availability of physical and intellectual space and the support of academic networks. Job crafting is most successful when it involves negotiating this space reflexively, with awareness of both institutional structures and the needs of others.

Sean at Suffolk raises that obtaining the first academic role in a university is "everything". He notes his job crafting that led to his this, saying that the advice he was given contradicted his experience, and that it was through a combination of making contact and chance that an opportunity was available. For Sean, once in post, he sees the potential to create space for him and his academic work to be highly realisable.

“...I was told by my PhD Supervisor you need a PhD to get into academia...I believed them, but then a job came up and I emailed the line manager and by coincidence they had created a course in my area and had no one to teach it...in academia I think that first role is everything...getting your foot in the door, once you’re in ..there is definitely a capacity to create your own space...but getting in is so difficult....was interviewed...in the first few weeks took over course leadership of the degree,...not bad in 3 years going from you can’t have a job in academia to now hiring the people who were supervising me not that long ago!”

Arial at Essex also comments on her experience of crafting space for her role once in post. She reflects on how she made sure she was on a teaching contract specifically to avoid the demands of being in the REF.

“Yeah. I was always on a teaching contract, so I was always on teaching admin, so I was doing my research, but I was always on teaching admin so I didn’t have the stress of the REF... So whilst my colleagues felt enormous pressure because of REF, they had things that I didn’t, like sabbaticals, and people like me were useful as I could just teach and run these projects, this was my strength, people play to their strengths”

Aurora’s account reflects the work of McCune (2021), and the idea that strong academic identities can be gained from teaching-only contracts. Harris (2005) also notes that focussing on teaching can mitigate many of the demands of HE. Whilst some academics welcome the REF as an opportunity to enhance their academic status, others see it as “threatening their existing identity” (Harris, 2005, p. 426). Research demands are a key reason as to why the space for academics to manage their activities at work is perceived as being increasingly limited, with focus on activities linked to income generation being supported by their institutions (Osterloh & Frey, 2019). This arguably has ramifications for the potential for academics to job craft, as they are restricted from proactively directing their activities to align with their own values and goals, to being directed to activities that fulfil institutional goals.

Eleanor at Essex provides a contrasting experience to Sean and Aurora, commenting that creating the right space for her academic identity and her career is not self-evident. Eleanor raises that she is working with a coach to work out how to

job craft in order to produce high quality academic work, and she also prioritises finding a work life balance that supports the way she wants to work.

“And those are the conversations I have been having with my coach! [Laughs] I think for me, personally, I am working on at the moment, creating space...creating space in my work...so I am currently sitting in a position where I am trying to figure out how to create space to be a good researcher...within the confines of the hours for which I am paid...”

Naomi at Cambridge comments on how she feels finding her place in academia takes time. For Naomi, she is consciously seeking to limit her job crafting at one stage as she found that her external networks provide opportunities to change jobs, therefore were giving her hard decisions.

“...you get offers from other places to go to a higher position there, so I know that happens, I know it does happen...so I did avoid external events for a while [laughs]...so yes there is a...and I guess that one way it works is that other places will try and get people at an early stage at their career to move because they see them on a certain trajectory, but it comes down to the previous question of where is the best place to be to do what you want to do...for your discipline...”

Naomi's comments suggest that finding a place for her research is more important than finding a space for herself, even if she is offered a good promotion. Clegg's work on academic spaces resonates with Naomi's reflections, highlighting that academic identity is “multiply constituted”, and drawn from physical and non-physical spaces, disciplines, departments, social networks and activities that academics undertake (Clegg, 2008, p. 329).

For Reece at Essex, finding a place for his work is intrinsically linked to his job crafting around academic networks. Reece outlines his goal as creating a space unique to him, but that he found this problematic as his colleagues had already crafted large spaces for themselves. He reflects that the drive to find his space meant he changed university to a place where his work had no major players already in situ.

“What made me change...change university...I think sometimes in environments where things are already well set up, it is hard to define a place for yourself...”

because if you want to come up with new ideas, this takes quite a bit of time...they start with a spark and need to be nurtured...and this is fine if you can do that, but if you are working alongside very well established academics that is a challenge...you know I had family there I was invested, but I thought if I want to make something of my own...I would need to move, to somewhere where my work is novel...that would make it quicker”

Reece’s reflections on established colleagues resonates with the work of Clegg (2008), who highlights that academic leaders often face significant challenges in supporting their younger colleagues, for example in protecting the space and time for academic research, especially given the mixed priorities of universities, which may value research and management differently. Job crafting is a possible response to this, and has been shown to, where a current role may not afford the opportunities for individuals to align their work with their personal values, lead individuals to change roles or even universities (Junker et al., 2023). This is reflected by Del at Cambridge, who describes how he has accepted another job offer at another university because his current institution can only offer him a short-term contract, and he feels his work is a good fit for the new institution’s current priorities.

“...so I am only fixed term currently...so a tenured role is hard to pass up...I think also I fitted their bill at a qualitative level because the unit I am moving to is focussed on my area...so I fitted...my subject matter is right up their street...I was a good fit for them, and I think that is why the offer was so good really, so that was not really personal qualities to me that was the subject matter...”

Interestingly, these experiences contrast with the work of Clegg (2008), whose participants tend to describe their academic identity as distinct from their academic discipline. Clegg raises that for her participants, *“None of my respondents identified in any simple way with discipline; the only respondent who directly framed academic identity in disciplinary terms distanced himself from the discipline as it existed”*, (Clegg, 2008, p. 340). But in this study, for Naomi, Reece and Del, finding space for their work was given the highest priority in directing their job crafting activities.

Physical space is also raised by Nina at Essex, who reflects on the importance of having a consistently available work location. She comments that being assigned to

a hot desking arrangement restricted her capacity to interact with colleagues. Nina feels that this contributed to a lack of a sense of belonging, and her finding it very easy to leave that role.

“Well I had like a sort of hot desk arrangement in a sort of office where lecturers could go and do their prep and I might bump into some people teaching on other courses...um but you know I feel awkward sitting in their really, and there was only one or two people in there really...it made it easy to leave when under difficult personal circumstances I kind of...I needed to make a decision to stay or go...um so yeah because there was not that sort of camaraderie and feeling like I am really part of something...”

Nina's experience reflects the work of Gill (2010) who raises that the introduction of open plan offices means academics are increasingly finding it hard to find space where they can work, with academics feeling that “you can't work at work” (Gill, 2010, p. 48). Nina's thoughts on not feeling “part of something” are reflected by Yolanda at Essex, although Yolanda raises that belonging at universities is not possible for anyone.

“There is no sense of belonging, it is not possible...Universities are just people doing things for self-interest”

Yolanda's consideration that the behaviour of colleagues prevents connectedness at work is however an outlier in the participant accounts. Academic networks, relationships with colleagues at work, academic work that has social benefit, are all raised by participants as significant sources of meaning and identity, even when they feel their workplace is deeply challenging. This reflects the work of Clegg (2008), who notes that her participants raise the interesting speculation that a new type of secure academic identity may be emerging from the competitive sector of HE rooted in relationships. If academics can find ways to disengage with the structures of HE to allow social networks to grow, then they may find creating new spaces for their work is a reasonable expectation.

Marcus at Cambridge criticises new institutional identity in terms of academics being able to find their pace. For Marcus, a university has a clear remit of social value, which he defines as a distinct “place”. For Marcus, the nature of the institution can give academics the sense that they do not have a place, and they do not belong at

all, unless they are prepared to prioritise institutional duties over their own academic work.

“I want to belong to a university rather than a research institute thanks very much, I like both, I like universities, knowledge, humanity, and the purpose for saving people's lives if you will, you have to make sure humanity is looked after in its...into the way it thinks about itself or where it is going in the knowledge, so I, I am very clear that a university is a place, and not a research institute or a marketing organisation...”

For Tim at Suffolk, although he explicitly rejects the idea that he belongs to his institution, he does link his place to how he fits into his social networks, and how he would like others to see him.

“I belong to a university, a part of, not belong, I am part of a university [laughs]...that is not kind of career ambition it is more to do with my sense of place and where I see myself and my 32 years and where I would like to finish on, and also, how I would like to be viewed by others...”

Tim goes on to say that his job crafting by creating academic links outside of his institution has led to a sense of finding his place in an intellectual, rather than institutional or even academic sense.

“...you need to create academic networks, to help continuing self development in a subject in terms of my own kind of, you know, dissonance...I am not sure I do...when I...[sighs] one thing that maybe says more about me, but when I go to conferences, and you know people there very high profile in terms of the area, UK and internationally, presenting papers you know sometimes within my track, all very nice individuals, I have never met any obstacles...I have never ever come across that at all...and I have found people in one sense possibly do not mind if you have got something interesting to say, people will have a conversation with you...”

Nicholas at Essex notes his job crafting activities around finding a space for his work are focussed around creating the right environment for his work. For Nicholas, this means setting himself up in social networks that facilitate work he enjoys.

“So it's about creating an environment for me that is enjoyable and that's with the people that I surround myself with and the work.”

Tim, Nicholas and Nina's comments on the importance of social networks reflects the work of Henkel (2005) who emphasises that academic identity continues to be shaped by interactions within disciplinary and institutional communities. Cross-institutional working then is seen as bringing opportunities for collaborations, but risks the danger of eroding the space for academic specialisms. Whitchurch (2008) makes the point that modern academics must manage relationships across boundaries, engaging in collaborations out with their normal academic groupings. For Aurora at Essex, finding new spaces for her work in interdisciplinary locations has had benefits, both for her academic work and for her career in general.

“But also I think by working sort of across faculty, I mean I, you know, I I'm very interested in sort of interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary anyway. And I think by working across the faculty and outside of my subject area, I think it gave me, you know, a a really good number of of connects across the university more broadly and that really helped me, you know.”

Reece at Essex provides interesting insight into cross-department working, noting that even in situations where colleagues are collaborative and welcoming, finding a physical place with academic colleagues who work in your area leads to higher quality academic work. Reece reflects on how part of his job crafting led him to sit in a different department with colleagues proficient in a skill he wanted to learn. This actually had a negative impact on his work, which Reece attributes to the lack of regular and rigorous challenge to his work.

“and I actually went and sat completely away from my initial group and went to a completely different building with people...and I sat with them to learn... I think in the university environment the point is that people question you... yeah, or just they critique it, they say, well, why did you do it in that way? Why didn't you do it in this way? Do you think you can make this better? So unless you've got that constantly coming back, I think, yeah, I think you can go off in tangents and not deliver as much as you should. Do you know, you think you're on the right path, but you're probably not...If somebody had asked you stuff earlier on, you would have done something different...”

In contrast to Reece, William at Cambridge describes how moving into new spaces in terms of different departments opened up opportunities for his work, and expanded his networks, which in turn gave him unforeseen opportunities. William reflects that he has mentally shifted to view collaborations beyond his disciplinary boundaries in order to pursue work that mattered to him,

“...it was a change to where I had been, but I thought if it could work then why not, and this has stayed with me and I’ve been located in places I wouldn’t have considered in the past, and I’ve made contacts that through them I’ve been able to...get staff, equipment, stuff I didn’t know would be possible”.

Harvey at Cambridge gives an example of going to a different group to learn a new skill, but instead of just physically relocating, Harvey job crafted to collaborate on a paper with the group as well. Harvey sees this as a catalyst to producing new and good work that he considers he would not have been able to produce if he had stayed where he was.

“I have gone to a group where I can say look I have learned from the best guys doing this, we have published together, so therefore I have a track record and kudos...the challenge has always sort of been you know not just sort of riding the first wave but coming off that wave and catching the next wave and riding that as well, and showing that you are good by, consistently producing good stuff rather than doing it just once, and by moving, this really helped in achieving this...”

Harvey’s reflections on his relational crafting, and connecting with others in order to gain new skills, reflects Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2002) idea that working with others is a “positive sum game” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 24).

The participant accounts here highlight that crafting a place for academic work is complex, requiring consideration of social factors as much as individual goals. Whilst job crafting is often understood as the proactive shaping of one’s tasks and roles, the findings here suggest that the capacity to job craft is itself shaped by space, both physical and intellectual, and by the ability to find a place that works for the individual and those around them. For participants like Sean at Suffolk and Aurora at Essex, securing or shaping space within teaching roles enables autonomy and meaningful engagement, albeit outside of performance frameworks such as the REF. For others, such as Eleanor at Essex and Naomi at Cambridge, the crafting of

space is a longer, more reflexive process, requiring decisions about how much to engage with external networks, and when and where to act. Naomi's point that finding a place for one's research takes priority over finding a place for oneself highlights that, for some participants, the need to be open to changing institutions is an essential part of their academic identity. There is a sense that when job crafting to find your place in academia, there is no one-size-fits-all experience, and Reece's experience at Essex reflects how finding a place with new colleagues can be a hindrance if it is not shaped with clear goals, whilst William at Cambridge shows it can be helpful for exposing unforeseen opportunities.

Across the accounts, it is clear that social networks are crucial for carving out space, and participants underline the importance of external relationships in driving academic work, especially when institutional belonging is weak, contested, or organised to support established academics. Cross-disciplinary working emerges as a key strategy for finding new opportunities and can open up both material and intellectual resources. In this regard, there is a sense that job crafting for space requires the buy-in of a wide range of colleagues, internal and external, and so that participants find their job crafting most successful in crafting spaces for themselves and their work when they also draw on a heightened awareness of the needs of others.

Academic Altruism: Relationship Management as Academic Craft

Managing relationships at work is discussed at length by participants in this study. Henkel (2005) highlights relationship management as a key skill and feature of contemporary academic identity, as social networks can be drawn on to reshape academic activities, leading to an increase in high-quality academic work and individual workplace satisfaction. Academics are increasingly expected to engage actively with external stakeholders and internal professional service colleagues (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Whitchurch, 2008). Moreover, cultivating relational skills is seen as part of being a modern academic, a key skillset for cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional working (Becher & Trowler, 2001).

Participants in this study describe relationship crafting as a commitment to a social model of academia, grounded in shared values, where support, mentorship and collaboration are not only helpful but seen as essential to meaningful academic

work. The findings here then build on existing work by showing that managing relationships is not simply a professional skill, but a form of reflexive job crafting, shaped by values of altruistic individualism (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Relational crafting is described by participants as being most successful when academics are able to balance their own goals with those of others, often through a process of reciprocity that, whilst sometimes framed as a “quid pro quo,” actually reflects a collaborative approach aimed at sustaining both academic meaning and shared academic practice.

Most of the participants in this study explicitly link their relationships at work, internal and external, to their own successes. Edmund at Suffolk views connections with others as a key way to mitigate the demands of academia and to build meaning at work.

“So in the social context, I think it has to be beyond, you know, a typical work relationship in some instances to...be able to get any good work done, and...to... get any joy out of what you're doing...”

For Marcus at Cambridge, managing relationships with colleagues is described in terms of providing support and mentorship where possible. Marcus feels very strongly about his relational crafting, commenting on how helping others in their careers has been the most meaningful work he has engaged with in his career, likening it to child-bearing.

“I am proud of my very best papers, but they do not last very long,...but the best students and the nicer people, perhaps the people who are failing that we rehabilitated or got them somewhere and they managed to find something that they can do, well, that is a glimpse of immortality, and that is the nicest thing...but you know, the feeling of giving birth to somebody or helping give birth to somebody's career is a very fine feeling when you look back that you might have helped, it is a lovely feeling actually, it is very creative...perhaps a more lasting value than you have with your great lasting discovery...”

Senior academic colleagues, such as PhD Supervisors and Heads of Department, are credited in particular with setting the culture for relationship crafting. Nina at Essex details how her experience of working with a good Head of Department made her recognise the importance of academic managers as drivers of social cohesion,

retention and collaboration, for herself and others. She raises that they were able to be a good manager even when the context of HE is placing them under difficult working conditions.

“I say the best thing about that place was my Head of Department...I think they are really good at their job, they are quite jaded by what is going on in the system, it is hard for them, but I think they are a good manager and with their more permanent staff...I think they are good at sort of keeping people together and, yes there were people who had been there a long time because of them, and I was there because of them...”

Nina's experience reflects the work of Clegg (2008), who emphasises the importance of academic leadership in fostering integration and unity. Eleanor at Essex expresses how her Head of Department supported her to job craft in order to adjust to a new Department and find new collaborations for her work. Eleanor describes how she was employed to teach in an area which was different to her PhD, and how she found this very difficult. Eleanor's Head of Department facilitated a new contact and supported her to attend a conference, and from this Eleanor created a new area of research drawn from her previous experience and relevant to her new Department.

“I really struggled for the first couple of years...I did not feel comfortable, working in a department and publishing in a different subject...like, there was no crossover, I could not do research-informed teaching...Head of Department [and I], we had a conversation...I said, well I do not know how I can best serve the department in terms of my research other than pedagogic research and that does not seem...[long pause]...that is not as well thought of in terms of REF, and he was like well...well what you have done, you know about topics that could be relevant to be brought into research in the department, and he put me in touch with someone and sent me to a relevant conference...and that is where my research sits at the moment...”

Nicholas at Essex credits that he has an academic career at all to the input of his PhD supervisor. Nicholas comments that if he had moulded his own progress he would not be in the position he is now, and that he could “never have an academic career on his own”.

“For me it is about that. I mean, the only way that...I think I could never have an academic career on my own, you know, I don't think you could ever do that because.....I just wouldn't....I would be where I am now...if it wasn't for....my supervisor...you know, if it was just left up to me, I wouldn't have probably wouldn't probably be here....so it isn't about being an individual...it's about, you know, making these things and stuff.... opportunities and create opportunities, hey, let's publish or let's...write...”

For Nicholas, his understanding of being an academic is therefore not an individual pursuit. He links his experience with his supervisor and others who have supported him to how he now seeks to do the same for colleagues in his own role. This is also reflected by Leah at Cambridge, who draws on the advice and experience of colleagues to model her own relationship building strategies.

“...I have had a couple of more complex situations...I mean for example co supervising a student who um...where their personal supervisor is not very much involved in their day to day um business has been proving quite tricky, so I kind of had to pick up various management tips and advice from various people, and I mean that has ended up being successful now yeah”

Nicholas' comment that “it isn't about being an individual” in regard to his academic work and academic career also suggests that despite the demands of performativity requiring academics to demonstrate success on an individual basis, academics are still engaging with academia as a collegiate activity (Henkel, 2005). Marcus at Cambridge provides a contrasting view, seeing the disconnect between how academic leadership is shaped by institutions and how it is modelled in practice. For Marcus, academic leadership is about using skills and experience to recognise good people and help them achieve in their academic careers. He laments the HE understanding of leadership, calling it “followership”, and says that part of job crafting for academics is networking with academics you respect, and colleagues you can genuinely help.

“the word leadership is the most misused scandal of a word ever, it is not leadership... every five minutes the university is offering to send senior people on leadership courses...I am told that a management course is quite good how to manage your times how to depute things for people who have never really done it, but leadership courses are essentially followership courses to get you in the

mode to do exactly what the administrators like... they are not leadership courses they are followership courses, and leadership is something that I think is largely, largely innate, it can be honed, and often by apprenticeship or by following people, you tend to follow people you have respected before, the people who have successfully nurtured and supported others..."

Marcus's comments reflect the work of Evans and colleagues (2013) who show that experience of support from academic leaders is not uniform, and that less than half of academics surveyed report getting advice or mentorship from Professors in their area. Daniel at Essex's account provides insight as to factors that may be influencing relationship crafting of Professors. He raises that he has both a Professorship and a Head of Department role and so is having to balance his managerial and his professional identities.

"...for me there is an interesting balance to be struck between the real politic, this is what you have to manage, these are the indicators, versus how you conduct yourself and how you manage and how you construct your relationship with colleagues..."

Daniel's comments suggest that holding a management identity influences how he can construct relationships with other academics when drawing on his academic identity. He notes, for example, that although he is a Head of Department, he has no real power to compel colleagues to contribute as his Department needs. For Daniel then overall his job crafting to build relationships is problematic.

"I had effectively no power over colleagues, and by and large the institution had a sort of matrix structure, that meant that I could get nothing done...and most of the agreements about who taught what were devolved to judgements of heads of groups, so I sat separately from heads of groups...and they basically, put forward the people who would teach on those programmes as part of their workloads...it was only, quietly...the administrative staff that would do it, if somebody had got bad reviews or something that wound, a quiet word would be said can we not have them..."

Participants in this study raise the importance of colleagues supporting their job crafting in order for their academic identities to be realised. Sean at Suffolk for example reflects on the need to proactively construct relationships in order to get

buy-in for his academic identity. For Sean, his job crafting has been directed around the difficulties of gaining the good will of colleagues, and how to get them to take on duties as needed.

“...the hardest management responsibilities at department level is other people and so it's line management, but it's also the buying of other people as if you're a if you're a module leader and you need people to come and teach and negotiating with other people...”

Lucian at Suffolk suggests that he has some autonomy to shape his relationship with academic colleagues when taking on a management role. Lucian rejects a managerial approach to managing relationships with colleagues, likening it to a parent child relationship. Lucian notes that he would prefer to interact with others on an outcomes rather than a process basis, implying that to be “process focussed” is to be a micromanager.

“I do not want to be someone's mum [laughs] if they cannot manage themselves that would reveal itself...we should be more outcome focussed than process focussed, the idea that you must be there 9 to 5 and you achieve nothing but you were there...for me outcome is important...”

Lucian echoes the work of Winter (2009) raising that managerial identities are having a direct impact on academic relationships. This is also shared by Edmund at Suffolk who raises that when he took on a managerial role looking after a programme, this affected his relationship with academic colleagues as he had less time to be around them. For Edmund, taking on course leadership meant having to speak at and attend many external events as part of the recruitment process, and to develop relationships with professional services staff.

“...started running a programme and was expected to be at events...Well, yeah, all of a sudden the circle changed because I was more involved other members of administration, the academic leaders...clearly my circle started to change and of course I would see these people at social events and I would be invited to social events and because of my role...”

That taking on managerial roles or duties can affect academic relationships is a point of concern. Henkel (2000) stresses that academic identity is not just an

internal process but is constructed through relationships with others. Daniel, Sean, Lucian and Edmund's accounts therefore suggest that their own management roles are reducing their ability to construct not only their own, but the academic identities of colleagues. Moreover, their accounts suggest that balancing their values and goals with the values and goals of others is key to successful relationship building. Edmund at Suffolk presents this idea of a quid pro quo dynamic to academic collaborations. He reflects on his task and relational crafting around running a course, noting with "small favours" he could get colleagues to work with him if he was prepared to do something for their work also;

"But you know, there's still that undertone of, you know, you could do something for me and I'll do something for you if you do something for me."

Expectations of colleagues presents a sensitive area for relational crafting. Nina at Essex describes how she had to deal with other established members of her new department anticipating that she would undertake tasks for them. Nina took on departmental duties, which she sees as a means of securing goodwill with colleagues.

"...in any team there are interesting dynamics...so you know I have always been one of those people that, just gets on with stuff that needs doing, and I think certain members of the team really appreciated that, so I think that was one of the reasons I was asked to be one of the leads...so I just get on with work, and I think that is why colleagues have been really um...kind and quite helpful and they are willing to help when I have got an issue or I am not sure about something because they know that I am getting on with something...um I think other colleagues, older colleagues were probably a little surprised...when certain things about my role popped up, so I sign off all of the um...course leader reports...for the other course leaders and some of the older, or the more longstanding members of the team probably were not...they were not unkind but they were a bit surprised...when I first started in the department I was...[long pause] there were expectations from other members of the team that I would do things for them..."

Clegg (2008) notes that how hierarchies in academic relationships are formed and maintained is complex. She refers to them as "hierarchies of esteem", noting that there are not fixed meanings by which academics are gaining status with their

colleagues, but rather through how individuals interact (Clegg, 2008, p. 337). Lucian at Suffolk also reflects on how his willingness to take on duties helped his colleagues accept him when he joined the institution.

“I think every time you start somewhere new you need to build up your reputation, but I have never had a problem with that it has always come fairly easily...it went fairly quickly from me moving to being asked to do these things, and as the newest member of staff [laughs] which makes me wonder if it they thought I was good or too naive to say no...”

Winter (2009) suggests that values incongruence in academia may require sophisticated relationship management. In line with this, Yolanda at Essex comments that recognising the boundaries of colleagues is helpful when reflecting on her relational crafting. Yolanda highlights that navigating other people at work can be difficult, and so recognising that you can't win everyone over is important.

“...you have to be quite resilient in order to manage that in some ways and accept that, you know, you're you're dealing with people. So people will naturally always have predispositions, predispositions or assumptions towards you. And you'll never educate that...”

For Naomi at Cambridge, her relational crafting encompasses recognising that she has different needs to her colleagues, and so in turn that she needs to develop a varied skillset and multiple approaches should she manage a group in the future.

“...there is not really a micromanaging which is great, but there is a need I think from the lead PI to remain involved and engaged um...the style of management in that spectrum will be...better for different people depending on the individual right, I am very happy to be left to my own devices, other people are not and require more supervision and...and I guess like you say the sort of different challenges you perceive when you start running things, one of them is knowing where people sit, not where you sit, but where the people working for you sit on that spectrum, because there is a tendency to treat them all the same, step back and let them get on with it, and I am definitely at that end with the people in my team, but I am learning they are not all equal and some need more, tinkering than others, so that is part of the sort of learning process of having a group...”

Participants also raise that the buy-in of others is key to academic identities that extends outside of academic colleagues to students. The importance of being able to shape relationships at work in his teaching role is discussed by Kevin at Suffolk. Kevin discusses how he transitioned from student to Lecturer, and how he actively sought to gain credibility with his students, some of whom would have known him in his previous identity, through how he presented himself.

“I said guys I know I was only the year ahead of you, but the reason I'm here is not because of what I learned on the degree. That's part of it. But it's also that part of what I did for the last 30 years. So what you're buying into here when you come into this class is 30 years of experience plus a degree, not just the degree...”

Not all relationships are viewed favourably by participants. William at Cambridge reflects on how he feels that success in academia is directly linked to academic social networks. He emphasises that crafting social networks can be misaligned with academic values, for example when academics choose to align themselves closely with colleagues because they have status. William states that he chooses to create relationships at work in a way that aligns with work that he finds meaningful, rather than to pursue them strategically, even though to do this could help him secure a permanent position.

“...from everything I have seen, to get a permanent job, or be to promoted, it is a reflection of who you know rather than what you know...I honestly cannot see how you can transition across that barrier, unless you are...happy to sell your soul and make friends with people who you do not like...I do not give a stuff if it the guy cleaning the toilets they can come in and do experiments in my lab, if they are a decent person and they have got good ideas...but...you need to be A doing the research of someone really high up and B you need to be their best mate, and that is how you are going to get that transition...”

Ezekial at Cambridge also feels that the relationships between colleagues can have negative outcomes. Ezekial notes that social networks have a greater influence on his department's work than academic priorities, and often actually drive the activity of the department.

“These interpersonal ties often result in decisions that may not prioritise the department’s academic or research needs, instead focusing on personal loyalties...”

William’s and Ezekial’s accounts could be presenting the other side of the experience of academic feudalism raised by Holligan (2011), where academic leaders use academic colleagues for free labour to boost their own academic standing. William’s account suggests that colleagues support these inequalities by playing along, reflecting that resistance is largely futile. William notes that this inequality of experience also favours him, and gives the example of having connections in other universities, and how they contact him for opportunities, which he thinks is unfair.

“...I mean I do not see it as a sinister thing, it is just a fact of life...it is a natural thing, unfortunately if you have not already got that link you cannot ever get it...I mean I have been invited to apply for positions at my old university, and quite frankly it stinks because the reason they are inviting me is because they know me and they know I have a good publication record but actually, should they be inviting me, they should just put the advert out, but I can see why they would invite me because they know me, but it means if you are trying to establish yourself in a university you already do not stand a chance if you do not know anybody there already...”

William’s desire to connect with others around his academic work rather than to further his own career, as he feels this gives his work greater meaning is shared by Nicholas at Essex. Nicholas makes the point that the difference between work being enjoyable or not is finding good people to work with.

“I enjoy work. I think that’s a really good point. So I think actually from a working perspective, I don’t anchor myself to...anything work wise but anchor myself to people...which might sound a bit weird, but actually, but actually it’s about working with with people, and if I, you know...it’s about creating an environment for me that is enjoyable and that’s with the people that I surround myself with and the work...”

Tara at Cambridge focuses on tensions around uncertainty and balancing individual and institutional risk priorities, and that this impacts her capacity to job craft as getting this wrong can bring negative consequences.

“...if you are being told to focus on things you don’t like, and you react you put yourself in danger...also if you try to help others who are brilliant but difficult to work with, you put yourself at risk...part of the problem is you don’t know, you are trying to do the right thing...but if you don’t get it right you can become a target...”

Tara’s account reflects Gill (2010), highlighting how failure can have a significantly negative impact on relationships with others, for example through the “toxic shame” of having a publication, grant or promotion rejected, and how this can lead to social networks becoming eroded (Gill, 2010, p. 50). For Leah at Cambridge, part of her relational crafting is around recognising the need to recruit people who will avoid failure. Leah explains how previous experience of problems with colleagues at work has led to her looking at how her current Principal Investigator (PI) selects people for their group.

“...so the PI...they say that they have picked up over the years, they try to pick people who are clever and who will work well together, and it only takes one kind of person to ruin the whole group atmosphere so it is really key to be able to pick the right people, and I really think that is true having had the experience with one, and I have also been in previous groups where there has been a lot of tension, maybe there has been one person not pulling their weight...”

For many participants in this study then, relationship management, in particular in terms of supporting others, and receiving the support of others, is raised as the most meaningful aspect of their academic work. Marcus at Cambridge reflects that helping colleagues to succeed provides a deeper sense of value than publishing papers, likening it to the creativity and legacy of “giving birth” to someone’s career. Edmund at Suffolk highlights that building social connections is essential not only for enjoying academic life but also for getting good work done. Nicholas at Essex explicitly raises that without the support and guidance of his PhD supervisor, he wouldn’t have had an academic career at all. Senior colleagues are cited as pivotal in providing examples and setting the culture for how academic relationships are formed and can flourish. Nina and Eleanor at Essex both describe how effective

leadership enabled them to connect, adapt, and ultimately craft identities that made sense in their departmental contexts.

However, participants also reveal that management responsibilities can disrupt these academic relationships. Taking on managerial roles can create distance between academics and their colleagues, limiting their ability to support others, and introducing conflicting expectations. Some raise criticisms of when relationships are perceived as self-serving and not furthering the spirit of academic collegiality - as Nicholas at Essex says, “it isn’t about being an individual”. The focus on meaning and the values in how academic relationships should be formed arguably demonstrates that participants are presenting strong commitments to balancing their own values with those of others, illustrating Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2002) notion of altruistic individualism. The idea that their own reflexivity leads them to work with and support others suggests that academic relationships are more than transactional, but a way of working that values the social in a context of limited resources, and positioning academia as fundamentally collegiate, even as institutional structures push toward individualism and competition.

Ambition and Altruism in Academic Work - Summary

Overall, the participants in this study can arguably be seen as broadly approaching their academic work and job crafting in ways that do not only reproduce neoliberal norms of self-interest, competition, and individualism, but demonstrate a commitment to others through supporting colleagues and students, co-creating meaningful spaces and relationships to support their own academic work and the academic work of others. This chapter therefore draws on Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2002) concept of altruistic individualism, and the idea that in order to fulfil personal goals, individuals recognise the importance of investing in the goals of others. It highlights how participants are job crafting their own careers and spaces whilst also demonstrating a heightened awareness of and value for their academic colleagues. This chapter therefore contributes to the literature by offering an account of academic identity that moves beyond frameworks of self-interested individualism. It situates job crafting as a practice of reflexive meaning-making within constrained systems, where identity is shaped not in opposition to others, but in relation to them. The findings suggest that participants are not merely navigating a tension between institutional demands and personal, but rather that through the

lens of altruistic individualism their job crafting can be seen as reflecting that to make space for others, intellectually and physically, in turn, makes space for oneself.

The findings in this chapter highlight that academic identity is created at the sites where meaningful work can be undertaken. For participants, meaningful work is not described in purely individualistic terms. Instead, it is strongly connected to social value, through supporting students, mentoring colleagues, contributing to disciplines, collaborating with others and creating work that had benefits beyond the individual academic. This suggests that academic identity is not constructed only through formal outputs, institutional status or career progression, but through activities and relationships that allow academics to experience their work as valuable. These findings also highlight the importance of agency. Participants describe actively seeking, protecting and creating spaces in which meaningful work can be undertaken. Critically, this agency is relational rather than wholly individual, and participants describe needing others to create opportunities for their work and careers, as well as describing creating meaning for their own work through giving support to others. This reflects Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) concept of altruistic individualism, in which individual identity projects are not detached from social commitments but are shaped through them. Academic identity, in this sense, is crafted through individual agency, relational support and socially-valuable work

Across all three institutions, participants emphasise that external relationships play a vital role in their job crafting, contributing to their academic identities by creating opportunities for meaningful work, even when institutional support cannot be counted upon. Participants consistently raise the importance of supporting others, and being supported, as essential to the success of their academic work. These findings, when viewed through Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) theory of altruistic individualism, arguably highlight that the job crafting described here does not reflect a view of academics as self-interested neoliberal individuals driven solely by personal success. Rather, participants present experiences of academic identity that could not exist without social support, structures, and values. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) concept of "altruistic individualism" proposes that in order to be individually successful, one must also "live for others", an insightful theoretical approach when considering the tensions explored in Chapter 2 between institutional and academic priorities, as well as the importance of collaborative work for academic identity (Henkel, 2005; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 22). While

meaningful work is a central component of academic identity, it is also seen as increasingly marginalised by the “punishing intensification of work” through rising workloads and institutional demands (Gill, 2010, p. 46). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim offer a potential reframing of the value clashes involved in academic identity. For Winter (2009), academic identity schisms emerge when academics, particularly academic managers, are compelled to align their work with institutional priorities, often at the expense of pursuing meaningful academic work. Moreover, policy changes in HE are seen as creating an environment where academic work becomes disconnected from its traditional meanings, separating knowledge itself from the “deep structure of the self” (Bernstein, in Harris, 2005, p. 423). The concept of altruistic individualism suggests that whilst academics do pursue personal success, they do also contribute to the broader academic community and society, enabling them to reclaim meaningful work and purpose, even when institutions challenge their core values (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

The following chapter develops this argument further by examining how participants reimagine academic identity through the sites and spaces where meaningful work can be created. It explores how academics draw on relationships, social value, disciplinary commitments and institutional contexts to craft academic identities that are not fixed by formal roles, but are actively reshaped through meaningful work.

Chapter 8 – Negotiation and Redefinition: Reimagining Academic Identities - Findings and Discussion

Negotiation and Redefinition: Reimagining Academic Identities - Overview

This chapter explores how participants engage in job crafting as a way of navigating their sense of self. Participant accounts across all three institutions reflect an ongoing negotiation of their academic identities, shaped by competing values, shifting institutional expectations, and the drive to engage with meaningful work. Rather than simply accepting institutional definitions of academic success, participants describe shaping their identities and careers in ways that align with their values, goals and social networks. These practices are not straightforward acts of resistance, but are contingent and sometimes contradictory forms of negotiation, adaptation, selective resistance, and redefinition, with a goal of an academic identity that they can get behind and that they can sell to others.

The first section *Rethinking Academic Identity: The 'academic with a small a'* explores how participants self-identify at work. For the majority of the participants, the label “academic” is avoided. Patterns in self-concept can be seen across the institutions, and participants from Cambridge describe their academic identity in terms of what they do; researcher, clinician scientist, physician, methodology development. Participants from Suffolk describe themselves at work in terms of their job titles; Lecturer, Professor, Head of Department, Teacher – even when they do not feel these titles are appropriate. In contrast to Cambridge and Suffolk, participants at Essex tend to describe themselves with self-created hybrid titles that reflect roles and values; Education Consultant, Actor Dean, Reverse Translationalist. These accounts reveal alternative ideas to institutional definitions of academic success and suggest that identity is actively crafted in response to competing demands. The findings support the view that academic identity is a dynamic construct influenced by individual priorities, social activities and institutional cultures. Participants' reflections echo Clegg's (2008) claim that being a “proper” academic is often a moving target and align with Butterwick and Dawson's (2005)

notion of academic identity as an “outlaw emotion,” situated in complexity, contradiction, and resistance.

The second section, *Negotiating Autonomy: Crafting the Boundaries of Academic Freedom and Independence*, explores how participants negotiate academic freedom and autonomy as dynamic and relational accomplishments shaped through job crafting. Participants demonstrate that autonomy is contextually dependent, emerging through how they understand and position themselves in relation to their roles, colleagues, and institutional structures. Rather than aligning with more constrained notions of autonomy such as Clegg’s (2008) ‘freedom that isn’t really freedom’ or Henkel’s (2005) concept of negative freedom, the participants in this study highlight that autonomy can sometimes be extended or negotiated through job crafting, in particular where these activities have a heightened awareness of social and institutional structures. Their accounts suggest that autonomy is not an individualised experience, but is often pursued to benefit others, for example, by creating pedagogic spaces that foster student academic freedom. Participants describe how their ability to exercise autonomy changes depending on the identities they take on, with some finding that positions of formal authority do not always enhance their influence. The findings of this study therefore suggest that autonomy in academia is uneven and contingent, but that job crafting offers a way to navigate and extend it. In this regard, participants’ experiences illustrate how awareness of shifting structural and relational dynamics includes the implicit recognition that for individual academics new ways of thinking about and building academic identity appear to have become an increasingly important feature of academic job crafting. This suggests that, for many, change has become an embedded condition of academic work, and that an essential aspect of job crafting involves the continual redefinition of one’s position rather than the pursuit of stability.

The third section, *Specialists and Generalists: Luck, Resources and Academic Job Crafting*, examines how participants navigate the tension between pursuing academic specialisms and meeting broader institutional demands. While the literature often links specialist and generalist roles to academic preference or career stage, participant experiences suggest that the ability to specialise is more often shaped by institutional resources and opportunities, so factors outside of their control, rather than through individual choice alone. Across all three institutions, participants describe job crafting as a way of negotiating their roles while trying to maintain a distinctive academic profile. Generalist roles are seen as institutionally

encouraged as a form of risk management, especially in response to student satisfaction metrics, which has an impact on the space for self-directed work. In resource-constrained environments, particularly where staffing is limited, participants reflect on how their capacity to specialise is compromised, requiring adaptive and often relational forms of job crafting. In contrast, participants in better-resourced environments describe more proactive job crafting strategies to pursue specialisms, involving deliberate planning, strategic networking, and the crafting of distinct research trajectories. Luck emerges as a significant theme, with participants recognising that recognition and opportunity often arise from timing and external opportunities rather than alignment with internal goals. These experiences support Henkel's (2005) notion of the "serendipity of science" and the belief that good academic work will be successful, highlighting how institutional structures and social dynamics, such as the size of departments, have an influence on both workloads as well as the intellectual quality of academic work. Job crafting for academic specialisation, then, is highlighted as a process shaped by the need to recognise that academic excellence and success is being constantly redefined within changing institutional landscapes.

The final section, *Shaping Academic Careers: Job Crafting New Pathways*, explores how participants describe job crafting as a means of shaping academic careers in ways that are both strategic and values-driven. Participants describe job crafting to actively maintain academic visibility through strategic networking to ensure consideration for roles before they are even advertised, taking on a deliberately broad portfolio of projects as a way to generate opportunities in careers that are conceptualised as non-linear, and finding ways to create energy and enthusiasm amid unclear promotional structures. Traditional academic benchmarks are challenged, and some participants advocate for the recognition of administrative excellence as a possible legitimate career route in academia. Overall then, these accounts demonstrate that participants reflexively navigate competitive academic environments by crafting careers that align with their values and redefine success beyond conventional metrics. This reflects Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) concept of reflexive individualisation, whereby individuals are compelled to shape their biographies under conditions of uncertainty, using personal judgement and social networks to respond to institutional pressures. The findings of this section therefore suggest that job crafting is not only a method of career progression, but a site of negotiation and redefinition for careers, where participants can craft space for their autonomy and new ways of being within higher education.

Rethinking Academic Identity: The 'academic with a small a'

Out of the 24 participants in this study, only one was happy to associate their workplace identity with the label “academic”. The remaining participants, when questioned on how they see their workplace identity, gave responses that reflect a range of individual, institutional and academic sources. Academic identity was not defined in the question and so participants provided their own interpretation of the concept. For many academics, their sense of belonging is often stronger to their groupings outside of their institutions than within them (Kim, 2017). The participant accounts reflect the discussion in Chapter 2 highlighting that discourses available to academics to consider their academic identity are rooted in reducing spaces, and even to academics themselves academic identity can be an “outlaw emotion” (Butterwick & Dawson, 2005, p. 333). Clegg (2008) argues that to be a “proper” academic is a shifting goal, subject to considerable ambiguity, and is both deeply important when you are in HE but “invisible” when you are outside it (Clegg, 2008, p. 336). It is unsurprising then that all participants raised tensions with the term “academic”, broadly presenting it as a label that is an inadequate reflection for the complex, multifaceted and context-dependent identities present in academic identity. For most participants the label “academic” fails to adequately capture the complexity of their workplace identities. Their accounts reflect a collective discomfort with the narrowness of traditional academic categories, suggesting that academic identity is not only fluid and situational, but also evolves in response to structural, cultural, and relational changes in their working environments.

Participants at Cambridge tended to answer the question of how they see their self-identity at work in terms of what they actually do. Tara at Cambridge sees herself as ultimately responsible for how she is perceived and shaping her academic identity.

“I think ultimately you make the decision of how you want to be identified.”

Often their answers are multifaceted, reflecting the different roles and areas of work that they prioritise. Marcus at Cambridge for example sees himself in terms of having multiple strands to his workplace identity, calling himself a “doctor”, “physician”, “researcher”, and “teacher”. Marcus notes that these different areas connect to make a coherent and ensuring sense of self through his personal

interests that are consistent and “scientific”. Part of Marcus’ explanation of how he self-identifies includes what he does not want to be, which is to be seen as an administrator.

“Well I am a physician and a researcher and...and a teacher, and I did all of those things to the best of my ability, it was totally consuming, I did not really want to be the person that you know, did the really big administration... I was primarily a doctor, with extraordinary scientific interests, and I never leave that behind...”

Ezekial at Cambridge also describes his identity in terms of what he does on a day to day basis, raising the feeling that what he is being required to do in his role is actually eclipsing the academic component. For Ezekial, the peripheral tasks of his role are taking time away from the academic ones, to the extent that he sees his workplace identity just in terms of the need to perform.

“I secure funding, manage departmental politics, which is exhausting...this diverts time and energy from actual research and intellectual work...this is what I got into academia for, but all I can do is perform...”

Naomi at Cambridge regards herself as having differing self-descriptors depending on who she is explaining herself to. She observes that being honest in regard to questions about her academic identity requires a lengthy answer which she doesn’t automatically give out. Naomi also notes that considering her workplace identity is not a regular feature of her working life. Overall, she regards herself as being situated in roles that reflect her priorities and where most of her working time is allocated, such as “start-up” and “clinician”. She also comments that explaining where she is actually located - “academic department” is an easy answer to her academic identity that she has given when asked.

“I have not had to do it that recently, I would say I am an intermediate research fellow and a PI...so yeah, the answer to that question in truth depends on who is asking it um...because in some contexts I...it is better to say and I am almost obliged to say my role in our start-up... and also a clinician um, whereas in another context it might be I am in an academic department, or in another context I am a clinician...the accurate answer is too long winded”

The idea of obligation in self-identification, reflects how certain roles are prioritised depending on audience expectations or strategic necessity, even when they do not capture the full complexity of academic identity. This may contribute to why for many academics, their sense of belonging is often stronger to their groupings outside of their institutions than within them, especially if their external networks are the site of important work (Henkel, 2005).

William at Cambridge defines himself as “researcher”, reflecting that this shapes his approach to knowledge. When reflecting on any job crafting he would have done differently, William’s sense of self shows he does not feel tied to his university in any way, and he explicitly raises that his identity is not linked to his institution and that he would have left Cambridge if he did not have a family.

“I am a researcher...it is like trying to mend a leaky pipe you can patch up the hole but there will be a hole the following day...when I am doing research I would sort of design a hole seeking system, it is a different way of doing it...my advice to myself would be get away from Cambridge as quickly as you can, but that would then ignore I have a home life and that is why I am in Cambridge, because I made a decision a long time ago my home life has to be my priority...my kids...knowing we are not going to be moving every two to three years is an absolute priority...so my career has definitely been a consequence of that choice, because I have always been popping in and out of different jobs within Cambridge, with the one thing that is solid, which is home...so if I was...if home was not an issue I would say leave Cambridge, but it is not an issue because it is the most important thing...”

Del at Cambridge also roots his identity in labels that go outside of institutional structures. He sees himself as a “clinician scientist”, which he describes as an appropriate term because it reflects both his academic career pathway and that he is dividing his time between research and clinical practice, with the ultimate goal of improving patient care. Clinician scientist is a specific label that is overseen by the Health and Care Professions Council, and that refers to a specific role and set of duties. For Del, this label is more than just a title and reflects a dual focus he feels raises the quality of his work in both areas better than if he was just focussing on one or the other.

"I would say I am a clinician scientist...I think that is what you would term...and that is the sort of, the idea that you are, splitting your time, but that one is making the other better, you know you are doing better clinical work because you are doing science, because you are hoping to do science that actually makes a difference to the patient care, and also having a rigorous scientific approach to everything you do, and being up to date with the literature and stuff will make you a better clinician as well, so that is the idea"

In contrast to participants from Cambridge self-describing in terms of activities, those at Suffolk drew overwhelmingly on their job titles when answering how they understood their professional identity. In addition, unlike participants from Cambridge and Essex, several of the participants at Suffolk reflected on what it means to be an academic. This included reflections on the problems that they felt in recognising themselves with the label of academic, and in several examples describing any academic identity they do acknowledge as existing outside of their identities at work.

Edmund at Suffolk describes himself in terms of his academic title, and "Professor", but as he is full time engaged in teaching, he notes that whilst his students recognise that he has an academic identity, many of his colleagues do not. Edmund feels that the awards he won for his teaching prove that he has a valid academic reputation and deserves his role as Course Leader, even though many of his peers see him as an administrator.

"I was always known as Professor...so among the students I had an academic identity, right, right, among the faculty, I only taught...I was an administrative person... but I won awards, I was able to establish a good academic reputation...I mean, I'm very proud of my, my reputation."

Edmund's discussion reflects the work of Clegg (2008), and that academic identities are negotiated within specific institutional contexts. Edmund's sense of academic identity is challenged by the opinion of colleagues who do not value teaching in the same way he does. The title of "Professor" does not bestow security for his identity with his peers. Sam at Suffolk also reflects this, describing himself as a Professor, but experiencing the title in a different way to Edmund. Unlike Edmund, Sam is involved in research but does not regard the title of Professor with pride. Sam states that he is a Professor because this suits the needs of his institution, suggesting that

he does not connect the title to his academic credentials. He says he gives different answers depending on whether he is required to be honest to the question “what do you do”.

“So I do have a track record of several million in research funding...when they really need to know I will admit to being a Professor [laughs] but if they do not need to know oh I work in a University....I am a Professor here, I am a Professor here because this place probably needs me to be a Professor...”

Lucian from Suffolk also feels that his identity spans two roles. He describes himself in terms of teaching and research, but his experience is that these are distinct areas which do not overlap.

“You almost have two jobs, it is reflecting the way they went in the states, you have the teaching sides, you have students you teach them the basic stuff, and then you have your other side which is developmental where you are doing research and never the two shall meet really, because they are not related...my research is not on the required curriculum so they do not get taught it they do not need it...”

Lucian self-identifies as a lecturer, separating it from the work that he regards as academic, namely research, which he feels develops him as an individual. Lucian sees his teaching as un-academic in nature, noting that his research and experience is not required in order to teach students. Lucian’s account provides insight into how those entering academia from industry or healthcare often feel like outsiders, even though they can feel that academic teaching and research is outdated and lacking authenticity (Clegg, 2008). By separating academic work from university work, Lucian’s reflections suggest that it is not his previous career in healthcare that raises questions about the validity of academic teaching in an area that he previously practiced in, but rather the disconnect between research and practice. He suggests that as he feels teaching undergraduates is quite basic, and that those pursuing academic work are not necessarily needed to do it, then other non-academic roles could be created to deliver lectures.

“...this academic side with the research develops me as a person, and potentially if you publish it helps build a knowledge base etc etc, and if you publish...but I am not sure students are engaged enough to know whether you publish or

not...and so really am I needed to lecture? Not really, it's quite simple really now...someone with non-research training and interests could do it..."

Arial at Suffolk raises that whilst she feels teaching is important, this has low status in her institution. Arial defines herself in terms of being a lecturer and sees this as the core part of her workplace identity.

"I tend to think of myself more as a career teacher, or lecturer, and student focussed, and I know it was, it was...valued...by colleagues, but I think in terms of...the overall value from the university I am not sure it was seen as relevant..."

Arial and Lucian's different reflections on lecturing as a facet of their workplace identity, in an institution with a predominantly teaching identity, is interesting. This could be a reflection of a sense of a lack of space for their personal values and goals in their work. Minocha and colleagues (2019) highlight that international academics coming to teach in UK institutions are surprised by a perceived homogenisation in UK academic teaching, and that diversity in pedagogy is discouraged in favour of a singular approach. Moreover, in their work on job crafting, Grant and colleagues (2014) identify that job titles can give individuals a mechanism for agency and psychological coping, and that reflecting this individuals seek personalisation and craft self-reflective titles for their workplace identities. Lucian and Arial's accounts suggest the importance of enabling academics to embed teaching into their identities in individual ways that reflect different hierarchies of priorities would improve workplace self esteem.

Kevin at Suffolk reflects on what it means to be an academic, describing it as someone who has achieved academic cognitive ability and academic acquisition of knowledge. He understands his workplace identity in terms of his job title and where he works, and that one can become an academic through effort over time, which he feels he has not achieved at this point.

"I struggle a little bit with this because the term academic to me means somebody that has reached a stage in their career, their academic career...which is more advanced from where I am now. So I don't use the word academic to define myself... They're two different things, as far, and one, the cognitive ability. And one is the acquisition of knowledge. And I see a distinct difference between the two...So I define myself as a a person that works in a

university, a lecturer, but somebody who's on the path to being an academic rather than being the final product that makes sense..."

Kevin sees the route to becoming an academic to hold a job title that recognises academic credentials such as having a PhD, suggesting that he does not feel the title of Lecturer achieves this. Kevin states that being an academic is not something he thinks about and is not a goal, even though he is currently pursuing a PhD.

"...if I have reached a position, a recognised position...Which may allow me to start calling myself or thinking about myself as an academic, but it's not something I'm looking forward to. It's not. I haven't got this defined thing in my mind...Maybe only when I've got a PhD will I be one...It's not even on my radar, because defining myself as an academic is not something that is..."

Kevin's account suggests that for those who have come into academia from outside can draw on previous experience and prioritise their workplace identities in a way that works for them.

"I was over 50 when I came into this. So I've already got multiple identities. A father, hobbies I engage with, roles and positions in previous jobs. I had identities... It's I I think it's it's about self identity. I'm sure. Yeah. Yeah. And how important an academic identity is to you..."

Tim at Suffolk reflects on becoming an academic, and what it means to be an academic. He starts by identifying as an academic with a "lower case a", but then talks himself round to saying he is not an academic because he separates intellectual development from being an academic and does not feel he puts enough resources into cultivating himself on his academic pathway.

"I always say academic and then very quickly inverted commas lower case a [laughs] and certainly not underlined, that is my kind of self-deprecating way...um...oh bloody hell...academic...I do not...oh um...I am going to say no um...and the reason I am going to say no is that...well...in terms of if one says that being part of an academic is to be on top of ones subject through doing an awful lot of reading, I do an awful lot of reading, tons, and not specifically my subject, I go to relevant disciplines and build it in...so how does one define intelligence...intelligence is about finding out and kind of reading...but it is still

not academic um...and the reason why I suppose I said no to being an academic based on what I just said, is that I do not take the job seriously enough [laughs]..”

Tim is negotiating his academic identity reflexively, using self-deprecation and humour to downplay his role, while simultaneously evidencing deeply academic practices, such as interdisciplinary reading, authorship, and intellectual synthesis, that suggest a more embedded academic identity than he is willing to publicly claim.

“Yes, I mean...I have had people say oh you must be clever, and I always say no I am not clever, and again that is kind of self-debasing...to be able to write a book and if it comes to fruition, and even if it is marmite it still conforms to the academic almost stereotype in terms of you have done reading, research, you coalesce that self in print, how much more academic can you get... “

Tim’s account reflects the work of Harris (2005), who emphasises that collegial relationships and disciplinary affiliations remain a consistent source of academic identity, but that institutions undermine these by focussing on assigning academics duties that reflect market-oriented practices and managerialism. Liam at Suffolk echoes this, calling himself a “Lecturer”, but then raising that he does not like his job title, and that he thinks of himself in terms of his discipline.

“I am not sure how to answer that question because I am not sure I do define myself professionally... I normally describe myself as a lecturer...um...[sighs]...I normally do not get into the job title thing because it confuses people...also I don’t really like my job title...I am an Associate Professor, I would prefer to be a Reader...I do not tend to use that um...and um...you know conversations with friends you know um...I would say that I work at a university with conversations with friends, or a lecturer, that is normally as far as that conversation goes...in terms of subject area, I do still see myself... in terms of discipline...you are always rather hesitant to describe yourself in that way I think...because someone much more qualified comes up and says no you are not, but this matches my field of publications...and that is the field that I aspire to do more work in...”

Participants at Essex take a completely different approach to how they engage with self-definitions. Interestingly, the participants at Essex often adopt hybrid titles that they create themselves and that convey both their roles and underlying values. For

example, Nina calls herself an “Education Consultant”, reflecting multiple identities as lecturer, consultant, CPD provider.

“Oh, well I put education consultant on my business card, because all of those roles were supplementary to another bit of professional identity...so...yeah so alongside all those things either I had a full time job with the university, which fed into another role I did...I was teaching and running my own education consultancy alongside that, doing CPD type stuff for teachers...”

These experiences reflect the findings of Grant and colleagues (2014) where in the face of increasing homogenisation in formal academic roles academics are creating their own workplace titles. Reece at Essex defines himself as a “Reverse Translationalist” and someone who has the skillset to take clinical practice into research to study them to improve knowledge and then take them back out to the clinic.

“..somebody who translates clinical research or basic translation, or a reverse translation...Someone with the ability to take things from the clinic back into the lab or back into an environment to study them and then take those findings back out...”

Aurora at Essex describes herself in terms of her role, but also adds the word “Actor” as she loves going out and giving talks.

“I well, I'm trying to think when I because it's such a long time ago since I last did a conference last year... I would say I'm a Dean...You know I'm. I'm an actor.”

For Aurora, giving talks and teaching is integral to her identity, and she reflects that this means she can still be considered an academic, even though in her Dean role she feels that she has moved away from academia;

“You know, I think in in my heart...I do teach. I'm probably one of the only Deans that does teach here...I think I'm still an academic. Yeah. And so that's what you say. You sort of go out to conferences or you go give talks...”

These accounts reflect the work of Henkel (2000; 2005), who argues that academic identities are shaped through participation in epistemic communities. These

communities can be outside, and well as within, institutions, and participant discussions suggest they are able to personalise their work and bring in their own values and goals to a larger degree than participants at Cambridge or Suffolk. Participants at Essex reflect the influence of personal backgrounds and how they help shape academic identities. Families, for example, can play a significant part in academic identity, which is reflected in the discussions of Yolanda at Essex who gives the most personalised answer to the question of how do you define yourself at work, saying “I’m just me”. For Yolanda, her children came above her career.

“I couldn’t now live with myself if I thought in any way my job had harmed my children...children need time and always thinking of something else or were not there physically...I never missed one school event, I lied, I made it happen...”

The capacity to self-define is also tied to a sense of historical context. Nicholas at Essex notes how changes in the culture of academia over decades have influenced the opportunities available to newer academics. Reflecting on his career, he raises the increasing pressures around performance metrics in contemporary academic roles. Nicholas makes the point that he feels a lot of his success has been down to that he is not a new academic, and if he was starting now he feels that things may have fared differently for him.

“...I think though...starting all this 30 years ago has helped me...if I was beginning my career now...I wouldn’t be as successful I don’t think...I had a lot of space at one time to experiment and try new things...now, you need to be specific and targeted...me 30 years ago would not get a junior researcher job now...the culture we work in has changed so much”.

Eleanor at Essex - the one participant who does call herself an academic - arguably provides a contrasting view to the other participants in that she seeks out an identity that reflects her job title, what she does at work, and how she has created a flat hierarchy for the different parts of her role, where they are all equal, under the label “academic”.

“Yeah...[sighs] um I prefer [laughs] I define myself as an academic...with the connotation that that includes all three of those things, I am not just a lecturer, I am not just a researcher, I am not just an administrator, I am an academic and

academic includes all three of those things...now I do not think that is necessarily how...all of my colleagues would um...define what an academic is ...”

Eleanor’s approach however does remain in keeping with participants from Essex in that she has created her own definition of her workplace identity. In contrast to all the other participants, she embraces the term academic, where she does not see it as a singular concept, but rather she recognises she is stronger in some areas than others, *“I am relatively new to research, but I have been teaching since I was doing my PhD”*, but that this does not diminish the value of the weaker parts of her workplace practices in her overall identity. Eleanor’s account reflects the work of Whitchurch (2008) who recognises that academic, professional and administrative responsibilities blend in unique ways round individuals crafting identities in HE. Moreover, Eleanor is an example of academics in pre-1992 universities who are bucking the trend identified by Archer (2008) and who are positively engaging with the label of academic.

Self-identity in participant accounts therefore suggest that academic identity is not a fixed or uniform concept, but one that is actively constructed in response to institutional contexts, career stage, personal values, and wider social roles. At Cambridge, participants describe multifaceted identities shaped by the roles they perform and the settings they inhabit, often emphasising science, clinical practice, or entrepreneurial work over traditional academic labels. Participants at Suffolk, in contrast, often use their job titles to define themselves but simultaneously express discomfort with these titles. They also more explicitly question whether they qualify as “academics” at all. Participants at Essex exhibit the greatest fluidity, often crafting hybrid or personalised identities that reflect both their values and their varied professional activities, demonstrating the agency to construct roles aligned with their epistemic and social commitments.

These findings build on the existing literature by suggesting that institutional context significantly shapes the space available for identity work. As Clegg (2008) and Henkel (2005) argue, academic identity is negotiated within specific organisational structures and cultures. However, the participants in this study show that while identity is contextually influenced, it is also reflexively constructed. Participants draw on titles, affiliations, experiences, networks and values to self-define, often in ways that challenge narrow definitions of what it means to be an academic. Moreover, participant accounts support Grant and colleagues (2014) view that job crafting and

self-titling are forms of agency that enable individuals to assert control over how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves. In doing so, participants resist reductive institutional scripts and instead articulate more expansive, inclusive, and at times ambivalent understandings of academic identity.

Negotiating Autonomy: Crafting the Boundaries of Academic Freedom and Academic Independence

Academic freedom and autonomy are central themes in the literature on academic identity (Henkel, 2000; 2005; 2007). Academic autonomy is defined by Henkel (2007) as “...*the freedom of the individual scholar in his/her teaching and research to pursue truth wherever it seems to lead without fear [of sanction]*” (Henkel, 2007, p. 88). The participants in this study conceptualise academic autonomy differently to Henkel’s definition, linking it to their immediate needs such as career stability, the need to ensure academic colleagues comply with institutional priorities, or to align their teaching with their academic values. Participants in this study therefore raise the issue of academic freedom in relation to their teaching, institutional roles, and academic career work, describing it in terms of being able to job craft in order to both protect and create spaces for their own autonomy within the constraints of HE. Patterns can be seen across the three institutions. Participants at Suffolk raise job crafting and academic autonomy in the context of spaces for academic freedom for students, as well as navigating tensions between their own academic freedom and their institutions where taking on institutional duties is seen as the way to gain a degree of academic freedom. In contrast, participants at Cambridge raise academic autonomy in terms of job crafting for independence, for example through securing research funding or establishing an academic profile as distinct from their colleagues. Participants at Essex are perhaps surprisingly quiet on the subject of academic autonomy and freedom, raising it only as a comment when linking with healthcare, industry, or reflecting on self-limiting in order to build a research profile. Participant accounts here expand on the existing literature that reflects academic freedom is interpreted in a variety of ways by academics, from freedom to pursue research interests to the space to manage their working lives, to include academic freedom in terms of the capacity to negotiate autonomy over their work (Henkel, 2005).

Sean at Suffolk is cynical about academic freedom, highlighting it as only being drawn on by colleagues in situations where their free speech has limited

consequences. He questions the value of academic freedom as a challenge, or lack of, to management, observing that in his experience the proximity to decision makers has a direct influence on whether the academic freedom is exercised. For Sean, in practice the challenge to management is actually raised by those furthest from those who hold the power.

"...I don't think I am always on board with academic free speech therefore... I recognise there is a need to voice opinion...to rebel against management...I suspect most academics are highly opinionated and egotistical...in academia there is a misconception...I think academics are definitely more cynical, but I think also when it comes to management, if they are in a meeting with their management, that cynical viewpoint quickly dissolves...those close to decisions don't tend to voice their opinions publicly, it is left to lower ranked to voice ..."

Academic freedom and autonomy are conceptualised differently by participants when it comes to students, in comparison to the discussion of academic freedom amongst academics. Tim at Suffolk raises academic freedom in terms of teaching. He acknowledges the tensions around causing offence, stressing that in academia for work to be meaningful there needs to be space to challenge ideas and academic peers, and "the right to offend." For Tim, the problem comes with setting rules around what can and cannot be said, as this constrains academic skills and knowledge.

"I if I am going to give a class and there are certain things I better not say, and that restrains outwardly, and that may even restrained in a curricula and other things, and I think that is highly dangerous...a large part of me is libertarian and I do believe in free speech, I genuinely believe, and I believe in the right to offend...ok may not agree with words being used, but if that is what people think they should not apologise, but the day we worry about offending, offending students...clearly there are certain things that one would never say and should not say, in terms of language, but you know, part of being at a university is for students to be challenged, and maybe a number of things they will find offensive, but as soon as we start going down that route of, do not say this or that, prescribing certain things um...then we are in danger, some would say we are already too far down the line..."

Tim's comments reflect the work of Jessop (2018), who says that there has been a deliberate attempt to limit the freedom of academic teaching and research in the UK, in part to ensure students remain happy customers and to meet managerial goals of efficiency and protected income. Tim offers an additional insight, saying that he feels that there is a deliberate confining of academics, not limited to his institution, but with publishers as well.

"I mean that is quite interesting in itself, the restraining of academics, not only in terms of what they say but what they write"

Kevin at Suffolk describes job crafting in order to create academic freedom for his students. Kevin regards part of his role as a Lecturer as crafting the space for students to explore their subject. He sees this as part of his role and that he is responsible for protecting the space for students to self-direct how they apply their learning in lectures, noting that he positions himself as happy to follow their lead.

"I've got to the stage now where I'm happy to let people go where they want to go and when I read it, if there's something I don't know or I'm not happy about, I'll have to go off and do additional reading. But it gives the students so much more freedom."

Edmund at Suffolk also raises academic freedom in terms of teaching. He describes job crafting by taking on additional duties requested by his Head of Department, with the trade-off being that he has freedom over how he teaches. When discussing his job crafting, Edmund raises that when he manager approached him to take on additional duties, he agreed on the proviso that he could manage what he taught and how;

"But give me the freedom I want. I mean, clearly I I said to him, this is what I want to cover. This is how I want to cover it. He was OK with it, so I took on what he asked me to do"

Kevin and Edmund's points about crafting spaces for their students is, interestingly, not reflected in the literature. For example, Jackson (2021) in her paper on students and academic freedom argues that student academic freedom is fundamentally different and more precarious than the freedom experienced by academics. For the participants in this study who raise academic freedom, the reverse seems to be the

case, and the potential for creating protected academic spaces for academic freedom to be exercised by students is not reflected by participants as possible in their own spaces. For example, Tim at Suffolk feels that there is an inherent tension between academic freedom and being an academic. He suggests that academic identity is a paradox between the need to self-promote and the need to self-reflect. Tim grapples with the concept of the self in academic freedom as being in opposition to pushing the boundaries of knowledge, which he says should be the goal of academic work.

“...if being an academic is, having freedom of thought which it should be about, and expression in a free open honest and transparent way, what you think about each issue, then self-interest would get in the way of being an academic...in my area people are so wedded to approaches...so I am fundamentally challenging that but I make it clear I am not having a go per se at, but there is a need for a new understanding...and it is a touchy subject anyway...the self...I am saying bring it to the fore, recognise it, you cannot control it but yeah...you can argue, I am touching on philosophy, anthropology, politics, organisation as a society, so all sorts of things, multidisciplinary, that is very academic...”

Tim’s suggestion of challenging entrenched ideas in colleagues, and his promotion of enlightened self-interest, is a call to balance strategic behaviour with academic integrity. Tim’s point on “the need for a new understanding” is arguably suggesting that academic freedom is key and can be achieved in academic work if academics are prepared to focus their energies on engaging with their academic knowledge within their broader discipline. For Tim, self-interest is not at odds with being an academic, and an awareness of the paradigms that are being worked in can coexist with academic values. Tim’s reflections suggest that academic freedom has gone outside of academic areas meaning academics are looking for it in non-academic spaces, and so arguably echoes the work of Clegg (2008) who highlights perceived versus real freedom and autonomy for academics, and the “apparent freedom which isn’t really freedom,” (Clegg, 2008, p. 337). Tim suggests that academic freedom is intellectual freedom and so must avoid wedding a sense of self to one specific methodology in favour of an openness to shifting approaches to work.

Daniel at Essex can be seen as providing a counter-argument to Tim’s call for methodology shifts as a route to academic freedom. Daniel describes how he has directed his job crafting to deliberately avoid going into academic work that is

“challenging” to avoid risking his career, but notes that by doing so is not exercising his rights to academic freedom.

“...so the notion of academic freedom, to speak the truth to power, I am not sure if any of the work I have undertaken has ever been really challenging...”

Daniel’s point can be seen as the pragmatic approach to academic work in the UK. In a review of academic freedom in the EU the UK has been called “the sick man of Europe” as it has “no constitutional protection for either freedom or speech or academic freedom” (Karran, 2007, p. 309). This ties in with the work of Harris (2005), who argues that the scope and remit of academic autonomy and freedom are in themselves being increasingly questioned by institutions and wider society. As academic freedom is recognised as drawing on institutional and cultural factors it changes “from time to time and from place to place” (Prelec et al., 2022, p. 1703). Daniel’s account is more typical in the literature than Tim’s, reflecting the need for academics to ensure continuity of their careers above going into academic spaces that are controversial (Hedgecoe, 2016).

The experiences of participants who have come from non-academic backgrounds raises that academic freedom is a subjective experience. Lucian from Suffolk points out that his job crafting as an academic is different to his crafting in his previous role in the health sector as he feels he has more space and autonomy to direct how he works and what he works on. Lucian sees this as a justification for leaving his healthcare role to move into lecturing.

“working in the health service is great um...and very fulfilling but it is also quite limiting in a lot of ways, it is quite hierarchical and you have very limited autonomy, so I have always been interested in kind of...being a bit more self-directed um, pursuing the kind of...my own agenda if you like um...and being able to do it in a way that works for me rather than a way that works for an organisation...”

However, in contrast, Sean at Essex, who like Lucian at Suffolk has come from a background in healthcare, sees the relationship between lecturer and student as somewhat constrained by comparison to the healthcare relationship between practitioner and patient.

“so with a student, you don't have that same level of freedom that you did as a therapist with a patient”

Sean's account reflects that the structures of HE are limiting academic freedom (Allen, 2019). The nature of institutional roles can also have an impact. Liam at Suffolk presents two views of academic freedom when he reflects on two different roles he has occupied, one academic and one academic manager. Drawing on his experience as an academic, Liam thinks that institutions have become much more controlling of academics, raising the idea that the boundaries of academic freedom are subject to institutional permissions.

“I mean we are seeing a much more explicit attempt to control what people are doing, so up til now we have had more or less, or certainly for a large proportion of our workload we are able to create the role that we want, the boundaries are pretty loose really,”

In contrast, when Liam goes on to explain how he took on a temporary academic management role, he raises the issues he faced in trying to manage academic colleagues. Interestingly, Liam's “we” moves from representing academics in his above statement on creating roles, to becoming a “we” representing university management. In terms of his academic manager role, Liam raises the concept of academic freedom from the perspective of the academic manager, seeing it as misunderstood amongst colleagues, describing academic autonomy and freedom as a negotiation tool between institution and academic. Liam feels that colleagues need to consider balancing personal and institutional priorities so that work is done to a “good standard” as judged by the institution.

“in minds it has been translated into I have the freedom with my time to do whatever I like...and it is ok you know if we set...a series of things that we need you to do as an individual, if you do those in 25 hours a week, that is ok, if you are doing them to a high standard that is not a problem...it becomes a problem if it starts to take you too long because it might mean you have too high workload,...but if we give a fair set of tasks to do, that are achievable within a reasonable amount of hours and you do it in fewer hours, as long as you have done it to a good standard that is not a problem...”

This shift resonates with Winter's (2009) argument that institutional and individual priorities must be constantly negotiated depending on whether academics identify as academic managers or managed academics. Liam's perspective on academic freedom as an academic manager also suggests an interesting lens to view the work of Henkel (2005), who argues that academia as a "bounded space" has shifted from being an academic goal to being seen as a "negative freedom" (Henkel, 2005, p. 170). Liam's account can be seen as suggesting that academic freedom now requires academics to put time and energy into institutionally-driven work, and in turn the institution will be prepared to turn a blind eye to allow them to pursue their own goals – so academic freedom becomes the freedom from institutional interference. This reflection on balancing institutional and individual priorities, and individual risk and responsibility, has parallels with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's theory of individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). For Beck, the risk from the decline of traditional structures in society means that individuals now have the responsibility for their own biographies, and are compensated by the reward of both increased freedom and increased responsibility. For Liam and Lucian, increased freedom comes from fulfilling the duties of their roles as assigned by their institution, rather than pursuing their own academic goals.

In contrast, Naomi at Cambridge, sees institutional requirements as a significant hindrance to her being able to pursue her academic goals. Naomi justifies seeking Fellowships funding as the alternative to being salaried by her university, via a lectureship for example, comes with an unreasonable demand on her time that would mean she is unable to seriously pursue research. For Naomi, obtaining a grant which pays your salary means institutional obligations are reduced and academic freedom and autonomy are increased.

"You would have less freedom, so the University Lecturer posts are usually 50/50 split between teaching and research, but with funding, if you secure a big one they require that you spend no more than 20% of your time on other stuff, so the difference is 80% versus 50% roughly in terms of academic time and that is a big deal, that is a third of your time missing.."

Naomi's point raises the matter of academic independence, a key theme raised by participants from Cambridge in this study as integral to academic identity. Independence encompasses not only the autonomy to choose research topics and the freedom to express scholarly viewpoints but also the ability to self-direct your

own academic career (Henkel, 2000; Clegg, 2008). Historically, academic independence has been closely linked to intellectual freedom and the pursuit of knowledge, but contemporary pressures, such as increased managerialism, performance metrics, and marketisation, have challenged this concept (Watermeyer & Tomlinson, 2022). Independence is seen as a necessary feature of academic identity for those who want to build an academic career, and so the challenge is navigating the tensions of creating space for the individual academic, even though academic work remains largely collaborative, and academic success at work is dependent on the buy-in of academic colleagues. (Golhasany & Harvey, 2022; Kinman, 2001). It is perhaps unsurprising that it is the participants from Cambridge who raise the topic of independence therefore, as their accounts also reflect short-term contracts and precarious funding, as discussed in the overview of the three institutions in Chapter 1. In this context, academic independence has become a negotiated space and site of tensions therefore between individual success and academic success (Winter, 2009; Clarke et al., 2015).

Del at Cambridge reflects on how his job crafting has been focussed on the need to prove his independence as a route to secure long term roles, promotions, and to pursue the research he wants to engage with.

“so the question is really what metrics prove you have independence, and this is a massive question for people at my stage, because you have a mentor or a supervisor...yet you have to show that you are not just doing their bidding, and you can work independently of them, otherwise people will basically say well that is all very well but I am not going to fund you because you are just someone’s lucky...”

Del sees the need to establish independence as part of his academic trajectory, where he had to consciously take action to separate himself from his group in order to pursue his own work and reinterpret his dependency on his PI as a stepping stone, rather than as a limitation, *“...I thought, well this is part of progress, and focussed on what are the next few steps...”*.

Harvey at Cambridge also describes engaging with job crafting activities in order to craft his own space for his academic freedom and as distinct from his group. Harvey claims that he engineered external placements in different countries to create

physical and intellectual space from his PI on the justification of learning a new skill and the capacity to claim senior authorship on his publications in this period.

“so I spent two years overseas...I needed to find a way to distance myself either intellectually or physically or both from my PI...but um...you know it has taken conscious thought to get myself into that position...”

Del at Cambridge reflects on coming to the conclusion that the best option for his career was to change university in order to prove his academic independence.

“...they [the funders] have to be sure you are not just carrying out your bosses plans, and for me one of the best ways to do that, having been here for 22 years anyway, was to leave...”

Another way that Cambridge participants describe establishing their academic independence is through industry partnerships. As Henkel (2005) notes, the opportunities for scientists to switch research fields are limited, especially if they seek to work at the forefront of developments in their academic disciplines. D’Est & Perkman (2011) suggest that the increase in university and industry collaborations has come about in part because academics are increasingly turning to industry to fund their research as an alternative to the highly competitive research funding process. Tara at Cambridge recounts how she started to work with industry as a means by which her work can have social impact. For Tara, this route presented a way in which her work could be made directly useful to society.

“...I had never intended to do, to have as much of a foot in on the industry side as I do...I never set out to do that, but it became apparent that if you want to turn academic work into something of practical consequences you have to do that, to some extent...you do not have to it is not a requirement, but the more you are engaged the more likely it is to work...”

Industry funding is not a problemfree route to independence, and Collin and colleagues (2021) detail the issues that Universities are increasingly facing with commercial sources of funding, noting that the need for results, and the lack of University governance around strategies for working with industry is leaving academics in a vulnerable position. Nicholas at Essex draws attention to the

limitations of industry funding for research, noting that industry expectations for specific outputs places significant constraints on the nature of his work.

“...industry is different...they want relatively quick results, so you can’t really take any risks, you really have to deliver what you are being paid for...”

However, Nicholas’ account suggests that he is acutely aware of the dangers, and so actively pursues low risk strategies when it comes to external funding, such as through his “project in the bag” approach as highlighted in the section on *Job Crafting for Risk: Uncertainty and Precarity in Academic Work*.

Participants accounts overall arguably offer a more nuanced perspective on the discussion in Chapter 2, Clegg’s (2008) concept of freedom that isn’t really freedom, and Henkel’s (2005) idea of negative freedom, raising that academic freedom is the capacity to create space for academic autonomy, and this can be gained through job crafting. Across institutions, participants demonstrate that academic freedom and autonomy are not fixed entitlements, but are actively shaped through ongoing negotiation and adaptation, reflecting the ways in which participants understand their work, roles, and colleagues. However, the extent of how much control participants perceive they have - an important antecedent to job crafting - does present as institutionally driven and shaped by university culture as well as academic contexts.

The findings of this section therefore align with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2002) ideas on self-reflexivity, and the idea that an awareness of the systems that individuals work is key to whether they are able to create new ways of working and meaning-making. Participants at Suffolk describe crafting pedagogic spaces that allow their students to experience academic freedom, suggesting that their view of academic freedom is as a collective activity that goes beyond individual academic autonomy. In addition to this, Liam at Suffolk, is an example of different understandings of academic freedom depending on whether he is thinking as an academic or an academic manager. Interestingly, Liam’s experience shows that in his managerial role which should have more status than his academic one he feels he has less influence over his colleagues, and his academic freedom is solely gained through institutional structures. Tim at Suffolk and Daniel at Essex provide two contrasting philosophies on academic freedom, with Tim describing the challenge of colleagues wedded to specific academic methodologies as being

opposed to the values of academic freedom, and Daniel acknowledging that he avoids controversial or challenging academic methodologies voluntarily, so both cases having a perceived impact on academic work. Autonomy is curtailed in these experiences, for Tim by his collegial context, and Daniel by his own pragmatic decisions. Academic autonomy can therefore be seen across all three institutions as not right but rather as a phenomenon that must be actively created, shaped by the extent to which perceived levels of academic freedom enable the capacity to job craft.

Specialists and Generalists: Luck, Resources and Academic Job Crafting

Participants in this study describe experiencing tensions between specialist and generalist roles in academia when discussing their job crafting activities. Across all three institutions there are accounts of feeling pulled between individual drives to develop an academic track record, and being required to adapt to broader, more generalist responsibilities to meet institutional needs. Academic specialisms are described by participants as specific academic areas that they want to focus on that contribute to their academic discipline, and, interestingly, a key theme emerging is that participants feel that in order to do this luck is needed. The role of luck is seen in part as a mediating factor against the demands of institutional priorities and lack of resources, described as exacerbating tensions between generalist and specialist identities, and participant accounts show that the possibility to specialise and focus on their own academic agendas is not so much about individual preference, but rather a response to how institutions create and constrain spaces for academics to align their work with their values.

William at Cambridge raises that he has a strategy to pursue his academic specialism by working out the end point and then how to build to it. William describes his approach to job crafting, and to his academic work, in terms of crafting a “story”.

“I enjoy writing grants, I enjoy writing papers in particular, I enjoy the chaos of research, you know you have got to come up with a story and you have got to think of ways in which you can get that story across and the evidence you need

to prove your story is right, it is really cool, so I often think of the story and then create the experiments to create that story rather than, come up with an idea and then at the end scratch my head and think how will we make that into a story, so I tend to think of the end goal and then work my way backwards, and I really enjoy that”

Harvey at Cambridge explains how he uses strategies to develop his own academic skills and experience, and to distinguish himself from others in his field. Harvey describes a broad approach to job crafting activities where he proactively relocated to a different institution in a different country for a period of time. This was to learn a specific new skill not available in his current workplace, set himself apart from his current research group, and establishing a foundation for academic independence.

“...I have manoeuvred myself into a position where, intellectually, I am, you know doing something that nobody else is doing...I am doing something very different to what my PI was doing beforehand, and I have gone to a lab where I can say look I have learned from the best guys doing this, so therefore I have a track record, I have publications, and kudos and it is not like I am just playing at this, I have taken the time to go there...”

Harvey’s comments build on the work of Harris (2005), who explores how academics are required to build track records that are portable, such as through publications and grants, in order to survive in precarious markets. Harvey implies that having a skillset that can be seen as useful, demonstrated through his publications, means he is in a good position to keep his work going.

Reece at Essex also reflects the need to craft a specialism that is sellable, noting that he ensures his specialism can be shaped for good outcomes. For Reece, this means ensuring he is only working on areas that have real world implications, as to not achieve this is “difficult” as he feels that without this he is unlikely to be successful in publishing or achieving any external funding for his work.

“So, you know, it's great working on things. But then if you can't translate it into a human...then that's difficult.”

Gill (2010) makes the point that academic excellence is no longer sufficient in itself, rather it must be demonstrated through work that has a demonstrable impact on

society. Reece's account suggests that academics are shaping their work in order to meet the expectations of what is considered academic excellence. Like Harvey and Reece, Tim at Suffolk sees his job crafting as situated around cultivating his specialism, rather than how he undertakes his specialism. Tim describes how he negotiated with his Head of Department in order to maintain space for his work. He describes how he had been teaching in his specialism for a prolonged period of time, but was assigned to teach in a new area, which he did not want to do as it would detract from his core work.

"but predominantly I have been doing a different area for a long time...so I see that as my specialism...so I have not had to fight for that actually, although last year I was timetabled to do a new specialism with another academic who was very anti it, so was I, could I teach it, yes, would I make a decent job of it in all probably, yes, would I want to, no, but then I had a conversation with the Head of Department and that was sorted...the payoff...the trade-off was that I would write a book, which is what I am doing now...which is fine you know, give and take..."

The compromise for Tim was to therefore agree to produce a book, which suggests that an academic output was the ammunition his Head of Department needed to push back with colleagues and management on Tim being required to take on the additional teaching. Interestingly, despite his successful negotiation, Tim feels that his capacity to pick and focus on an academic specialism has been down to luck.

"...anyway so I have been lucky in one sense, because I have taught some contemporary areas relevant to that topic...that covers a range of disciplines, so I have made that my own.... if I had to pick one word in terms of where I am yeah it is probably fortunate, fortune, circumstance, maybe happenstance, maybe been lucky..."

Henkel's (2005) work highlights that a persistent myth in academic science is that if the pace of work is left to the domain of scientists, luck is allowed to take its course and accidental scientific discoveries that change the course of the field for the better come to light. As a consequence, Henkel notes that many of her participants use the argument of the "serendipity of science" to resist any perceived attempts by managers, funders and governments to influence scientific research agendas, and that, *"strategic research' played virtually no part in the discourse of academic scientists in the studies"*. (Henkel, 2005, p. 164). Naomi at Cambridge suggests a

slightly more nuanced view to Henkel's participants when raising the concept of luck. Naomi sees a balance of job crafting, academic duties and Head of Department support as contributing to her maintaining a specialism. She raises the idea of luck as occurring when an academic identifies a breakthrough that is academically valid, but that in order to be successful, other academics and funders need to recognise this as a priority also.

"...there is a fair bit of luck involved in that, so either you chance upon something that is right and interesting, and also that people care, you know about what you found..."

The idea of luck in establishing an academic specialism is also raised by Del at Cambridge. Del's discussion reflects the work of Henkel (2005), who highlights that making a distinctive and individual contribution to their discipline is a key but elusive goal for academics. Del talks about how he found his research place through his relational crafting, as he was given advice that helped shape his research trajectory. However, Del raises the importance of luck in this, and how luck in the timing of his research meant his research was able to gain recognition from journals and academic peers.

"...I was hugely lucky that someone pointed me in that direction...but yeah as...as we know...when I published my paper it came out of the blue, nobody had published anything like it, and then within a year we had more discoveries, and another group had some too, so the other group would have got there eventually...as they nicely said in their paper, they had used my paper...at the time we published it, everybody else was a mile off...if there had been a competing paper someone would have published it within three or four months..."

Del's account supports the idea that academics need to identify novel research, but also highlights that for some academic areas the value of research is ultimately recognised from subsequent work supporting the findings.

"...but it is like show business, you need your big break...I was hugely lucky...when I published my paper it came out of the blue, nobody had published anything like it, and then within a year we had more discoveries, and a European group had some too..."

As discussed in Chapter 2, luck is raised by academics as a shaper of success and failure, which in turn are shaped by visibility and alignment with institutional goals. Success in academic specialisms no longer guarantees career progression or even stability (Gill, 2010; Henkel, 2000; Harris, 2005). This is explicitly reflected in the account of Ezekial at Cambridge, who notes that luck is needed as in academia, success can still result in failure.

“...so you could be brilliant...you could do brilliant work, and then you turn round, and there’s no job...even a great discovery is no longer a guarantee of success...all you need...your mentor goes, the funding changes...you can be brilliant, but you need luck to stay in academia..”

Ezekial reflects the work of Gill (2010), and that academics are feeling that even those who are highly competent and committed often experience failure, instability, and rejection under neoliberal academic systems, as success is constantly redefined and often unattainable. Participants suggest that this precarity is in part a result of diminishing resources. Tim at Suffolk raises the idea of luck and the ability to specialise as being a direct consequence of a lack of staff. He reflects on how institutional demands have been encroaching on his academic specialism as a result of his department only having a small number of colleagues.

“it should not be down to luck, really, you know, if you are looking at career development and linking it to appraisal, what would you like to do, what is your real interest...the more staff in the department the more freedom you have to do that...but we only have a small number now...so there is not the room to...”

Sam at Suffolk also talks about how he was pulled away from his specialism due to a lack of staff. He raises how he has been compelled to teach in areas outside of his specialism owing to recruitment not being able to keep up with staffing needs.

“I anticipated it would be hard at the beginning, because if you have never been a lecturer before, you do not have slides etc. to give, so your first year you expect hell, um it has actually got worse recently...Yes, because we have not been able to recruit enough staff fast enough, which means some of us have had to take on modules that we would like, you know there is no reason for me to take on 10 modules a year, I should be on 6 or 7, but somebody has to teach them, the kids are there, the employers are paying for it...”

Tim and Sam's accounts echo Clegg (2008), who highlights how academics are expected to be flexible, taking on a range of duties that often conflict with their research identity, whilst Gill (2010) raises that as resources become scarcer and workloads intensify, academics are forced to adapt to institutional needs, at the cost of their specialisms. Participant accounts here recognise a lack of staffing, resources and the space for academic work as threatening both meaningful academic identities and contributing to a sense of fragmentation and professional insecurity.

Aurora at Essex sees a lack of staff as having a direct impact on the quality of academic work. She regards insufficient teaching resources as the difference between a "training college" and an academic institution. To not staff a course adequately means that teaching cannot be of an academic standard, and Aurora feels that her institution has been happy for this situation to take place, which has challenged her academic identity and made her feel "old fashioned".

"Whilst it doesn't invest in course provision and expects teams of 1 to 2 and 2 to 3 members of staff to deliver entire courses at undergraduate level, then yes, but it depends what you want because....If you if you want to act as a kind of training college, then you can do it, you know, but you're not teaching, you're not teaching, you're not educating the way that I, you know, I understand education, old-fashioned kind of academia. And maybe I'm old-fashioned, you know, maybe I'm behind the times."

Aurora's reflection suggests that the capacity to develop an academic specialism is not only impacted by a lack of staff, but that the size of academic groupings make a difference to the capacity to job craft. She talks about the importance of size of academic groups, noting that her job crafting was facilitated by the fact that there were enough people to share the load to make it workable;

"And the faculty was big enough that you didn't. Sort of. It wasn't like, too much work shared amongst too few people or anything. And your teaching load was not too sort of unbearable."

Lucian at Suffolk reflects on students as customers, suggesting that institutional shaping of his work and approaching teaching from a generalist rather than a

specialist perspective is encouraged by his institution as a way to minimise risk of student complaints.

“you publish and say we will do this module and it will be about A B and C and there will be 10 hours of lectures blah blah and then somebody had 9 hours lectures in the year so they sued and said I want 10% of my money back and they were successful...so now you have to watch your back, you have to put on lectures, cover them whether you know about the subject or not...and a lot of my job is about student complaints now, and they do not want to be there either...and they and they pay their money, show up, so they expect to pass”

Daniel at Essex also feels that his managerial role as Dean impacts the space for his academic identity. Daniel feels that he is expected to work with a divided personality, and to leave his academic knowledge and training out when he is approaching his managerial role.

“I am not clear that anybody expects me to link my academic work to my managerial work...I guess you are expected to be a little...schizophrenic um...in that respect, but there is um...maybe but no I am not sure that anybody here regards me as having, as we sit round the table as heads, I do not think anyone sees my ideas and reflections as privileged because of my academic background..”

Daniel portrays the small size of his department as an obstacle to his job crafting. Daniel feels that the size means a lack of resources, lack of space to strategise, and a source of social discord.

“...the real concern is about always being “it”, and the context, so if my department was bigger, there would be probably more space...a pile more money...and a whole almost a cabinet underneath me with responsibility for the operational work...so one thing you might like to reflect on about identity and the stresses and strains is do not forget that scale matters...”

Daniel's account reflects that staffing is not only a mediating factor in the experience of participants in job crafting an academic specialism, but that size of academic groupings have a significant influence on the potential to build an academic track record. This resonates with Henkel's (2000) discussion of disciplinary identity,

where the strength and coherence of academic communities is crucial for fostering intellectual development, and where smaller or fragmented groups may lack the critical mass needed for mentoring, collaboration, or research support. Similarly, Clegg (2008) and Winter (2009) highlight how institutional restructuring and reduced staffing can isolate individuals, making it harder for them to align with strategic priorities or sustain a research trajectory. These structural conditions therefore actively shape what kinds of specialisms can be developed, and by whom. Leah at Cambridge reflects on the fact that the number of people working in her area has in her experience had an impact on the success of the group overall. For Leah, if a group becomes too big then cohesion is lost, as some within the group do not connect. This in turn affects the quality of the research that they are undertaking.

“...or if the group gets too big it can become quite fractured...and I have been in one group like that, I mean it was not a bad environment, but it was not optimal, some people just do not talk to others, or yeah it can get a lot, harder to work in, so the current group is actually really good for the research...”

Ezekiel at Cambridge considers that group size is deliberate and part of a strategy by group leaders, not necessarily at the benefit of those in the group. Ezekiel reflects on how he was a Research Associate for what he feels was unusually prolonged period of time, and how a colleague is still on this pathway as it suits the needs of their group although it is to their detriment;

“I...am one of the most extreme cases in that I lasted so long...15 years...as an RA...most of people would do one or two tours of duty, and then would either make it out to another university, or would be snapped up by industry...but um...yeah it was common to be on contracts, some groups deliberately did try and keep the cohesiveness of their groups so people could be around for some time, there was one individual who joined after me and he still, he was recently promoted to SRA, he has just been on contracts, and basically he should stop because it is no good for him...”

Reece at Essex raises that only having one permanent member of staff in his area is a challenge for his own work. He notes also that as there are no Professors, there is no academic authority he can draw on for his own career, and so this has an impact for example on his capacity to engage in relational crafting at external meetings.

“The size of your group is related to how much of a voice you have at forums...I think there is only one tenured academic in my area, and that is it, and there is no Professor, so that is a challenge...”

Reece’s point that the precariousness of others affects his capacity for job crafting reflects the work of Buonocore and colleagues (2020) who show that high insecurity in roles reduces the likelihood of individuals job crafting, especially with cognitive job crafting. However, Liam’s point that lower rates of precarious employment means that academics have a greater responsibility to their institution suggests that even when precarious employment is low, the large presence of it across the sector is enough for working relationships between individual academics and their institutions to be affected.

Participants accounts build on existing literature which positions the distinction between specialist and generalist roles as reflecting academic preference or career stage, suggesting that the capacity to specialise is felt to be largely down to individual luck and institutional resources. Across all three institutions, participants describe tensions between developing a distinctive academic profile and being required to take on broader, generalist duties to meet institutional needs. At Suffolk, participants describe how limited staffing has directly impacted their ability to specialise, and their job crafting reflects this by being shaped by negotiation. Generalist roles are institutionally encouraged as a risk-avoidance measure, especially in relation to student expectations and complaints, which creates obstacles for developing academic specialisms. At Cambridge, in contrast, participants describe job crafting strategies to proactively pursue specialisms, often involving forward planning, external placements, and research trajectories crafted for distinction. Luck is a key theme, reflecting Henkel’s (2005) discussion of the “serendipity of science,” where research agendas are legitimised not by strategic alignment with institutional goals, but through timing and recognition. At Essex, participants highlight that resources have an impact on the opportunities to specialise, and for example the size of the department is linked to the capacity for strategic space and collegial influence. It is also suggested that institutional tolerance for under-resourced teaching undermines academic standards and erodes the sense of academic identity. Job crafting for academic specialisms therefore is not just a question of personal goals, but that in order to build an academic track record, consideration of institutional contexts is key.

Shaping Academic Careers: Job Crafting New Pathways

The literature on academic careers highlights the fragmentation of traditional progression routes and the growing need for academics to navigate uncertain, competitive, and individualised pathways (Henkel, 2000; Archer, 2008; Clegg, 2008). Participant accounts from all three institutions show job crafting that reflects new, non-linear, and “messy” academic career paths that seek to balance academic identity with individual goals and values (Budge et al., 2016, p.210). In response to increasingly fragmented academic pathways and shifting institutional expectations, participants in this study raise experiences of job crafting not just to mitigate career uncertainty, but to develop careers that support varied academic identities.

Academic careers are described as drawing on a range of potential pathways, reflecting that participant job crafting for careers requires strategic adaptation, flexibility, alignment with personal values, and consideration of available opportunities. These experiences reflect an agreement of the rejection of the notion of a singular academic pathway, and how participants frame their careers as non-linear and individually shaped, often requiring navigation of blurred boundaries between personal values and institutional demands. The findings in this section therefore contribute to literature on job crafting by demonstrating that career development in academia is not simply a process of advancement, but requires negotiation, adaptability, and the potential for redefining self-concepts where participants job craft to create spaces that reflect their own values, choosing which spaces to pursue in their careers on an ad hoc basis.

Entry points into academia have shifted significantly over the past few decades, enabling routes into working in HE not only from study but from industry and non-academic backgrounds, reflecting broader structural changes in HE. As Henkel (2000) and Archer (2008) note, the pathways into academic careers have become more fragmented and competitive, with increasing emphasis on academics needing to meet institutional fit, funding, and performance metrics rather than demonstrating academic excellence. Eleanor at Essex illustrates the point that PhDs no longer provide a straightforward route into academia. Despite completing a PhD, Eleanor attributes her first academic appointment not to her credentials, but to chance:

“...because think about the number of PhDs that pass their Viva every year and the number of academic posts available, it is no longer the way to get into academia...and there is no longer a guaranteed income at the end...I genuinely feel like I lucked into an academia job...”

Leah at Cambridge raises that in her opinion UK HE has an advantage in regard to the opportunities for academic progression. She reflects on how academic structures in other countries means academic group leaders try and keep their PhD students for as long as possible, creating delays to their academic career. For Leah then, the ability to progress into new roles is key to building academic pathways.

“...it is different in other countries, so for example my partner from Spain, it is very different where there is no Postdoc funding so they try and keep their PhD students for as long as possible, and I mean I am talking 7 or 8 years...”

Harvey from Cambridge offers a strategic perspective on how he navigates an increasingly uncertain academic labour market. His approach to job crafting reflects an acute awareness of the scarcity and unpredictability of securing academic posts, as well as the informal mechanisms through which opportunities are often distributed. Rather than relying on formal recruitment processes alone, Harvey actively cultivates his academic visibility and embeds himself within relevant professional and social networks. His account illustrates a deliberate effort to mitigate structural precarity by aligning his identity work with relational and reputational capital.

“the landscape changes all the time in terms of what posts are available or not available and you know who wants what at different times, and I think part of it is making sure that people are aware of what you are doing, so that if the post does come up, people will think about you, because quite a lot of the time these things are not advertised”

While Harvey's strategy may reflect the advantages of seniority and experience, it is important to note that job crafting is not exclusive to more established academics. The literature suggests that the ability to craft one's role may be constrained by career stage, with junior academics often having limited autonomy (Wellman & Spreitzer, 2011). Budge et al (2016) highlight that the formally hierarchical nature of academia has now been replaced by “messy” academic identities where more “fluid

connections" are possible and the barriers that once existed between junior and senior academics have been broken down (Budge et al., 2016, pp. 210, 218). However, participants in this study described engaging in job crafting even in their earliest academic roles, sometimes beginning during their doctoral studies. Leah at Cambridge, for example, reflects on how taking on student supervision duties during her PhD directly contributed to securing her first academic position.

"I have been lucky enough to be able to supervise, even from the first year of my PhD, and I have had some great students going through, and some of them have become really great friends now which is really nice,

Leah suggests that this social dimension of her work facilitated career development through new activities and responsibilities and also contributed to a deeper sense of meaning in her role, reinforcing the relational aspects of her academic identity. Leah's point about being "lucky" reflects Archer's (2008) point that academic careers in the UK are becoming increasingly fragmented by fewer opportunities and resources.

Naomi at Cambridge raises that academic careers do not follow clear progressions, and there are many opportunities for stagnation.

"...one thing I fell into basically by accident...we put in, it is not likely we would get it but we got it, and now that takes time...so yeah I think the career path you end up on it is not a sort of linear progression between dots...actually it is extremely sequiturs and there will be cul de sacs and things..."

Naomi acknowledges that her approach is both time and resource intensive and creates uneven career progress. She raises that she hopes that a few of her projects will be successful, but acknowledges some will be dead-ends.

"...so I am doing a whole bunch of projects, but some of them are things that are relevant...others I did for reasons other than having a burning interest in that question...one thing I fell into basically by accident...we put in, it is not likely we would get it but we got it, and now that takes time...so yeah I think the career path you end up on it is not a sort of linear progression between dots...actually it is extremely non-sequiturs and there will be cul de sacs and things"

For Eleanor at Essex, crafting opportunities for her career means recognising that contemporary academic work has elements outside of research and teaching. Eleanor raises the point that good administration should be recognised by institutions as a strength in its own right, to the point where other goals, such as publishing, are not required in addition to administrative excellence.

“...academia isn't what it used to be 30 years ago. It's hugely different now. And I think we've all got, you know, we've, you know, we don't have secretaries anymore...I think things have changed hugely, but I still think that universities should play to their strengths. I think if you have somebody who's desperately good at admin, you know, and you know they're doing their research and they're on top of everything, but they're never going to publish, you know...that should be ok”

Naomi and Eleanor's accounts echo the work of Clegg (2008), who argues that being an academic involves individuals undertaking varied roles in an attempt to meet multiple and often conflicting expectations. Lucian at Suffolk also raises how the space for academic work is diminishing due to the “grind” of institutional priorities. Lucian's main duties as an academic are teaching, and he describes his research as taking place mainly in his own time, seeing it as distinct to his role

“...so thanks to the grind of the teaching schedule...I am doing a part time PhD...which is essentially spare time PhD, so a lot of that work does not actually happen in the workplace, it is at home and at weekends...”

In contrast, Sean at Suffolk frames his crafting as wanting to retain enthusiasm and take on new tasks as a way to stay engaged with his role and still enjoy it.

“...I think a big factor is age...when I started teaching I was in my 20s...and colleagues would always say to me when you get older or when you have been here a while that energy will stop...and it became a point I wanted to make that the energy doesn't have to stop...”

Whitchurch (2008) highlights the opportunities that arise for academics to build meaningful careers when they are “unbounded professionals” open to taking on new skills and ways of working (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 3). Liam at Suffolk describes a

desire to expand his teaching portfolio, which led him to take on the task of developing a new course. Although the course was ultimately not validated, Liam reflects that this involvement created unforeseen opportunities, enabling him to move into a Course Leader role on an existing programme. His account illustrates how academics may engage in strategic forms of job crafting by taking on institutional tasks that, while not directly aligned with traditional markers of academic success, can open up opportunities for new career trajectories.

“I had had a role in...research at the university already, but I wanted to do more teaching basically...I knew I wanted to do more work with students um and...also partly to...give a bit more coherence to kind of research areas...it came about because the department went through process of writing new programmes, one of which I was involved in, and had an academic interest in that area...so I ended up writing the course, and when it was approved they needed someone to come in and run it and I applied for that job had got that job...actually that course never ran...the university took a decision not to run the course and not to pursue it um...I got involved in getting on other programmes...and I become course leader of a programme”

Liam's comments reflect wider findings that academics are increasingly crafting their own career progression through adaptive, opportunistic engagement with institutional roles, and that taking on new tasks opportunities can arise even in contexts of uncertainty and limited formal advancement pathways (Archer, 2008; Clegg, 2008; Gill, 2010).

Participants at Cambridge offer a different view, job crafting career progress through research funding rather than institutional roles. Del's justification at Cambridge for pursuing Fellowship funding comes from his viewing this as a strategy to maximise his options and ensure he has protected time and resources to drive his own academic work. Del notes the highly competitive nature of this approach and that failure means ultimately leaving academia.

“you need a Fellowship...and that will be very very competitive because it is an opportunity...it will pay your salary for five years and all of your consumables and all of your staff, so they are very competitive and they are quite difficult to get, and if you do not get one of those, maybe some universities would have, senior lectureship you know, positions, but you would still have to have some grant money

as well you know to pay for your projects...um...so yeah if you do not get one of those, my experience of people in most...UK universities they do not get externally funded fellowships...they tend to go back to full time industry work, so it is not as if you would not be able to get a job, it is just that carrying on research would be quite difficult"

One benefit of career pathways shaped by competitive fellowships is that they have clearly defined structures and expectations. Academics entering higher education from non-academic professions, such as healthcare, often face challenges in adapting to institutionally driven academic roles, where success is governed by unfamiliar rules, hierarchies, and cultural norms. Murray and colleagues (2014) makes the point that for academics who have backgrounds or additional work in industry or healthcare, adjusting to academic systems can be difficult. Sean at Suffolk's discussion embodies this, revealing that as his background is healthcare, he finds the system for career progress in academia to be vague and obscure.

"...it's totally different to the NHS...there the structure is clearer, you know you need to do x and y to move up...here it feels like the goalposts move, when I started they wanted research...now it's general contribution...I am sitting on committees, and I get committees are important...I am not sure if they should be important to my career..."

Sean's thoughts on the difference between healthcare and academia career progress routes reflect the work of Avery et al (2022) which calls for "clearer career paths" in universities for former healthcare workers wishing to craft academic careers (Avery et al., 2021, p. 406). Interestingly, Sean also feels that his academic colleagues do not behave in a way that he would expect around promotions by not recognising or commemorating his successful advancement in any way.

"Like my promotion was not celebrated in any form...There's no...you know recognition from colleagues very few I'd say...if you're really tight on resources, yeah, people tend to look more at what other people have and that kind of thing."

Sean's attributing a lack of colleague acknowledgement to his promotion to resource constraints as a driver of social discord reflects the discussion in Chapter 2 that the multiple systems of HE have an impact therefore not only on institutional priorities, but on resource distribution, and create a dynamic environment where

academics must navigate competing demands, negotiating their academic identities, and crafting their roles in response to evolving institutional and policy pressures.

In contrast, Lucian at Suffolk presents a more optimistic view of a comparison between academia and healthcare. He describes his current role as a lecturer as offering significantly more autonomy and freedom, particularly when compared to the rigid and hierarchical structures he experienced previously. For Lucian, the ability to influence his own direction and engage in research alongside teaching represents a liberating shift.

“Um I think there were a number of factors...firstly I kind of, working in the health service is great um...and very fulfilling but it is also quite limiting in a lot of ways, it is quite hierarchical and you have very limited autonomy, so I have always been interested in kind of...being a bit more self-directed um, pursuing the kind of...my own agenda if you like um...and being able to do it in a way that works for me rather than a way that works for an organisation...and also I have been interested in research...”

Lucian's reflections underscore the point that crafting career pathways is not only about securing progression but also about redefining his relationship to work and authority in a new professional landscape. Where participants report difficulties in achieving this balance is with the opportunity for career development via management roles. Floyd (2012) argues that often academics take on management roles in order to resolve identity conflicts, but that in practice this comes at a cost and academics find they have less time for their own personal values or goals.

Marcus at Cambridge also views the system of HE sceptically and in tension with academic priorities. Marcus considers part of his job crafting as resisting the structures of the institution, focussing on his research, helping others, and not getting promoted.

“...it was a condition of coming here that I would never be Head of Department, I never wanted to do it...the stupid jobs....the people who then...get frustrated by what they think the rewards are to become a Vice Chancellor or a Dean or whatever, why anyone would ever want to do that...but I got funding every

year...which was a hell of an effort...and a few people I have helped...that was wonderful..."

Marcus' reluctance to take on a management role at work suggests that he does not associate promotions with increased academic freedom and authority, but rather this can only be obtained through securing grants. Clarke & Knights (2015) suggest that resisting academic rewards is a credible expression of modern academic identity, as the system around promotions subjugates academics to control by their employer and forces alignment with institutional priorities. Moreover, Winter (2009)'s work on the academic identity schism argues that academics across the spectrum are subject to institutional demands and so the capacity for them to engage with meaningful work is limited. This is explicitly reflected by Tim at Suffolk who links promotion with a betrayal of his core values, suggesting that promotions implicitly require a reduction of personal autonomy.

"I have not gone for the Professorships...I have not sold my soul... I have always liked to be my own person... I do say no... I do not always conform and I am never going to..."

Liam at Suffolk describes taking on an interim management role in order to boost his career prospects and because it "shows a degree of ambition" to his senior colleagues. Liam reflects on how the experience was ultimately negative, primarily because he felt his institution did not want him in the role, and then ultimately because he feels he received no progression or career capital from it.

"...I know I am not the person that the institution wanted to do the role... I got some additional money and that was quite nice...partly I was sold on the idea that it was good for my CV, which I generally have come to realise is um...another lie that organisations tell people in order to get them to do things... I applied for the permanent job when it was advertised and did not get shortlisted or interviewed...because I did not have the experience they said...so it did not help in that regard..."

Liam's comments reflect a perceived cultural expectation now in academia that credible individuals will pursue opportunities for advancement, and that failure to do so means individuals are viewed negatively.

Tim's and Liam's accounts echoes the work of Bagilhole (2002), who makes the point that until the later part of the 20th century, academic promotions were relatively rare, with academics typically staying in the same roles without many opportunities for upward movement. However, a shift in expectations has meant that in order to be successful in academia, seeking out promotions is necessary, especially by women, in order to be taken seriously by their institutions and academic colleagues (Bagilhole, 2002).

Aurora at Essex, when describing her job crafting for her career advancement, explains how she sought to undertake duties around her academic manager role in a way that aligned with her values.

"I think it would be very interesting to think of what people's core values are and whether they align with their institutions...I think people have to compromise a lot...they don't think until retirement were they every authentic...colleagues sacrificed their values and sanity to get ahead in the organisation...so much you have to do as an academic manager is a load of shit...so you can find other ways of doing things...I was always looking for ways of doing something either circumventing things I didn't believe in or doing it in the most painless way that satisfy higher powers...."

Sean at Suffolk describes the need to be visible in regard to certain tasks in order to be considered for promotion. When describing job crafting in order to build his career, Sean explains that to go from a Lecturer to Senior Lecturer comes with the expectation that Lecturers will already be demonstrating they are performing at Senior Lecturer level. For Sean, this has a negative impact, as he sees it as undertaking duties he is not being paid for.

"....well, you are expected to take on more senior tasks, to prove you can do it, before you can even be allowed to apply...but you are not financially rewarded for doing this..."

The participant accounts in this section highlight that job crafting for their academic careers is strategic and reflexive. Approaches include taking on new tasks, focussing on promotions, balancing academic and other professional identities, whilst aligning with personal values, social contexts, and institutional demands. The accounts highlight how participants across institutions are actively crafting their own

careers through adaptive strategies, demonstrating agency in shaping their own pathways, often prioritising meaning, relationships, and authenticity over formal markers of success, and in some cases actively avoiding these and promotions as they are seen as coming at the cost of academic freedom and autonomy. This arguably reflects Beck's concept of reflexive individualisation, where participants can be seen as navigating a complex, shifting academic landscape by critically engaging with its constraints to craft roles that better reflect their values and aspirations. This study therefore contributes to the literature by showing how career crafting can be a site of resistance, negotiation, and reimagination of academic identities.

Negotiation and Redefinition: Reimagining Academic Identities - Summary

The findings explored in this chapter show participants reimagining their academic identities. Participants describe their academic sense of self as rooted in their capacity to create meaningful work with social value. They describe shaping their academic identities through relationships, collaborations, student-focused work, disciplinary commitments and wider social contribution, and it is through these interactions that meaningful work is both made possible and becomes the site of academic identity. At Cambridge, participants describe multifaceted academic identities shaped by the diverse roles they perform and the settings they inhabit, often placing greater emphasis on science, clinical practice, or entrepreneurial activity than on traditional academic labels. At Suffolk, participants more commonly define themselves through their job titles, but this is often accompanied by discomfort or ambivalence and unease with institutional labels. Participants also question whether they can describe themselves as “academics,” framing themselves as still on a path towards becoming . In contrast, participants at Essex show fluidity, crafting hybrid or personalised identities that reflect both their professional values and wider social roles, demonstrating a desire to shape roles that align with their epistemic and ethical commitments. This highlights that academic agency is not only exercised through resistance to institutional expectations, but also through the creation of spaces in which meaningful academic work can be developed, protected and sustained. Academic identity crafting is therefore shown to be highly relational, which makes participants' frequent rejection

of the collective title of “academic” particularly significant as it suggests they see this term as divisive rather than a label representing common interests.

Participant accounts in this chapter offer valuable insight into how job crafting acts as a crucial mediating process within an HE sector characterised by continuous change. Rather than passively accepting academic roles defined by institutional agendas and traditional academic pathways, participants describe shaping their academic careers in ways that reflect their personal values, create space for autonomy, and work with, around, and at times challenge, narrow or prescriptive definitions of academic success. Across this chapter, job crafting has emerged as a response to institutional structures and as a means through which academics work with, around, and at times against institutional expectations. The participants in this study demonstrate crafting new and meaningful pathways through academia that are adaptive, value-driven, and responsive to shifting institutional conditions. Academic identity is therefore presented as a changing, evolving and reflexive practice shaped through ongoing negotiation with the conditions of contemporary HE. These findings build on Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2002) concept of reflexive individualisation, illustrating how academics navigate uncertainty by actively constructing their identities, roles, and trajectories within and against the contexts they inhabit.

The findings from this chapter therefore offer an alternative to accounts of academic identity as being primarily reactionary, institutionally determined or constrained by neoliberal systems (Gill, 2010; Taylor, 2008). Instead, this chapter shows job crafting as an active and reflexive mechanism through which participants reimagine their academic identities to locate them in the sites where they are able to produce meaningful work. The job crafting to create these sites and spaces are deeply social, and participants recognise the need to invest in others and have others invest in them. Building on the ideas explored in Chapter 3, and on Wrzesniewski and Dutton’s (2001) view that job crafting occurs when individuals perceive a misalignment between work structures and personal goals, this chapter therefore demonstrates that participants are not only responding to existing conditions, but are relationally crafting in order to create spaces in which autonomy, specialisms and academic careers can be developed within a context of continuous higher education change. The findings of this chapter also reflect Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2002) theory of altruistic individualism by positioning participants as contextually aware agents who recognise the role of others in the construction of

their own academic identities within conditions of uncertainty, institutional constraint and changing expectations. Job crafting is therefore revealed not only as a means of coping with change, but as a vehicle through which change itself is enacted, offering new ways of understanding academic work, identities and careers as dynamic, relational and deeply human.

The next Chapter is the conclusion of this thesis and sets out the theoretical, empirical and conceptual contributions arising from this research

Chapter 9 – Conclusion and Contribution

Conclusion and Contribution - Overview

The central contribution of this thesis is that it demonstrates how academics reflexively construct academic identities through meaning-making driven job crafting. Academic identity is actively crafted through academic game-playing where spaces are created for meaningful academic work. Rather than being constrained by, responsive to, or resistant to HE systems, participants demonstrate actively negotiating the boundaries of academic work within, alongside, and beyond formal institutional structures. The thesis also shows that academics are not neoliberal or altruistic, but that both orientations are demonstrated by their job crafting. By reinterpreting and reshaping roles, relationships, priorities and environments, academics craft spaces for meaningful academic work through which academic identities can be built, sustained and developed. Where such meaning-making is blocked, disengagement, withdrawal, or even exit may become rational responses.

In this conclusion, I provide an overview of the key outcomes of this work by first returning to the research questions that guided the study, before outlining the theoretical, empirical and practical contributions of the thesis. I then consider the implications of the findings for academic identity, job crafting, and higher education policy and practice in a changing and increasingly competitive sector.

Contribution of the Thesis

Drawing together the findings and discussion chapters, this thesis builds on existing work on academic identity, job crafting and higher education by demonstrating how academics actively construct meaningful academic identities within constrained institutional settings. Whilst the existing scholarship has often considered academic identity in relation to neoliberalism, managerialism, performativity and resistance, this thesis extends these debates by focusing on how academics reflexively craft spaces in which meaningful academic identities can still be created. I argue that academic identity is not only shaped in response to institutional conditions, or produced in response to them, but is actively crafted through engagement with multiple institutional and academic games. Overall then, this thesis demonstrates

that academic identities are constructed through meaningful work, that the spaces in which such work becomes possible are shaped through academic game-playing, and that these games are not purely strategic or self-interested, but are also shaped by social, relational and altruistic considerations. Academics therefore emerge as bricoleurs of academic identity, drawing on their networks, institutions, activities, values and goals to craft a meaningful academic sense of self.

This thesis makes a contribution to understandings of academic identity by showing how academics reflexively construct meaningful academic identities through job crafting within constrained institutional settings. This thesis conceptualises academic identity as a situated, relational and meaning-making process shaped through engagement with multiple institutional and academic games, rather than as a phenomenon that is institutionally determined or individually chosen. Participants engage with games shaped by performance demands, institutional priorities and neoliberal conditions, but also by social, relational and altruistic commitments. The contribution of this thesis therefore is also in highlighting how academics craft identities through the negotiation of boundaries, meaning and change in everyday academic work.

In response to the research questions below, this thesis makes theoretical, empirical and practical contributions to understandings of academic identity, job crafting and higher education work. These contributions centre on three core arguments. Firstly, that academic identities are complex, situated and relational; secondly, that academic identity is crafted in the meaningful spaces created through job crafting; and thirdly, that academics engage in multiple institutional and academic games where neoliberal and altruistic orientations may co-exist rather than operate as opposing forces.

1. How do academics reflexively construct and negotiate their academic identities through job crafting?

The findings of this study show that academics construct and negotiate their academic identities through task, relational and cognitive forms of job crafting. Participants reshape what they do, who they work with, and how they understand the value of their work in order to create new spaces for meaningful academic work through which their academic identities can be crafted within constrained institutional settings. Job crafting therefore is engaged with as a reflexive identity-

making process through which academics interpret, protect and rework their sense of academic self.

2. How do academics interpret and reshape the boundaries of their roles within different institutional contexts?

The findings of this study show that academics interpret and reshape the boundaries of their roles in ways that are strongly shaped by institutional context. Across Suffolk, Essex and Cambridge, participants engage with different resources, individual goals and institutional priorities, which shape the kinds of academic games available to them. At Cambridge participants describe crafting identities through research, reputation and external networks, at Suffolk through teaching, student support, collaboration, institutional contribution, and at Essex through bespoke identities drawn from work seen as socially valuable. This demonstrates that the boundaries of academic identity are not fixed, but are actively negotiated within, alongside and beyond formal institutional structures.

3. How is meaning constructed in academic work, and how does this shape the construction of academic identities?

The findings of this study show that meaning in academic work is constructed through activities, relationships and spaces that are often linked to social, relational and collaborative forms of work, including supporting students, mentoring colleagues, contributing to disciplines, creating social value and working with others. This shapes academic identity as it enables participants to understand themselves as academics, not only through formal outputs, metrics or institutional roles, but through the meaningful contribution their work makes to others.

Conceptual Contributions: Identity, Meaning and Agency

This thesis makes three conceptual contributions to understandings of academic identity, job crafting and meaning-making in HE as follows:

- Conceptual Contribution 1: Academic identity is constructed through sites of meaning.

The first conceptual contribution of this thesis is that rather than being determined through metrics, formal roles, institutional definitions or career stage, academic identity is constructed through the activities, relationships and spaces that academics experience as meaningful. This shifts the locus of academic identity away from the structures of HE only, and towards lived experience and values-based engagement. Academic identity is understood therefore as an ongoing process shaped through the meaningful work that academics are able to create, protect and sustain through job crafting.

- Conceptual Contribution 2: Academic agency is situated, reflexive and relational

The second conceptual contribution is a more nuanced understanding of academic agency. Whilst structural constraints are present, academics are not positioned as passive recipients of institutional pressures. They are also not fully autonomous individuals able to craft work without constraint. Instead, the findings of this study show that academics demonstrate situated and reflexive forms of agency through everyday practices of negotiation, reinterpretation, prioritisation and relationship-building. This agency is relational because it is often exercised through others - students, colleagues, collaborators, networks and institutional relationships. Moreover, participants demonstrate that relationships with others can create opportunities for new spaces of meaningful work that are not solely determined by the constraints of neoliberal institutions.

- Conceptual Contribution 3: Job crafting is a reflexive mechanism of identity construction

The third conceptual contribution is the positioning of job crafting as a reflexive mechanism of academic identity construction. In this thesis, job crafting is more than a behavioural process through which individuals alter tasks, relationships or perceptions of work. Here, task, relational and cognitive crafting are shown to be practices through which academics construct, sustain and change their academic identities. Through job crafting therefore, academics actively reshape their roles, relationships, priorities and environments in ways that enable meaningful academic work to be created within, alongside and beyond formal institutional structures.

Theoretical Contributions: Neoliberalism, Job Crafting and Altruistic Individualism

This thesis makes three theoretical contributions to understandings of academic identity and job crafting in the context of HE as follows:

- Theoretical Contribution 1: Academics are not passive recipients of neoliberalism.

In contrast to the literature that recognises academics as constrained, reactive or damaged by neoliberal HE, this study demonstrates that academics are actively reshaping their roles, relationships and environments to create their academic identities. Neoliberalism, managerialism and performativity remain dominant forces in HE structures, but the findings of this study show that academics work within, alongside and beyond these structures, creating new spaces for meaningful work. This theoretical contribution therefore moves beyond the idea of academics as either capitulating or resistant to neoliberal HE, and towards an understanding of academic identity as located in meaningful work that is inherently social. This supports and extends Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) concept of reflexive individualisation by showing that academics are not only required to respond to institutional change, but to reflexively construct identities and careers within conditions of uncertainty, competing demands and shifting institutional expectations.

- Theoretical Contribution 2: Academics are individually crafting careers with a sense of meaning that is deeply social.

The second theoretical contribution extends Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) concept of altruistic individualism within the context of academic work. Participants in this study described meaningful academic work as being strongly social, and involving collaboration, student support, mentoring, disciplinary contribution and wider social benefit. This extends understandings of academic identity beyond neoliberal individualism by showing that self-directed academic career construction is deeply linked with social and relational considerations. However, rather than positioning neoliberalism and altruism as opposing forces, the findings of this study show that academics operate through a form of bricolage, drawing on individual, strategic and socially-oriented values to construct meaningful and sustainable

academic identities. This demonstrates that whilst academics may navigate neoliberal higher education, they do not behave as wholly neoliberal subjects.

- Theoretical Contribution 3: Job crafting is a mechanism of academic identity construction

The third theoretical contribution extends job crafting theory by showing that in academic work, job crafting is inherently identity-forming. Academics engage in task, relational and cognitive crafting not just to actively shape their work, but also to create the conditions under which meaningful academic identities can be constructed. This extends job crafting theory by showing how crafting practices are not only used to improve engagement at work, or workplace satisfaction, but also to negotiate the boundaries of academic identity. Job crafting therefore operates as a mechanism through which academics can construct, protect and sustain their sense of academic self.

Empirical Contribution: Boundaries, Institutional Contexts and Multiple Games

This thesis makes empirical contributions to understandings of academic identity, job crafting and HE work as follows

- Empirical Contribution 1: The boundaries of academic identity are actively crafted.

The first empirical contribution of this thesis is that it demonstrates that the boundaries of academic identity are actively crafted as participants use job crafting to reshape their workloads, redefine what counts as academic work, and negotiate space for meaningful work that reflects their values. This shows that academic identity does not come from formal roles or institutional definitions, but is produced through everyday practices, and is driven by meaning-making. This study therefore also extends empirical understandings of job crafting by showing that it not only shifts the boundaries of task, relational and cognitive approaches to academic work, but also the boundaries of academic identity.

- Empirical Contribution 2: Academic identity and job crafting are shaped by institutional context.

The second empirical contribution is through the comparative insight this thesis provides across the three contrasting institutional contexts of Suffolk, Essex and Cambridge. The findings show that academics' opportunities for crafting meaningful work, and therefore the scope of their academic identities, are shaped by institutional priorities, expectations and resources. Participants from Cambridge describe more strategic, reputation-based and metrics-aware forms of crafting, participants from Suffolk emphasise teaching, student-centred work and broader institutional contribution, and participants from Essex describe more hybrid and negotiated academic identities. Ideas of self-concept can also be grouped by institution, with Cambridge participants self-identifying with the type of work they do, participants from Suffolk self-identifying with their job titles, and participants from Essex crafting hybrid and values-based identity labels.

- Empirical Contribution 3: Academic work involves engagement with multiple games.

The third empirical contribution is that academic job crafting is shaped through academic game-playing. Participants describe playing games for research, teaching, publishing, funding, student recruitment, collaboration, institutional performance and creating spaces for work that has social value. Whilst metrics, funding and REF requirements remain key to academic work, the findings show that participant job crafting to meet these demands includes the consideration of how to support others and produce work that is meaningful. Participant discussions on academic games therefore also show that neoliberal and altruistic orientations are not mutually exclusive, but may co-exist within academics job crafting. This thesis therefore extends work on academic game-playing, responding to Butler and Spoelstra's (2020) call to recognise that academic games are layered, by showing that the games academics engage in are multiple, overlapping and actively negotiated.

Practical and Policy Contributions

In addition to the conceptual, theoretical and empirical contributions, this thesis also provides practical and policy contributions. The findings have particular implications for academic identity in an increasingly competitive higher education environment. As universities compete for students, funding, reputation, partnerships and

measurable impact, there is a risk that academic identity becomes narrowed around externally visible indicators of performance. This thesis shows that academic identity is sustained not only through recognised outputs, but through meaningful work, relational activity, disciplinary commitment and socially valuable contribution.

The findings of this study suggest that in order to recruit and retain academic staff, HEIs need to recognise the diverse forms of work through which academic identity is created. If institutions recognise only income generation, publications, REF performance, student numbers or formal teaching metrics, they risk overlooking the relational, collaborative and socially valuable work that enables academics not only to sustain meaningful academic identities, but also to create academic work with wider social value. In this context, institutions that wish to support strong academic identities need to create conditions in which academics can craft meaningful work, rather than simply requiring that they adapt to performance metrics and competitive outputs. Participants demonstrate that where academics have space to reinterpret roles, develop relationships, pursue values-driven work and negotiate priorities, job crafting can support engagement and identity construction. However, where meaningful work is blocked by overly narrow performance measures, excessive managerial control or limited recognition of social and relational work, disengagement, withdrawal or exit may become rational responses. Supporting academic identity in constrained HE environments therefore requires recognition of the full range of academic work through which value is created.

The findings of this study also suggest that institutions should consider how workload models, promotion criteria, research strategies and performance frameworks recognise the full range of academic work. This includes good academic citizenship, such as mentoring, student support, collaboration, interdisciplinary work, community engagement and informal relational labour, as well as high-quality academic work with social value, irrespective of how it is funded or where it is published. Supporting academic identity requires more than encouraging individual resilience or productivity, but rather institutional conditions that enable academics to craft spaces for meaningful academic work, through which they can create, protect and sustain meaningful academic identities.

Recognising the institutional benefits of strong academic identities is also useful for institutional strategy and branding. The case for why students should come to an institution, why funders should provide grants, and why local authorities, businesses

and external partners should engage with universities is strengthened by a clear and coherent academic case, supported by academics who are engaged, knowledgeable and productive in their disciplines. The value of the university is grounded in the academic knowledge, skills, relationships and outputs held by its academic staff. Recognising and supporting this academic value can increase academics' career capital and enable more socially beneficial academic work, rather than narrowing academic activity around funding priorities and political trends.

Limitations of Research

Whilst this study aims to contribute to the literature on academic identity and job crafting, it is subject to limitations.

Firstly, in order to gain rich and detailed accounts of job crafting, the sample size was kept small, at eight participants for each of the three universities represented. In order to maintain anonymity for the research participants, all information that could identify the participant was removed from the transcribed interview. This means that no results or conclusions are possible around individual academic characteristics, such as discipline-specific work, or individual characteristics such as ethnicity or age. The pseudonym chosen did, however, reflect the self-identified gender of the participant. However, consistent with qualitative research, the purpose is to generate theoretically rich insights into how academics construct academic identities through job crafting within specific institutional contexts. The study therefore develops concepts and explanations that may be transferable to other HE settings, while remaining grounded in the particularities of the participants and institutions studied.

Secondly, each participant was interviewed just once. As perceptions are subject to change, it may be that if the interviews had been repeated, additional experiences or different interpretations of experiences would have been shared. This study sought to mitigate any negative impact of this by utilising a semi-structured format with no time limit, which enabled the research participant to lead the conversation and to bring in any topic they felt was relevant, including for example intuitional policies and work-life balance.

Thirdly, the field work for this research was conducted before the ramifications associated with COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, the situations outlined in the

Chapter 1 - Overview of the Universities of Cambridge, Essex and Suffolk have changed. Cambridge has moved towards recognising academic outputs in addition to research when it comes to academic promotions, introducing the metric of general contribution, and bringing in a staff structure in 2021/22 which changed University Senior Lecturer to Associate Professor and Reader to Professor. Suffolk moved towards developing their research culture, with a first submission to REF 2021 and the introduction of research contracts for staff in the same year. No significant changes were reported by participants as occurring at Essex since the data collection period.

Future Research

The findings of this research highlight several areas for future research. Guidance for academic managers on how to foster environments that enable job crafting was identified by several participants as a potential avenue. This could focus on how to create spaces for the hybrid self-reflecting identities that emerged from the accounts of the Essex participants in this study. Also, investigating how university branding in institutions can encompass both institutional and academic identities could make a very competitive case for future student recruitment and academic retention. An exploration of job crafting practices across disciplines, career stages, and demographic groups would be valuable on many levels. Different academic disciplines impose unique demands that influence job crafting opportunities and constraints, and early-career academics, for instance, may have less autonomy but greater flexibility in crafting their roles compared to senior academics. Moreover, understanding how gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background intersect with job crafting could provide a deeper understanding of systemic barriers and enablers within academia. Finally, Professional Services job crafting in universities remains underexplored despite its significant impact on academics' workload and identity. Understanding how professional services staff are reshaping their administrative roles to align with personal and institutional goals could highlight where frustrations and opportunities are possible for academics in the bureaucracy of the university.

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