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**‘Organizational misfits as creative agents of change: the case of pracademics’**

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**ABSTRACT**

The experience of ‘misfit’ between individuals’ professional identities and their work roles or work contexts is common in inter-role or inter-professional career transitions. Extant literature has focused on the identity struggle of these people and framed their responses in terms of attempts to minimize maladaptive outcomes at the individual level. In contrast, this study examines how problematic identity dynamics associated with misfit motivate the shift towards the development of positive identities and induce creativity in meaning-making and change-oriented actions. It builds on the insights of Mead (1934) and Joas (1996) who view creativity as the most significant aspect of human agency originated from the active self, and the identity work literature that highlights the agentic process in identity construction. The empirical study looks at a group of ‘pracademics’ whose career trajectories deviate from the prototypical patterns in academia. It examines the identity work strategies that these people undertake to overcome misfit and construct a positive sense of their professional selves in career transitions. It shows how identity work liberates them from the limits of a particular identity, and facilitates new activities that alter aspects of their work contexts. The analysis distinguishes two identity work strategies: ‘hybridization’ and ‘positive distinctiveness’. These provide different pathways to identity positivity and disrupt established work practices in different ways. The study advances our understanding of identity work as a creative human endeavour and sheds new light on the change-oriented agency of misfits.

**KEYWORDS:**

1. Agency
2. Creativity
3. Identity work
4. Positive identity construction
5. Pracademics
6. Misfits.

**INTRODUCTION**

The experience of ‘misfit’ between individuals’ professional identities and their work roles or work contexts is a common occurrence in inter-role or inter-professional career transitions ([Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015](#_ENREF_34); [Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010](#_ENREF_36)). Especially among veteran professionals who bring their prior knowledge, work norms and well-established identities to the new work context, the initial experience of misfit and work-identity integrity violation can be stressful and uncomfortable ([Beyer & Hannah, 2002](#_ENREF_3); [Gardiner, 2016](#_ENREF_27); [Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006](#_ENREF_53)). A body of literature, notably on person-environment fit, focuses on these people’s struggle to gain legitimacy and stresses the adverse effects of misfit on their well-being and on the performance of their organizations ([Kristof, 1996](#_ENREF_43); [Vogel, Rodell, & Lynch, 2016](#_ENREF_68)). Responses to the discomfort and identity threat arising from misfit have often been framed in terms of attempts to minimize their negative consequences and maladaptive outcomes at the individual level. Although some authors describe misfits as ‘active, motivated creators of their own fit experience at work’ ([Follmer, Talbot, Kristof-Brown, Astrove, & Billsberry, 2018: 440](#_ENREF_26)), the idea that misfit is a liability for both individuals and organizations remains prevalent in this literature.

In contrast, a well-established literature in sociology highlights the innovative potential and creative agency of misfits or marginally positioned people. Simmel’s ([1950](#_ENREF_64)) work on ‘the stranger’, and Coser’s ([1962: 177](#_ENREF_14)) idea of ‘innovating dissent of a nonconforming minority’ elaborate on how role ambiguity and peripheral structural positioning enable misfits to function as innovators. Similarly, other authors argue that misfits can serve as ‘tempered radicals’ - people who do not fit easily within the dominant cultures of their organizations and who challenge the status quo through intentional acts ([D. Meyerson & Tompkins, 2007](#_ENREF_47); [D. E. Meyerson & Scully, 1995](#_ENREF_48)). More recent research on peripheral actors also highlights their creative generativity ([Jones, Svejenova, Pedersen, & Townley, 2016](#_ENREF_40); [Sgourev, 2013](#_ENREF_61)). The main argument is that these people are less constrained by the dominant cultures and institutions, and are therefore more likely to originate ideas that challenge the status quo. In short, this strand of work views misfits as 'valuable assets’ for organizations by highlighting the structural and cognitive possibilities for creative agency. However, it remains unclear what drives them to realize such possibilities.

This study argues that the above two views are not necessarily contradictory but each captures one aspect of the reality. The psychological discomfort and identity threat associated with misfit could be a driving force behind individuals’ creative agency. The study adopts an identity perspective to shed light on this and advance our understanding of why these people are predisposed to be change-oriented agents. It examines how problematic identity dynamics associated with the experience of misfit stimulate creative agency through individuals’ identity work in maintaining positive self-conceptions. Creative agency is conceptualized as the capacity of actors to exercise imagination and choice, and enact new behaviour in response to problematic situations or interrupted contexts. This builds on the insights of Mead ([1934](#_ENREF_46)) and Joas ([1996](#_ENREF_39)) who view creativity as the most significant aspect of human agency and who argue that it originates from the active self in skilful problem-solving and searching for new possibilities of action. The analytical framework also draws on the identity work literature which highlights the agentic process in identity construction (Brown 2017; Watson 2005). Identity work, referring to the cognitive and behavioural tactics by which individuals negotiate and construct their identities, is commonly motivated by a desire for identity positivity ([Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010](#_ENREF_20); [Tajfel & Turner, 1986](#_ENREF_67)). In this study, the positivity of an identity is construed as positive self-conceptions derived from individuals’ sense of self-worth/self-esteem and self-consistency/certainty (Gecas 1982). An emerging strand of research views identity work as a form of embedded agency leading to organizational/institutional change ([Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010](#_ENREF_15); [Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002](#_ENREF_17); [Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003](#_ENREF_54)). This study examines how the quest for identity positivity among ‘organizational misfits’, whose identities are contested, induces creative agency and leads to the development of new organizational practices.

The concept of ‘organizational misfits’ refers to individuals whose career trajectories and work norms deviate from the prototypical patterns in their organizations ([Kleinbaum, 2012](#_ENREF_41); [Kristof, 1996](#_ENREF_43)). The study focuses on a group of ‘pracademics’ - experienced practitioners who had made career changes to become academics. These people serve as archetypal examples of organizational misfits because their career trajectories deviate from the prototypical academic careers and thus may be viewed as lacking in legitimacy by their academic peers ([Empson, 2012](#_ENREF_24); [Posner, 2009](#_ENREF_52)). Illegitimate or non-conforming members of social groups are often penalized and occupy marginal positions if they persist ([Kleinbaum, 2012](#_ENREF_41)). Research has shown that experienced newcomers often encounter significant transition barriers to becoming fully legitimate members of new communities of practice ([Gardiner, 2016](#_ENREF_27)). Moreover, career changes from professional practice to academia can be particularly difficult owing to the pervasive research-practicedivide and contrasting knowledge practices between the academic and practitioner communities ([Carton & Ungureanu, 2018](#_ENREF_10); [Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001](#_ENREF_60)).

This study examines the identity work strategies that these people undertake to overcome misfit and construct a positive sense of their professional selves when making career transitions. It explores how their quest for identity positivity stimulates creative agency and brings about changes in the knowledge and work practices of their host work contexts. The empirical investigation is based on interviews with 34 pracademics from several UK research universities. The analysis distinguishes two identity work strategies pursued by the pracademics: ‘hybridization’ and ‘positive distinctiveness’. The pracademics who adopted the hybridization strategy redefined identity meanings, disrupted knowledge boundaries and challenged established work practices in academia. Those who pursued the positive distinctivenss strategy exploited their misfit as a resource for self-affirmation, created opportunities for advocacy and altering the relational dynamics between practitioners and academics. The former can be described as ‘transformative’, and the latter as ‘catalytic’, change agents. The two identity work strategies illustrate the different pathways to identity positivity that undergird the individuals’ creativity in meaning-making and change-oriented actions. Common to both is the way they liberate the individuals from the constraints of a particular identity, giving them the resources and psychological freedom to act in ways that contradict established expectations and practices. By highlighting the self-dynamics that induce the creative agency of misfits, this study contributes to our understanding of identity work as a creative endeavour arising from the need of individuals to enact themselves and find solutions to problematic situations ([Joas, 1996](#_ENREF_39); [Mead, 1934](#_ENREF_46)). The identity perspective highlights the affective-motivational aspect of human agency and enriches the sociological/structural explanation of why misfits are predisposed to be change-oriented agents.

The next section presents the main concepts and framework, followed by the research methods and data. The paper then examines the two identity work strategies pursued by the pracademics and shows how their quest for positive professional selves stimulates creative agency. It concludes by discussing the study’s theoretical and practical significance.

**CONCEPTS AND FRAMEWORK**

The analytical framework brings together the insights of Mead (1934) and Joas (1996) who view the self as the origin of human creativity and agency, and the identity work literature that directs attention to the agentic process, both cognitively and behaviourally, in identity construction. It argues that the experience of misfit impels individuals to undertake identity work to maintain positive self-conceptions. In doing so, they liberate themselves from the limits of a particular identity and facilitate new activities that alter aspects of the social context in which they are enmeshed.

**Identity, Self and Creativity**

Identity refers to an individual’s sense of self that is developed and sustained through social interaction. It focuses on the meanings that an individual attaches reflexively to herself or himself. It comprises the content of the self, and anchors the self to the social system (Gecas 1982). The self is a product of reflexivity that emanates from the dialectic between the ‘I’ (the subjective self as knower/actor) and ‘me’ (the objective self that embodies social demands) (Mead 1934). Social psychologists commonly use the term ‘self-concept’ to refer to ‘an organization of various identities and attributes, and their evaluation developed out of the individual’s reflective, social and symbolic activities’ ([Gecas, 1982: 4](#_ENREF_28)).

Scholars in the field of creativity have shown an increased interest in the link between identity and creativity ([Cheng, Sanchez-Burks, & Lee, 2008](#_ENREF_13); [Gocłowska & Crisp, 2014](#_ENREF_31)). However, much of their work has focused on how identity states (e.g. ambiguity) or structures (e.g. dual identities) influence creativity. It treats creativity primarily as a socio-cognitive outcome arising from individuals’ cognitive flexibility and/or access to diverse resources. This study offers a different perspective – it argues that creativity is inherent in the identity process as individuals seek to realize and enact themselves in response to disruptive or problematic situations. The theoretical grounding of this can be traced to Mead’s (1934) theory of the self that emphasizes the agentic and creative aspects of human action, attributing these active properties to the ‘I’ aspect of the self. The self, according to Mead, is constituted by the interaction between the ‘I’ and others through social interaction and role-taking. Mead argues that actors have the ability to develop consistent and unitary self-conceptions within the conflict of different expectations through adaptation – a process that affects not only the self but also the social environment. The self that emerges from this dynamic, reflexive process is the point of reference for action orientation. In this way, Mead’s theory of the self provides an important basis for theorizing creativity in identity formation in that the active ‘I’ retains ‘a portion of subjectivity as a source of conscious meaning and the possibility of its modification and transformation’ ([Dunn, 1997: 689](#_ENREF_19)).

Building on the Meadian view of the self as representing the inner locus of control, Joas (1996) places creativity at the centre of theorizing human agency. He conceives creativity as ‘self-expression’ revealed through ‘acts of reconstruction’ that are ‘called forth’ when habitual forms of action and established expectations are interrupted. ‘Self-expression’ locates the seedbed of creativity in the subjective world of actors, enabling them to align inner experience with external expression. ‘Acts of reconstruction’ refer to the re-orientation of action on the basis of changed perceptions. Such acts, according to Joas (1996: 128-9), emerge when actors’ habitual activities are disrupted and cause a phase of ‘real doubt’: ‘The only way out of this phase is a reconstruction of the interrupted contexts. Our perception must come to terms with different aspects of the reality; action must be applied to different points of the world, or must restructure itself.’ Joas sees reconstruction as ‘a creative achievement on the part of the actor’ because it enables something new to enter the world: a new mode of acting, new relationships or new social products (e.g. norms and practices) which becomes part of the new social contexts.

**The Quest for Identity Positivity**

A central thesis of social identity theory is that people typically strive to see themselves in a positive light, and this positive self-conception is grounded in socially important and salient roles such as occupations and how these are perceived by others (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Dutton et al., 2010). The quest for identity positivity is associated with the self-esteem and self-certainty motives which are thought to be pervasive and universal (Gecas 1982). Identities are deemed as positive when they are evaluated favourably by self and/or others, and when individuals are able to achieve a good fit between their self-conceptions (e.g. professional identities) and some combinations of internal and external standards (Dutton et al 2010).An individual’s identity is also more positive when different facets of the identity are in a balanced or complementary manner, or when the opposing needs for assimilation and differentiation from others are reconciled ([Brewer, 1991](#_ENREF_5)).

Individuals seek to construct positive identities in their workplace because work is central to the fulfilment of their needs for self-esteem and self-certainty. They strive to achieve a positive sense of self by forming, modifying and transforming how they define themselves and others ([Dutton et al., 2010](#_ENREF_20); [Laura Morgan Roberts, Dutton, & Bednar, 2009](#_ENREF_58)). The quest for identity positivity can be particularly intense in situations where the authenticity and validity of one’s identities come under challenge such as in times of career /work role transitions. Research has shown how career actors proactively adapt to changes in work role demands by engaging in personal and role development (Nicolson 1984), creating ideal ‘possible selves’ ([Ibarra, 1999](#_ENREF_35)), ‘customizing’ their professional selves over time (Pratt et al 2006), or by using ‘identity parking’ to manage identity change ([Chen & Reay, 2020](#_ENREF_12)). These are all examples of positive identity construction in response to disruptive situations. This strand of work demonstrates that the development of positive work-related identities not only enables individuals to minimize the negative consequences of identity threat and tension, but can also foster strength and resource building. However, it focuses primarily on the effects of identity positivity on individuals’ adaptability and access to social resources. What remains unexplored is how the pursuit of identity positivity at the individual level drives creative agency and brings about wider outcomes at the organizational level. The literature on identity work provides crucial insight into this.

**Identity Work and Creative Agency**

The concept of identity work is pivotal to our understanding of the self-dynamics and agentic processes underlying the development of positive identities. It denotes the self (i.e. Mead’s ‘I’) as ‘the point of origin’ of human agency ([Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 974](#_ENREF_23)) and offers the opportunity to investigate how micro-processes influence macro-consequences ([Brown, 2017](#_ENREF_7)). Snow and Anderson ([1987: 1348](#_ENREF_66)) conceptualize identity work as ‘the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept’. Watson (2008: 129) argues that ‘identity work involves the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to inﬂuence the various social identities which pertain to them in the various milieus in which they live their lives’. Watson’s conception of identity work as including an ‘inward’ cognitive process of identity preservation and an ‘outward’ relational process of identity negotiation is particularly relevant. It suggests a reciprocal relationship between the cognitive/sensemaking and behavioural/relational aspects of identity work. And, more crucially, it highlights the quest for social validation and identity positivity that drives individuals to engage in identity negotiation and influence their social context.

Identity scholars have identified various identity work strategies that individuals deploy to maintain social status or self-worth in the face of identity threats, commonly manifest in devaluation and legitimacy threats (Petrigileri 2011; Roberts 2005). Kreiner and Sheep ([2009](#_ENREF_42)) show how individuals transform identity threat into growth opportunity by means of cognitive reframing and improving the quality of relationships with those who pose threats. Roberts ([2005](#_ENREF_56)) suggests that members of socially devalued identity groups may use positive distinctiveness strategies (e.g. impression management and communication) to improve the status of their identity group in order to achieve self-esteem and positivity. Research on the identity work of stigmatized individuals demonstrates how socially marginalized or minority employees actively deploy their social identities in the workplace by using claiming, educating, and advocacy encounters to gain legitimacy and lay the groundwork for social change that may reduce the stigma and enhance collective self-esteem ([Cha & Roberts, 2019](#_ENREF_11); [Creed et al., 2010](#_ENREF_15)).

All these strategies for achieving identity positivity consist of inward ‘cognitive/interpretive’ and outward ‘behavioural/relational’ aspects of identity work. Tajfel & Turner (1986) use the terms ‘social creativity’ and ‘social change’, respectively, to distinguish these two clusters of strategies used by members of negatively distinct in-groups to achieve identity positivity. Social creativity strategies such as cognitive reframing ([Elsbach & Kramer, 1996](#_ENREF_22)) and identity redefinition ([Slay & Smith, 2011](#_ENREF_65)) are often used to bolster the perception or esteem of the devalued social identity. They provide an important cognitive foundation for social change strategies which involve actions taken to change the relative status of the in-group as a whole and/or its access to resources and power ([Jackson, Sullivan, Harnish, & Hodge, 1996](#_ENREF_37); [Tajfel & Turner, 1986](#_ENREF_67)). Rao et al ([2003](#_ENREF_54)) refer to social change strategies as ‘identity movements’ that challenge dominant cultural codes and established practices that may result in replacing a traditional identity with a new identity.

There is an emerging literature on the influence of identity work on various social processes and outcomes. For example, Lok (2010) shows that the social construction of an identity based on a particular institutional logic inherently involves the conditioning of practice and vice versa. Research on identity work of stigmatized individuals demonstrates how negotiation of identity meanings can subvert relative symbolic power differences between social groups and influence their understanding of both the stigmatized and dominant identities at the group level (Creed et al., 2010; Lyons et al., 2017). Pettit and Crossan ([2020](#_ENREF_51)) illustrate the instrumental role of occupational identity work in facilitating and/or disrupting strategic renewal of organizations. It shows that the identity work of occupational members in protecting identity meaning and ways of working influences activity modification needed for strategic renewal. Identity work has come to be seen by some as an important form of institutional work as institutions can be affected through constructing and enacting particular identities that disrupt institutionalized rules, norms and beliefs (Creed et al 2002; 2010). This literature has shown that the particular ways in which actors see themselves and attach meanings to their identities influences how they act on external relationships and negotiate collective social identities. However, the path from the endogenous process of identity construction at the individual level to actions that shape the external social context has rarely been explored. The gap between identity work and institutional work remains to be bridged.

This study postulates that creative agency, emanating from individuals expressing and enacting themselves, is what bridges the two levels of ‘work’. Identity work, as an agentic activity, involves not only actors’ interpretive agency in meaning making (‘social creativity’) but also their concomitant effort to shape the social context in which they are enmeshed (‘social change’) ([Emirbayer & Mische, 1998](#_ENREF_23)). In other words, meaning-making, mobilization of resources for creative action, and the construction of social identities are intertwined. Identity work, therefore,reveals the role of creativity in human agency as actors engaged in acts of reconstruction on the basis of meaning-making or changed perceptions. Joas (1996: 129) cogently argues that this creative achievement of individuals facilitates the generation of newness. This perspective resonates with Mead’s theory of identity formation which highlights the mutual constitution between self and environment, and places creativity of action in the foreground.

While misfits or marginalized individuals may have identity-driven motives to undertake identity work, they have limited resources or legitimacy to mobilize broad support and act as purposeful agents of change. How might their identity work strategies bring about wider changes beyond a sense of positivity? Research on agents of institutional change suggests that marginalized actors (e.g. tempered radicals) often rely on micro-acts of creative agency to bring about incremental changes in their local contexts (Meyerson and Scully 2005; Meyerson and Tompkins 2007). These could range from subtle, identity-based moves to mundane, isolated acts of resistance to grass-roots coalition building. Weick ([2001: 427](#_ENREF_69)) describes this type of change tactics as a ‘small wins’ strategy whereby people ‘identify a series of controllable opportunities of modest size that produce visible results’. In a study of legitimation of a new work role in a well-established health care system in Canada, Reay et al ([2006: 978](#_ENREF_55)) vividly illustrate how actors successfully legitimized new work practices through situated ‘microprocesses that were demarcated by the achievement of small wins’.

Building on the above literature, this study examines how the identity work of a group of organizational misfits – ‘pracademics’ - disrupts the established knowledge boundaries and work practices in academia as they seek to overcome identity threat and maintain their positive professional selves in career transitions.

**THE EMPIRICAL STUDY**

**Pracademics as Organizational Misfits**

The term ‘pracademics’ is commonly used to describe individuals who are active in both the academic and practitioner worlds, or who switch across the work role boundaries in both directions (Posner 2009). This study employs the term specifically to refer to experienced practitioners who had made career changes to become academics. Career moves from the practitioner world to academia are non-institutionalized occupational changes that involve radical work role transitions. Socialization processes are usually disjunctive and pose significant challenges to individuals’ professional selves ([Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010](#_ENREF_36)). Pracademics are well suited for the purpose of this study because they are likely to experience the discomfort of misfit arising from value incongruence ([Bandow, Minsky, & Voss, 2007](#_ENREF_2)), work-identity integrity violation (Pratt et al 2006) and identity threat ([Petriglieri, 2011](#_ENREF_50)). For example, several studies show that pracademics often experience devaluation identity threat as they move away from their original source of credibility and find themselves in more junior positions within academia than was the case in their practitioner careers ([Blenkinsopp & Stalker, 2004](#_ENREF_4); [Empson, 2012](#_ENREF_24)).

Furthermore, moving from professional practice to academia can be particularly tension-ridden owing to the cultural-cognitivedivide and notable differences between the two communities with respect to the types of knowledge valued and modes of knowledge representation ([Carton & Ungureanu, 2018](#_ENREF_10); [Rynes et al., 2001](#_ENREF_60)). Within academia, conceptual, text-based knowledge is generally accorded higher status than practice-based, experiential knowledge. This is so even in strongly practice-based disciplines such as creative arts where the status of non-textual (e.g. audio-visual) knowledge is ambiguous and academics are under pressure to comply with traditional academic knowledge practices ([Niedderer & Reilly, 2010](#_ENREF_49)). Crossing the career boundaries between the two communities therefore entails crossing knowledge boundaries which are deeply rooted in interpretive frames, work practices and status hierarchies ([Carlile, 2004](#_ENREF_9)). It may threaten the validity and legitimacy of the knowledge accumulated over the course of an individual’s career. Failed validation or devaluation of prior knowledge is often a major source of identity threat in professional role transitions (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010).

Pracademics are thus likely to experience misfit and problematic identity dynamics as they make the transitions from the world of practice to academia. What identity work strategies might they undertake in order to overcome the problematic experience and maintain a positive sense of professional selves? How might their quest for identity positivity induce them to engage in ‘acts of reconstruction’ (Joas 1996) that influence the host work contexts?

**Data Collection and Sample**

The study is based on 34 individual interviews with pracademics in creative arts and social sciences from several UK research universities. The interviewees were experienced practitioners who had joined academia mostly in their mid-careers with some making the transition in their late-careers. They were identified by examining closely the CVs of individuals on their departmental webpages and some additional names were obtained by snowballing. Additional biographical data were obtained through other online sources such as LinkedIn and personal webpages. The majority of the interviewees were in the mid- and late- careers, and had been in academia for some time, ranging from 5 to 20 years. This time dimension allows the tracking of their transition experience based on their retrospective accounts and comparison across the individuals with varied length of work experience in academia. The disciplinary and career background of the interviewees are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

The interviews used a semi-structured protocol which was revised as the research progressed to take advantage of emerging themes. To allow for meaningful comparisons across interviews, there were common questions dealing with: a) the individuals’ work histories and career transition experience; b) their experience of misfit and identity threat in work role transitions; c) their responses and identity work undertaken to overcome misfit and gain legitimacy. The respondents were also encouraged to develop their own themes through an open, conversational style of interviewing. Interviews lasted about 60-75 minutes each and were recorded and transcribed. In addition, other relevant information obtained via web searches, such as CVs, also provided valuable data.

**Data Analysis**

The analysis followed an abductive approach ([Shepherd & Sutcliffe, 2011](#_ENREF_62)), iterating between the data and literature in several stages. In the first phase, NVivo 11 was used to code the transcripts, focusing on the broad themes relating to the interviewees’ career transition experiences, their experience of misfit and incidents of identity threat, and their coping strategies. This first round of coding revealed marked differences between the role transition experience and identity dynamics of those who joined academia mid-career, and those veteran professionals who joined in their late-careers. The majority of the former expressed their desire to become academics whereas the latter did not appear to have such clear aspirations. Both groups reported initial experience of misfit and incidents of identity threat, but framed their experiences differently. The mid-career pracademics’ description of their experience was much more emotionally-ladden and they also appeared to make stronger efforts to adapt to academic role demands. By comparison, the late-career veteran professionals showed less discomfort and they frequently used ‘self-deprecation humour’ ([Janes & Olson, 2010](#_ENREF_38)) for tension relief. For example, one described himself as ‘a lurker’ and spoke light-heartedly about being called ‘professor-LITE’ by one of his academic colleagues’ (A17).

In the second stage, each case was coded manually to identify patterns of identity dynamics, and the individuals’ strategies for coping with misfit and identity threat. The analysis revealed two distinct identity work strategies: a) a ‘hybridization’ strategy based on identity integration and differentiation; and b) a ‘positive distinctiveness’ strategy for protecting their core practitioner selves and exploiting misfit as a ‘resource’. These were based on the interviewees’ identity narratives that revealed their different self-conceptions, and the reported incidents or activities that reflect or support the self-conceptions. For example, those who deployed a hybridization strategy showed ambivalent and changeful self-conceptions: they aspired to become ‘proper academics’ while, at times, refused to ‘write like an academic’. They sought to gain legitimacy as hybrids by combining the knowledge and work practices of the two communities. In contrast, those who pursued a positive distinctive strategy continued to see themselves as practitioners but crafted their academic roles in ways that fit their self-conceptions. They stressed the unique value of their practitioner experience and used it as a resource to gain acceptance and develop meaningful relationships with their academic peers. Although the two strategies are not mutually exclusive, the evidence suggests that the majority of the mid-career pracademics adopted the former whereas many of the veteran entrants pursued the latter.

Having identified the two broad identity work strategies, the author returned to the data, focusing on the ‘how’ and ‘what’ questions. How did the two strategies play out, both cognitively and behaviourally, in their work and interaction with others? How did they perceive, evaluate and reconcile the different knowledge and work practices between the practitioner and academic worlds? What effects might their cognitive and behavioural tactics have on their work practices and contexts? For the cognitive aspect, the analysis focused on the individuals’ meaning-making in securing a sense of positivity and legitimacy in their identity talks and around their particular situated knowledge/work practices. For the behavioural aspect, the analysis extracted any reported incidents or activities concerning identity validation and negotiation, and evidence on actions taken to mobilize resources and support for enhancing their personal and collective self-esteem.

In the final stage, through constant comparison and grounded theoretical reflection it emerged that each identity work strategy is associated a particular type of change agency. The ‘hybridization’ strategy enabled the pracademics to disrupt knowledge boundaries and alter established work practices: it facilitated ‘transformative’ change agency. The ‘positive distinctiveness’ strategy was used by the pracademics to demonstrate the value of misfit and alternative sources of legitimacy: it fostered ‘catalytic’ change agency by raising awareness about new possibilities.

**PRACADEMICS’ EXPERIENCE OF MISFIT, IDENTITY WORK STRATEGIES AND CREATIVE AGENCY**

**Misfit and Identity Threat: A Problematic Situation**

Many of the pracademics interviewed reported experiencing the discomfort of misfit arising from initial ‘work-identity integrity violation’ (Pratt et al 2006) because the work role demands did not appear to match their knowledge/skills and established professional selves. For example, one former journalist in Media Arts described her feeling of ‘humiliation’ and ‘panic’ when she first encountered the academic world and realized that ‘doing theoretical writing’ was part of her role:

 ‘...we were not able to perform as academics because, but we had no idea, we’d never done it, I had never written a theoretical essay. There was no way I could simply perform this new set of tricks...And I would sometimes ask incredibly naive questions of the seasoned theoreticians and they would look at me as though somehow, how, it was a question of “how could you be so stupid?

I remember walking into the bookshop and looking around just feeling a sense of complete panic… Totally lost. I felt undermined**’** (A7)**.**

The pracademics’ feeling of misfit was further intensified by the identity threat associated with status loss and devaluation of the experience/knowledge accumulated in their previous practitioner careers. In the interviews, many vividly described their initial frustration and disillusionment of being professionally devalued, despite having held prominent positions in their previous practitioner fields. For example, the aforementioned journalist said, ‘I was somebody with a reputation in the industry, my name was known, but you came into academia and there’s no transfer at all… there was a total lack of recognition’ (A7). A former senior management consultant was adamant that he had ‘gone to the bottom of the pile again’ (S1). Devaluation threatens individuals’ self-esteem and induces a sense of discrepancy between their desired and perceived professional identities (Roberts 2005).

A hierarchical view privileging theoretical/conceptual knowledge over experiential knowledge was also deeply felt by many as particularly disconcerting and posed an ongoing challenge to their credibility in academia. This sentiment was most apparent among the mid-career entrants who aspired to become ‘proper’ academics. One in Music felt that his practitioner-oriented work (e.g. producing CDs; writing in practitioner journals) was not seen as ‘high grade’ by his academic colleagues: ‘[they] would look down at what I was doing’ (A11). Another in social policy expressed her concern about what she described as ‘cultural snobbery’ in academia in that ‘being involved in pure reasoning is superior to trying to solve practical problems’ (S4). Over time, many of the pracademics came to realise that they were not seen as ‘real’ academics and some were acutely aware of their marginal positons. One said, ‘‘I just came to realize that there was a club that I could never be a member of’ (S1). The interview narratives suggest that the pracademics themselves questioned their ‘fit’ as members of the academic community as their professional competence and legitimacy were challenged by their academic peers: ‘I am not a career academic, I don’t know what the word is, I am not a pure academic in that way…I am not REFABLE[[1]](#endnote-1)’ (S3).

Previous research suggests that people undertake intense identity work when they are confronted with situations that arouse feelings of self-doubt and pose identity threat. They may respond by targeting the threatened identities and/or targeting the source of the threat (Petriglieri 2011). In work role transitions, individuals may deploy various identity work strategies internally to preserve their sense of coherent professional selves and externally to negotiate legitimacy and maintain self-esteem. The analysis reveals two distinct identity work strategies deployed by the pracademics, ‘identity hybridization’ and ‘positive distinctiveness’. Those who pursued a hybridization strategy embraced the paradoxical co-existence of their past practitioner and present academic selves. They both internalized and challenged the knowledge practices of the host academic community.It is an integration and differentiation strategy that involves redefining identity meanings and negotiating a new basis of legitimacy. Those who employed a positive distinctiveness strategy actively exploited their ‘misfit’ as a resource for self-affirmation and gaining legitimacy. It is an identity differentiation strategy aimed at protecting one’s distinctive identity and creating a positive social meaning for that identity.

As will be shown below, the pracademics’ identity work in constructing positive professional selves entails a great deal of creative agency, both cognitively and behaviourally. Cognitively, it involvesinterpretive agency in meaning-making for resolving identity tension and self-affirmation. It reflects the adaptive response of a ‘Meadean self’ in creating a unitary self-conception by synthesising divergent representations of expectations (Mead 1934). Behaviourally, it involves mobilization of resources and support for negotiating new practices and alternative sources of legitimacy. As Joas argues (1996), actors respond to problematic/disruptive situations by re-orienting themselves both in their perceptions and actions that denote creativity in human agency. These two aspects constitute what identity theorists refer to, respectively, as ‘social creativity’ and ‘social change’ strategies for developing positive social identities (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Jackson et al 1996). They are revealed in the pracademics’ everyday identity talk and situated activities, as well as in their ‘acts of reconstruction’ (Joas 1996) both at the individual and group levels. In what follows, each identity work strategy will be examined in turn.

**‘Hybridization’ Strategy: Redefinition and Co-Legitimacy**

Hybridization is an adaptive identity development through which individuals partially alter their identities while seeking to influence their work contexts in order to achieve a better fit between their self-conceptions and external standards or role expectations. Those pracademics who pursued this strategy actively learned academic modes of knowledge creation and writing in the beginning in order to validate their position as legitimate role entrants. Over time, these individuals appear to customize their identities to fit academic role demands. In the interviews, those who had been in academia for some time proclaimed themselves as ‘academics’ and others declared that they were *not* practitioners anymore. However, probing deeper into the interview narratives reveals a more ambivalent picture of simultaneous identification (integration) and dis-identification (differentiation). For example, one who had been in academia for over 10 years revealed that he was ‘perpetually being somewhere in between the two worlds’ (A9). Another felt that he had become ‘more entrenched in this [academic] world’ but stated that ‘it would be against my own interest to go native over here and lose connections with the practitioner world’ (S1). For the majority, identity change entails overlaying an academic identity onto the practitioner one in a ‘nested duality’ relationship ([Brewer, 1999](#_ENREF_6)).

These pracademics can be described as ‘integrated outsiders’ who strive to be ‘the same and different at the same time’ (Brewer 1999). Hybridity enables them to reduce the tension of misfit while achieving a sense of ‘optimal distinctiveness’ – a balance between fitting in and standing out - as a source of identity positivity (Kreiner et al 2006). It is a double-play strategy that liberates individuals from the limits of one particular identity, giving them the psychological freedom and cognitive resources for negotiating new identity meanings and basis of legitimacy.

**Social creativity: Redefining identity meanings and transgressing knowledge boundaries.** Underlying the pracademics’ hybrid identity work is their social creativity in overcoming the experience of misfit arising from the contrasting knowledge practices associated with their practitioner and academic selves. They sought to maintain self-coherence and work-identity integrity by redefining the meaning of ‘being an academic’ and reconstituting knowledge boundaries. Many recognized that becoming a ‘proper academic’ involved ‘doing research’ (A7) and ‘doing more [academic] writing’ (A4), and stated that was what they were doing. At the same time, they sought to renegotiate identity meanings and gain acceptance as ‘a different kind’ of academic. For many, being an academic did not necessarily entail becoming a ‘theoretician’ or adhering to academic ways of knowing. The following quote captures the personal legitimating account of a former filmmaker in redefining the meaning of being an academic: ‘I’m an academic, that’s what my identity is. I am, at the same time, a sort of slightly weird marginal academic because I know I’m not a kind of theoretician and that’s not my trade and my trade exists in this sort of practice research community within academia’ (A9). Another in Management said, ‘I’m now a proper academic and I can’t get away from that now, but partly what I’m doing I suppose i*s redefining what a proper academic is and making it possible*’ (emphasis added; S7).

These personal legitimating accounts were not only avenues for resolving identity tension but they also induced the pracademics to re-negotiate knowledge practices and boundaries. Seeing themselves as ‘a different kind of academic’ gave them a degree of psychological freedom to violate the rules and practices of academia. For example, many were critical of the academic language games and refused to use academic jargon in their own work. One stated in the interview that her ‘continued ignorance’ of academic ways of writing was ‘quite useful’ because it enabled her to write in a way that was accessible to practitioners (A1). This purposeful use of ignorance, what McGoey ([2012](#_ENREF_45)) refers to as ‘deliberate ignorance’, is a rebuke of the academic language style and an attempt to subvert the cooptive power of insider language. Others frequently used humour in the interview to ridicule what they described as ‘obscurantist’ and ‘impenetrable’ academic language: ‘It makes me laugh, you know… they talk like this [using technical terms], if they can’t talk like that a lot of the work loses its power’ (S11). Humour that is used to criticize aspects of the status quo constitutes a form of symbolic resistance and subversion ([Hiller, 1983](#_ENREF_32)). By denigrating and challenging the academic language style, the pracademics sought to assert the practitioner aspects of their professional selves and justify their less than full compliance with academic role behaviours.

Besides these micro subversive tactics, many of the pracademics also actively negotiated their hybrid professional selves in everyday work by engaging in imaginative recomposition of practitioner and academics modes of knowledge articulation. This was particularly notable among those in creative arts where performative or visual models of artistic knowledge articulation contrasted sharply with the conventional academic text-based knowledge. Some engaged in ‘code-mixing’ ([Auer, 2005](#_ENREF_1)) by developing ‘hybrid languages’ in their work in order to reconcile the differences. One in drama created what she referred to as a ‘meta-language’ at an academic-practitioner event by mixing ‘music, dance and text’ in order to engage with both groups (A2). Another brought together a group of actors, costume designers, musicians and academics to publish what she described as a ‘half practitioner and half academic’ book - one that was ‘both theoretical and practical’ and integrated visual images and analytical texts (A1). Code-mixing is a form of hybrid identity work through which individuals construct their hybridity by mixing the languages or communicative practices of the two social groups with which they identify (Auer 2005). Both the meta-language and the hybrid book are examples of creative knowledge combination arising from acts of hybrid identity work that transgresses knowledge boundaries and challenges orthodoxies. Hybridization enables individuals to move between different positions and ‘imaginatively construct new perspectives on their course of action’ ([Glăveanu, 2015:165](#_ENREF_30)). It creates a space for ‘acts of reconstruction’ and the emergence of novelty (Joas 1996).

**Social change: Negotiating co-legitimacy and promoting new practices.**Beyond the individual, isolated incidents of non-conforming and innovative practices in their day-to-day work, concerted actions were undertaken by some to negotiate the co-legitimacy of practitioner ways of knowing and practice work alongside academic ones. They did so in order to create a more positive work environment for their hybrid selves. There are two notable examples. The first is the creation and subsequent diffusion of audio-visual PhD programmes in Media Arts that legitimates non-textual modes of knowledge by integrating it with academic writing in the research process and output. The interviews and documentary evidence suggest that this was an outcome of the active campaigning over several years by a group of pracademics across several universities. Many found the academic knowledge hierarchies that privileged textual over non-textual modes of knowledge undermining and decided to challenge them. One stated in the interview that the campaigning group had been ‘working over the years to get a system of recognition of practice work comparable to that of published papers’ (A8). Another, a prominent leader of the group, believed that their success in institutionalizing audio-visual PhD programmes had ‘brought into question the rigid adherence to a particular sort of analytical knowledge’ among traditional academics (A9). This example is illustrative of the pracademics’ collective effort in influencing the definition of what counts as valuable knowledge in their attempt to gain co-legitimacy and enhance collective self-esteem.

The second example is the incremental legitimation of an atypical ‘practice-oriented’ career path at one of the universities looked at in this study. A small group of pracademics, who felt marginalized within the conventional career, provided the initial driving force behind this. It began with their interest-driven action to seek an alternative career track and job title that reflected their value and professional profile. In the interviews, several expressed their initial frustration of not having a career path or job title that accorded them with the same status enjoyed by those with a traditional academic profile. They spoke about how they liaised and pressed for a practice-oriented career pathway similar to that of ‘clinical practitioners’ in the medical world. One in Management revealed that he initiated the discussion early on with his Head of Department: ‘…you know, other people are on sort of normal academic career tracks and I didn’t quite fit that. And the next part of that was, you know , I said to XX: “…so I could be here for another ten years and it would be nice to have some kind of career path”, so to his credit he started to explore that and then started a process of persuading the University that they should set up a practice stream’ (S1). Another in Politics echoed a similar experience: ‘I’d been pressing the University, well it’s all very well being treated as a professor [in terms of pay] within the University but outside people don’t actually know I have that status, how about calling me professor…’ (S5). The appointment of several ‘professors of practice’ (PoP), initially treated as *ad hoc* special arrangements in these two departments, subsequently led to wider acceptance of the practice career track within the University.

The above two examples show how the pracademics construct their hybridity by negotiating for an expanded basis of legitimacy and esteem such that practitioner way of knowing and practice work attain the ‘same-value-ness’ as academic ones. Their hybrid identity work enables them to translate the quest for positive professional selves into change-related actions. These actions challenge the binary knowledge divide between academics and practitioners, and disrupt the politics of knowledge that privileged the former based on knowledge demarcation and hierarchy. In doing so, they are able to reduce identity threat and construct meaningful hybrid identities by mixing the knowledge resources across domain boundaries and by asserting control over the definition of legitimate knowledge. Their hybrid identity work is interwoven with ‘acts of reconstruction’ (Joas 1996) by transgressing knowledge boundaries and promoting new practices: they are ‘transformative’ change agents.

**Positive Distinctiveness Strategy: Identity Buffering and Advocacy**

Positive distinctiveness is an identity differentiation strategy that seeks to communicate and affirm the notion that difference or misfit is valuable ([Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002](#_ENREF_21)). Many of the veteran practitioners who joined academia in their late-careers pursued this strategy. Unlike the mid-career entrants, few aspired to become fully-fledged academics, in part, because people’s desires for further career development usually levelled off in their late-careers. Moreover, veteran workers often seek to preserve aspects of their work identities that reflect their past success (Beyer and Hannah 2002). The majority of these pracademics sought to establish themselves by using a combination of teaching and quasi-academic (managerial) roles, without subjecting themselves to the full demands of academic membership to include research. Although they also reported initial identity threat, they did not seek to restructure their ‘threatened’ identities to fit new role demands. Instead, they sought to protect their practitioner selves by clearly differentiating themselves from the academics. In the interviews, many pointed to the marked differences between themselves and the ‘pure academics’, and stressed the unique value of their practitioner experience and reputation. For example, one in Management boasted about his profile in the business world: ‘…when the FT [*Financial Times*] calls me up for comments my comments will be on the front page of FT’ (S8). Another in Politics spoke about an incident of an academic colleague playfully ‘grabbed’ his address book over lunch and held it up for bidding: ‘It went up to ten thousand pounds, everybody sort of betting and I mean that sounds ridiculous vanity but it is true, I do know a lot of people…’ (S5). Being ‘fought over’ by others was clearly a source of personal pride and self-esteem.

These veteran practitioners are ‘proud misfits’ (Follmer et al 2018) who assert their core practitioner selves in adapting to academic role demands and seek to exploit their self-distinctiveness as a resource for positive identity construction. Their identity work strategies involve social creativity in identity buffering and self-affirmation which, in turn provide them with the psychological and relational resources to engage in change-oriented actions through advocacy and relationship building.

**Social creativity: Identity buffering and self-affirmation.** These people creatively used their quasi-academic roles as identity buffers to protect and enhance their practitioner selves. They engaged in cognitive job crafting (Niessen et al., 2016) by emphasizing selective aspects of their academic work and drawing parallels with their past practitioner experiences so as to maintain a sense of self-continuity and self-distinctiveness. For example, a former TV producer, who took up the position of department head in Media Arts, saw this as an opportunity to define her role and redeploy the knowledge/skills that she had previously acquired. In the interview, she stressed the striking similarities between her current academic-manager and previous producer roles: ‘Being a producer is being a manager… I always felt when I came here, I know this set up, I’ve been through this.’ She continued to see herself as a producer who used coordination skills to mobilize the cooperative efforts of others. Similarly, a former filmmaker talked about how he actively used his ‘skills as a film producer’ in a wide array of quasi-academic activities (A18). By focussing attention on aspects of academic work that were most in tune with their self-conceptions and leveraging their ‘signature strengths’ ([Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013](#_ENREF_8)) to craft their academic roles in ways they found meaningful, the pracademics were able to maintain the salience of their practitioner selves and neutralize the identity tension arising from their misfit in other areas. Cognitive job crafting is an identity work tactic that helps individuals to maintain self-consistency and a positive self-image at work (Niessen et al 2016).

Those who had been in academia for some time also actively crafted the task and relational boundaries of their work so as to gain credibility and better embed themselves in the academic work environment. Particularly notable is their proactive stance in acting as knowledge brokers between their academic and practitioner colleagues. Some did this informally in their daily work by helping their academic colleagues build links with practitioners. The following two examples are illustrative:

‘…if I’m at a reception and there’s a journalist I know and a colleague of mine who I know is working on a policy paper which I know would be of interest to this journalist, I grab him, say look, must introduce you and I go and take them to my chum at the FT or whatever. So I’m doing this systematically now’ (S5).

 ‘I did offer up my experience to as many people who would take it as possible. So to let it be known that if they needed somebody [practitioners] to come into their class to give a guest lecture I’d be more than happy to help find them, you know, and if they needed to bounce some ideas off of somebody who’s worked in industry I’m an easy get…so to some degree I tried to make myself the link as well to the practitioner community’ (S8).

Others initiated more formal collaborative arrangements between their academic and practitioner colleagues. Typical examples include organizing joint workshops/conferences and promoting knowledge transfer partnerships to engage members of both communities. All these amount to what Dorado ([2005](#_ENREF_18)) describes as ‘convening’ - a coalition building strategy whereby actors mobilize their relational resources to foster a web of dependency relations in order to enhance their credibility and influence. The pracademics recognized the growing importance of the ‘knowledge transfer’ agenda in academia and saw this as an opportunity to engage in an activity that was perceived as valuable so as to create favourable impressions and elicit approval from their academic peers. One might argue that these pracademics used brokering as a ‘citizen behaviour’ to gain what Hollander ([1958](#_ENREF_33)) refers to as ‘idiosyncrasy credits’ - social credits or status accorded to peripheral group members as a result of perceived conformity and competence. By demonstrating their distinct contributions to selective aspects of academic work, they sought to reduce the tension of misfit and embed themselves in academia without having to comply with core academic role demands. One explicitly stated in the interview that his role in promoting knowledge exchange had ‘liberated’ him from the imperative of research: ‘I’m telling them [academics] stuff that contributes to their research…I’m not really one of them in the sense that you know, I don’t have to publish’ (S3). By shifting attention away from the source of misfit (i.e. research) to focus on an alternative activity (i.e. contribution to others’ research) that demonstrates good fit, the pracademics were able to buffer themselves against identity threat and free to behave in ways that defy expectations.

Identity buffering and self-affirmation by means of job crafting constituted a social creativity strategy that enabled the pracademics to develop meaningful attachment to academia as ‘misfits’ and attain better work relationships with those who posed identity threat. The enactment of a brokering role enhanced their credibility and fostered cooperation between their academic and practitioner colleagues. As such, the strategy pursued by the pracademics in their quest for identity positivity may have positive consequences for social integration.

**Social change: Advocacy and new forms of relating.**The socially integrative implication of the pracademics’ identity work is also revealed in the way they advocated the interests of their practitioner peers and created opportunities to integrate them as equal partners in their interaction with academics. In the interviews, many expressed concern about the low status of practitioners amongst academics and frequently acted as their ‘representatives’ to negotiate for resources and support. One, in her role as department head, mobilized a group of pracademics in founding a practice-based academic journal aiming at getting practitioners to ‘write about their work and theorize their practice’ (A16). Several prominent pracademics formalized their knowledge brokering roles by setting up practice- or policy-oriented research centres to engage practitioners and demonstrate the value of their contributions to academia. A former journalist, who set up a think-tank unit within his Department, declared that he wanted to create a ‘sympathetic space’ for practitioners (S3). Another in Management echoed a similar intent for the research Centre that he led: ‘This centre has to have two audiences, the academic community and the business community… I want to ensure that even the academic research we do would be useful to practitioners’ (S8). These purposively created organizational spaces open the doors of academia to practitioners and help to promote their status as legitimate partners and audiences of academic research. They are indicative of the disruptive potential of the pracademics’ identity work.

Identity theorists argue that people will protect the collective aspects of their self as much as they protect the individual aspects of the self ([Sherman & Cohen, 2006](#_ENREF_63)). What the above examples illustrate is that the pracademics actively deployed their practitioner identity through advocacy to enhance the attraction and elevate the collective self-esteem of their social identity group from which they derive theirs. As Creed and Scully ([2000](#_ENREF_16)) argue, advocacy activities are both expressive and instrumental. They involve claiming and signalling the distinctiveness one’s social identity while attempting to foster a positive value of that identity group by influencing others’ perceptions and effecting change in one’s favour. Several interviewees reported the positive influence of their actions on the culture and attitudes of academics towards practitioners or practice-oriented disciplines:

‘I think that having faculty with some real world experience before they became academics has an impact on, if you like, the culture of the place, which sort of influence the people who have never had a job in the real world.’ (S6)

‘…journalism isn’t taken that seriously as a subject, me being here has been one of the things that changed it, when I first came here and wanted to have a course with the word ‘journalism’ in they rejected on the basis that journalism wasn’t a proper subject to study…We managed to get it in there, now there would be no question about it you know, I’ve now got people in every other department saying, perhaps we ought to do diplomacy and journalism, perhaps we ought to do politics and journalism …’ (S3)

By using their job and relational resources to educate others about the value and contributions of their social identity group, these pracademics were able to transform identity challenges into opportunities for positive identity development. In doing so, they also facilitated cooperation and permeated the knowledge boundaries between the academic and practitioner communities. Brokerage creates opportunities for relationship building between previous unconnected or unsure others, and advocacy enhances the status of practitioners as an ‘outsider’ minority group within academia. They are ‘catalytic agents’ (Meyerson and Tompkins 2007) whose ‘acts of reconstruction’ (Joas 1996) have the potential to alter the relational dynamics among others and energize them to initiate the desired changes.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This study has demonstrated creative agency in identity work as individuals seek to overcome misfit in work role transitions. It shows how identity threat arising from misfit drives them to undertake identity work in their quest for positive professional selves which, in turn, stimulates creativity in meaning-making and change-oriented actions that alter aspects of their work environment. The two identity work strategies, hybridization and positive distinctiveness, illustrate the different pathways to identity positivity that undergird creative agency. The hybridization strategy involves reconstitution of identity resources from the two associated work domains and actions taken to influence the evaluative criteria for gaining cross-domain legitimacy. The pracademics adopting this strategy can be called ‘transformative’ change agents who redefine identity meanings, disrupt knowledge boundaries and initiate new work practices. The positive distinctiveness strategy entails exploiting misfit as a resource for self-affirmation and creating opportunities for demonstrating alternative sources of legitimacy. It has the potential to foster the social integration of misfits and enhance the quality of their relationships with others. The pracademics who pursued this strategy can be described as ‘catalytic’ agents in that they facilitate new connections and raise awareness of new possibilities.

While both strategies result in displays of creative agency, their disruptive potential appears to differ. The hybridization strategy was more disruptive of the existing social order. This is evident in the pracademics’ subversive tactics in everyday work as well as in their concerted efforts contesting the established knowledge practices, and legitimizing new knowledge and career practices. These people, mostly mid-career entrants, appeared to experience the intense discomfort of misfit and identity threat. Their actions were driven by the desire to gain acceptance as bona-fide members of the academic community while retaining a degree of self-consistency. By contrast, the positive distinctiveness strategy, did not directly challenge the established social order. Instead, those who deployed this strategy remained as ‘proud misfits’ and used their misfit as a resource for gaining idiosyncrasy credits so as to achieve identity positivity. They raised awareness of new possibilities brought by practice people and created spaces for relationship building between their academic and practitioner colleagues. Their actions were less contestational but may bring about incremental cultural change. One might argue that the level of discomfort from misfit and intensity of identity threat affect the goal-directedness of their identity work and its disruptive potential. This resonates with Giddens’([1984](#_ENREF_29)) (1984: 54) argument that control of human anxiety is the ‘most generalized motivational origin of human action’.

This study contributes to the identity literature and sheds new light on the creative potential of misfits or marginal actors. First, it highlights the creativity of human agency in identity construction and shows that micro-level identity work triggered by problematic situations can have wider positive organizational outcomes beyond individual conflict resolution and identity growth featured in the literature on positive identities ([L.M Roberts & Dutton, 2009](#_ENREF_57)). It advances our understanding of identity work as an agentic activity consisting of an inward cognitive dimension manifested in individuals’ social creativity in meaning-making, and an outward dimension of change-oriented action that influences the social context. These two aspects are reciprocally related. For example, identity redefinition and cognitive job crafting endowed the pracademics’ with expanded cognitive resources and motivational energies for engaging in change-related efforts. Validation of identity claims through acts of legitimation, in turn, reinforces their sense of identity positivity that further energizes creative actions. The creative knowledge combinatorial activities arising from the pracademics’ hybrid identity work is a case in point. Although previous studies have shown the instrumental role of identity work in disrupting or facilitating organizational change ([Lok, 2010](#_ENREF_44); [Pettit & Crossan, 2020](#_ENREF_51)), this study goes one step further: it stresses the creative generativity of identity work and explicates the interactive dynamics between inward self-dynamics and outward change-oriented actions.

Second, the study casts new light on the relationship between identity and creativity. Extant research has tended to treat creativity as a cognitive outcome of dual identity processes such as synergistic identity integration or broadening of self-definition that promotes cognitive flexibility and creative thinking ([Cheng et al., 2008](#_ENREF_13); [Gocłowska & Crisp, 2014](#_ENREF_31)). This study offers a different and more nuanced interpretation. It argues that creativity is inherent in identity processes for self-expression and the concomitant acts of reconstruction in response to problematic situations. As such, identity work represents a ‘creativity project’ in meaning-making through self-transgression and in generating new possibilities through reconciling ‘misfit’ between self and others. This view is in line with Mead’s (1934) insight that human creativity arises from the adaptive response of individuals to problematic situations. It also echoes Joas’ ([1996 :129](#_ENREF_39)) conception of creativity as an element based on the need of individuals continually to express, realize and enact themselves, and is ‘something which is performed within situations which call for solution’.

Third, the identity perspective adopted in this paper also deepens our understanding of why misfits or marginal actors are predisposed to be change-oriented agents. The classical literature in Sociology (Coser 1962; Simmel 1950) and more recent institutional research, notably the ‘paradox of embedded agency’ thesis (Meyerson and Scully 1995; Reay et al 2006), attribute the change-orientation of these people to their peripheral structural position and cognitive disembeddedness. However, this strand of work conflates structural opportunities with actors’ motivations and desires. By emphasizing actors’ identities, desires and expectations that underlie their change-oriented agency, this study highlights the affective-motivational aspect of agency overlooked in the literature ([Weik, 2012](#_ENREF_70)). It also accords individuals a higher degree of ‘self’ autonomy and inherent creativity than the ‘non-conforming minority’ (Coser 1962) or ‘cognitively disembedded actors’ (Meyerson and Scully 1995; Reay et al 2006) who manage to ‘escape’ the paradox of embedded agency.

Relatedly, the study also reveals a change agent who is more subtle, pragmatic, intended or unintended and who differs from the more visible and purposeful one such as the institutional entrepreneurs commonly portrayed in the institutionalist account of change agency. Like marginal people or tempered radicals, organizational misfits generally lack the resources and legitimacy to mobilize support for undertaking purposeful and projective change actions. The type of change-oriented activities initiated by the pracademics were predominately identity-driven moves situated in everyday work with intended or unintended subversive consequences (e.g. deliberate ignorance and code-mixing), or semi-strategic small wins with cumulative disruptive potential (e.g. creation of new organizational spaces). Although the effectiveness of their micro-acts of agency is hard to gauge, the ‘small win’ approach (Weick 1984) may well cause some real bottom-up disruptions to the established system. In this way, the identity-focused perspective developed in this paper contributes to an emerging literature on changes in micro-practices driven by ‘pragmatic’ forms of agency, as distinct from the more ‘purposeful’ and ‘projective’ ones (Emirbayer & Mische1998; Reay et al 2006).

A caveat about viewing misfits as creative agents of change is that their role in changing the established social order is by no means determinate. Change, by nature, is always ‘work in progress’ and not an end product ([Farjoun, Ansell, & Boin, 2015](#_ENREF_25)). Mead (1934), amongst other pragmatists, regards individuals as paradoxical and having multiple and contradictory selves - capable of both challenging and following established rules and practices (Emirbayer & Mische 1998). For example, the hybridization strategy adopted by misfits denotes an ambivalent orientation of striving to be simultaneously ‘the same and different’ (Brewer 1991). It may undermine as well as preserve aspects of the social order. The positive distinctiveness strategy of seeking value from being different may, paradoxically, reinforce ‘the main stream’ as the dominant part of an established system from which misfits differentiate themselves.[[2]](#endnote-2) The pracademics’ attempt to gain ‘idiosyncrasy credits’ (Hollander 1958) by engaging in conformist ‘citizen behaviour’ is a good illustration. It is quite possible that, under certain conditions, creative actions may have a conservative impact on organizations ([Rothmann & Koch, 2014](#_ENREF_59)). This is an aspect worthy of future investigation.

Although this study has focused on a group of pracademics with atypical careers, the insights gained have wider relevance. With the growing fluidity of contemporary careers and the increased demand for employee diversity, the ‘misfit’ problems faced by pracademics are likely to be experienced by a growing number of people whose careers go beyond coherent fields of activity. Employees from minority identity groups represent another example of misfits who have to cope with the challenges of identity threat and devaluation ([Cha & Roberts, 2019](#_ENREF_11)). Research on the identity work tactics of these people highlights the proactive and positive ways in which they leverage their identities to achieve work-related goals and challenge established assumptions. It echoes the findings of this study but stops short of explicitly linking identity work to creative agency. This study suggests one should pay greater attention to the identity dynamics of misfits or marginal people in order to achieve a fuller understanding of why these people can be valuable assets for organizations.

The study has several limitations. It is based on interviews with a selected sample of individuals who had made successful career transitions and thus it may have exaggerated the positivity of their identity work and their role as creative agents of change. The evidence on social creativity and change-oriented actions was drawn primarily from the interviewees’ narratives and reported experience/incidents, albeit with some corroboration from documentary sources. It lacks the detailed concreteness that a critical incident approach can provide. Furthermore, the study was conducted in the context of academia where individuals enjoy high work autonomy and have access to resources for positive identity construction. Other work environments may be less favourable and inhibit the creative generativity of identity work.

In conclusion, organizational misfits can be profoundly disruptive and creative owing to their proactive stance in the pursuit of identity positivity through identity work. While strategies for achieving positive professional selves are deeply personal, they may have wider organizational and structural consequences. The study advances our understanding of identity work as an agentic and inherently creative human endeavour, and enhances the sociological/structural interpretation of the creative agency of marginal people.

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**Table 1 Interviewee profile**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Case code/discipline | Academic position (at time of study) | Previous practitioner position | Time in academia | Time in practice | Career stage at time of entry to academia |
| ***Creative Arts*** |  |  |  |  |  |
| **A1** Drama | Senior Lecturer | Arts Administrator | 11-15 yrs | NK | Mid |
| **A2** Drama | Senior Lecturer | Actor | 6-10 | 20+ | Mid |
| **A3** Drama | Professor | Theatre/art development | 11-15 | NK | Mid |
| **A4** Drama | Fellow | Performer | 6-10 | 6-10 | Early/Mid |
| **A5** Media | Lecturer | Screen Writer/TV director | 6-10 | 11-15 | Mid |
| **A6** Media | Professor | TV producer | 16-20 | NK | Mid |
| **A7** Media | Senior Lecturer | Journalist | 16-20 | 20+ | Mid |
| **A8** Media | Reader | Film-maker | 6-10 | 6-10 | Early/Mid |
| **A9** Media | Senior Lecturer | Film-maker | 11-15 | 20+ | Mid |
| **A10** Media | Reader | Journalist | 11-15 | NK | Mid |
| **A11** Music | Reader | Musician | 16-20 | NK | Mid |
| **A12** Music | Professor | Musician/composer | 16-20 | 6-10 | Mid |
| **A13** Music | Professor | Musician | 6-10 | 11-15 | Mid |
| **A14** Design | Reader | Architect | 6-10 | NK | Mid |
| **A15** Design | Professor | Architect | 11-15 | 20+ | Mid |
| **A16** Media | Senior Lecturer | TV producer | 11-15 | 30+ | Late |
| **A17** Media | Professor | TV produce | <5 | 30+ | Late |
| **A18** Media | Senior Lecturer | Film-maker | 11-15 | 30+ | Late |
| **A19** Media | Senior Lecturer | Film-maker | <5 | 30+ | Late |
| **A20** Design | Professor | Designer | 11-15 | 20+ | Mid/Late |
| **A21** Design | Professor | Designer | 11-15  | 16-20 | Mid |
| **A22** Drama | Fellow | Artistic director/performer | <5 | NK | Mid |
| ***Social Science***  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **S1** Management | Professor | Accounting/managementconsultant | 6-10 | 20+ | Mid |
| **S2** Social Polic**y** | Professor | Government economist | 20+ | 13 | Mid |
| **S3** Politics/Media | Professor | Journalist | 6-10 | 20+ | Mid/Late |
| **S4** Social Policy | Professor | Social worker | 20+ | 6-10 |  Early/Mid |
| **S5** Politics | Professor | Political advisor | 16-20 | 20+ | Late |
| **S6** Management | Professor | Marketing Manager | 30+ | 6-10 | Early/Mid |
| **S7** Management | Professor | Management consultant | 16-20 | 6-10 | Early/Mid |
| **S8** Management | Professor | Banker/Financier | 6-10 | 20+ | Mid/Late |
| **S9** Management | Professor | Public sector policy analyst | 20+ | 11-15 | Mid |
| **S10** Politics | Lecturer | Political advisor | <5 | 11-15 | Mid |
| **S11** Management | Senior Fellow | Public sector policy analyst | 11-15 | 6-10 | Mid |
| **S12** Management | Professor | Government economist | 30+ | 6-10 | Mid |

NK=not known

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**NOTES**

1. This means not eligible for inclusion in the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) – a national research assessment of universities. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I am grateful to one of the reviewers for drawing my attention to this. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)