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Exploring the use of virtues to facilitate identity construction among management students

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the challenges and opportunities facing educators who wish to facilitate management students’ identity construction as a means to foster their students’ emergent professional identities and post-graduate career attainments. We look to medical and law schools’ recent advancements, alongside their traditional dissemination of knowledge and technical skills, in better aligning students’ developing identities and related behaviors with respective professional ideals. Drawing on insights from these professional schools, we examine whether the concept of “professional virtues” that’s proven valuable in these contexts might also be used to facilitate students’ professional identity construction within management education.

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1. Introduction

What does it mean to be a professional manager? Does it include more than having mastered a canonical body of specialized knowledge or the ability to perform tasks constitutive of the profession (e.g., Abbott, 1968; Blackler, 1995)? Many scholars, social commentators and business critics argue that the current conceptualization of the managerial profession, and how we educate our students for this profession, fails to account for many of the ambiguous, fluid and situational challenges inherent in contemporary business and organizational life (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Currie, Knights, & Starkey, 2010; Parker, 2018). Some even suggest that a divide between universities’ theoretical emphases and the demands of the “real world” have exacerbated unethical behaviors among professional managers (Currie et al., 2010; Hühn, 2014; Painter-Morland, Sabet, Molthan-Hill, Goworek, & de Leeuw, 2016, etc.). Of additional concern, the ever-increasing rate of change and heterogeneity among the skills and knowledge required of the management profession only seem to be accelerating this divide (Barley, Bechky, & Miliken, 2017; Reed, 2018). Surely, there must be something beyond basic knowledge and skills that educators can disseminate to channel and constrain prosocial professional behaviors given these overarching challenges. In this paper, we critically examine whether such constraints for aspiring and practicing managers might derive from professional identities anchored in a set of managerial virtues and if, and how, the inculcation of these identities might be introduced and embedded via university education.

To date scholars and management educators have made significant empirical and theoretical connections between management learning, professional development and identity construction. Reed (2018), for example, illustrates managerial identity construction as a discursive process through which individuals thrive as managers by mitigating tensions and underlying contradictions between their identity, the managerial profession and their surrounding milieu. Recent empirical findings from several works detail the positive outcomes (e.g., increased agency, legitimacy and leadership effectiveness) for individuals that successfully align their identity with the real-world demands of professional management (e.g., Brown & Coupland, 2015; Brown & Toyok, 2013; Xing & Liu, 2016). Taken together then, a growing literature supports that successful professional management is largely “a process of evolving [one’s] particular identity” (Warhurst, 2011, p. 281). Despite a wealth of support for higher education’s ineluctable centrality in shaping students’ identities (e.g., Bell, Taylor, & Thorpe, 2002; Gold, Thorpe. Woodall, & Sadler-Smith, 2007; Reed, 2018; Warhurst, 2011), the majority of research on
the formation of “managerial identities” focuses on postgraduate professionals with little attention to, or guidance for, identity development during university studies (Hay, 2014).

Therefore, this paper examines literatures at the nexus of identity and professional development to apply insights toward the facilitation of managerial identities among university students. We also leverage these insights to explore high-level pedagogic and curricular changes that might enable students to construct managerial identities via a set of specific professional virtues. Before doing so, however, we first provide a synopsis of the broad literatures concerning identity and identity construction among aspiring professionals. Next, we refine these literatures to explore the unique identity-based challenges faced by management students. We then introduce and further develop the concept of “professional virtues” (i.e., trait-like characteristics that are contextually positive, consistent and manifest through action in one’s work role) that has made inroads into legal and medical pedagogies. We then draw upon these virtues-based pedagogies and other social sciences to develop insights relevant to management educators wishing to facilitate students’ identity construction. Lastly, we explore potential theoretical and practical contributions of extending this study’s critical consideration of professional virtues within management education.

2. Social identity theory and professional development

Although we primarily apply insights from social identity theory to consider the efficacy of professional virtues within management education we agree with Stets and Burke (2000, p. 224) that differences between identity theory and social identity theory are “…more differences in emphasis than in kind, and that linking the two theories can establish a more fully integrated view of the self.” This paper is therefore informed by views that are relatively uncontested by both theories, namely that every individual’s unique personal identity is a heterogeneous composite of the values, behaviors and goals of certain social groups and/or roles, and an explicit non-affinity with values, behaviors and goals perceived in other social groups and/or roles (Tajfel & Turner, 1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). These identities are reflexive and develop and persist both mechanically (i.e., unintentionally) and organically (i.e., purposefully through “identity construction”) as individuals attempt to maintain a coherent and consistent identity in an ever-changing world (MacLure, 1993) and among multiple and simultaneous sources of structured cultural meanings (Zolfaghari, Möllering, Clark, & Dietz, 2016). Major personal (e.g., a debilitating injury [Sparkes & Smith, 2002] or college graduation [Whitbourne & Tesch, 1985]) or environmental (e.g., the dissolution of an important referent group [Ethier & Deaux, 1994] or the ascension of a negative social stereotype [Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty, & Hayes, 1992]) changes can catalyze increased dynamism, and both mechanical and organic change, even in long-held identities. At some level then, identities are always “provisional” and subject to change especially when individuals aspire to improve their current or future self (Ibarra, 1999).

In the broader management literature, work-related identities have been studied both as individuals relate to specific organizations (e.g., “Amazon employees”) and to specific professions (e.g., “professional managers”) (e.g., Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Pratt, 2000; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). We are interested primarily in the latter concept of professional identity (i.e., the ability to self-categorize with a desired professional group) because many management students (both undergraduate and graduate as discussed below) lack past or present professional experiences directly relevant to their postgraduate careers. Currently then, it is primarily through postgraduate organizational experiences that aspirants receive feedback from relevant others to “form, repair, maintain, strengthen or revise” (Svenningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165) their evolving sense of a professional self while simultaneously attempting to align their behaviors with an organization’s unique norms (Watson, 2008; 2009). It seems an oversight then to ignore management students’ professional identity development given its importance for maintaining cognitive consonance (Weick, 1995) and for its pragmatic (via the furtherance of self-interests (either through acquisition of tangible or intangible benefits)), moral (via extraordinarily-positive normative evaluations) and/or cognitive (via successful devising, framing, and enactment of routines to accomplish both individual and collective goals) benefits (Brown & Toyoki, 2013).

In short, the development and maintenance of professional identities that are both coherent and enabling (Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008) are important for both aspiring professionals and practitioners regardless of their organizational setting. As identities (professional and other) retain a degree of dynamism throughout life, individuals consciously and unconsciously engage in mechanical and organic identity work to maintain identities in the face of changes to their social landscape or life circumstances. These efforts necessarily heighten during life transitions where referent groups previously used to define oneself are challenged by changes to their availability (e.g., moving away from

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Fig. 1. Conceptual model of virtues-based pedagogic challenges.
childhood friends) or newfound contestation regarding their efficacy for one’s future goals (Svevinsson & Alvesson, 2003). As aspirants in the process of becoming (Ibarra, 1999; Ybema et al., 2009), management students are traversing a critical phase of identity development and constructing new self-understandings based on engagements with different groups of peers, teachers, mentors and practitioners and the roles they observe among these actors. Consequently, we now turn our attention to what we consider to be the biggest challenges for identity construction among managerial aspirants.

3. Challenges to identity construction among management students

On a positive note, the decision to pursue management education indicates a willingness, among most students at least, to believe in a refined future self and to engage in the construction of an identity that facilitates the construction of this new self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Furthermore, because college represents a transitional stage in which individuals shed, challenge or diminish elements of their past identities (e.g., childhood peer group, family, etc.) management educators have an audience primed to embrace work aimed at their future identities (Ibarra, 1999; Ybema et al., 2009). Management educators, therefore, already occupy a privileged position to both disseminate canonical knowledge and skills and to influence processes of professional identity construction. There are, however, both external (i.e., societal and global) and internal (i.e., unique to business schools) challenges to the institutionalization of professional identity construction among business schools.

In regards to external challenges, students come into business schools already inundated with a troubling assortment of incorrect and often antagonistic views regarding “successful” managers (Clarke, Brown, & Hailey, 2009; Jackson, 2001; Kjærgaard, Morsing, & Ravasi, 2011). These views are influenced by pernicious cultural and/or global biases that extend to individuals’ traits (e.g., gender (Abraham, 2017; Davies & Thomas, 2002; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002; Schein, 2001; Schein & Mueller, 1992), race (Carton & Rosette, 2011; Zapata, Carton, & Liu, 2016), etc.) and incorrect, and often-unobtainable, perceptions about behaviors that confer managerial success (Umoh, 2017). While all industries confront their own unique stereotypes, this corpus of literature supports that stereotypes about managerial traits and behaviors cut across industry contexts and invariably affect both students’ and practitioners’ beliefs.

In addition to these widespread misconceptions, today’s management students are entering an increasingly heterogeneous and dynamic professional landscape (Reed, 2018) that educators cannot reasonably hope to comprehensively understand, capture and convey in a semester-long curriculum. For example, Barley et al. (2017) note how managing in larger organizations (traditionally the career path for management graduates and the context for the overwhelming majority of academic inquiry) will only further diminish as managers grapple with increasing contingent work, outsourcing, artificial intelligence and automation. Somehow, then, management students must develop and enact identities that conform with this heterogeneous, dynamic and perhaps even not-yet-existent practitioner beliefs and societal expectations about managerial roles (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004).

There are also nuances of business schools themselves, and their prevailing treatment of the concept of management, that present challenges for management students’ professional identity construction. First, while accounting and finance programs commonly expose students to institutionalized aspects of their profession (e.g., compliance with the SEC, IASB/IFRS, and GAAP principles) we, and others (e.g., Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Dunne & Martin, 2006), have observed that many management majors often have little more than cursory interactions with practicing management professionals. In addition, because of the dearth of institutionalized certification for entry into the management profession (as opposed to the accounting profession’s Certified Public Accountant (CPA) and the finance profession’s Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) certifications) we posit that management students generally encounter more heterogeneous courses that lack many of the homogeneous professional identity refers institutionalized for other business majors.

These external and internal challenges raise the question as to whether or not management can even be considered a “profession” in the sense that it allows direct comparison with other “more-professional” business disciplines or other professional schools. After all, given the historic understanding of “professions” as unique social institutions that “create a mutually reinforcing social shelter within which a formal body of knowledge and skill can develop, be nourished, practiced, refined and expanded” (Freidson, 2001, p. 200) the aforementioned heterogeneity and dynamism that define contemporary management and management education might preclude the identification of an esoteric set of knowledge and skills that confer professional status (Abbott, 1968). We contend, however, that this definition is still largely rooted within the traditions of 1960s and 1970s industrial society, in which professions’ “asymmetries of experience” (Abbott, 1968, p. 5) still conferred sustainable competitive advantages. Today and into the foreseeable future, predicted (e.g., the demise of manufacturing, the rise of contingent work, robotics and automation (Barley et al., 2017)) and unforeseen changes (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic) are rendering the skills and knowledge that once “belonged” to disparate professions increasingly transmissible and transitory. Agreeing with Freidson and other scholars from an array of disciplines (e.g., Cruess, Johnston, & Cruess, 2004; Madsen, Hasle, & Limborg, 2019; Plesner & Raviola, 2016; Witschge & Nygren, 2009), we attest that in many contemporary contexts “the functional body of a specialized knowledge and skill is less central to the professional ideology [and identification] than the attachment to a transcendent value that gives meaning and justifies its independence” (p. 220). It is these “transcendental values”, Freidson suggests, that “add moral substance to the technical content of [professions]” (p. 220). In the following section, we further unpack these “transcendental values” using the long-established concept of virtues as an under-utilized target for professional students’ identity construction. Following this we examine two “extreme” (Eisenhardt, 1989) contexts (i.e., medical and law schools) where despite the continued “life and death” implications of professionals mastering specialized knowledge and skills, pedagogies centered on virtues-based identity construction have begun to surmount these schools with promising early results.

4. Virtues and professional education

Attributed to Aristotelian origins (circa 3rd century BCE), the concept of virtues has recently become a subject of renewed interest in positive psychology, which focuses on generalized “flourishing” (i.e., “liv [ing] within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth and resilience” (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005, p. 678) as a noticeable departure from psychology’s past emphasis on dysfunction and its alleviation (Faller, 2001; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Positive psychologists define “virtue” as: “a disposition to act, desire and feel that involves the exercise of judgment and leads to recognizable human excellence or instance of human flourishing” (Yearly, 1990). Research into virtues that promote flourishing has
identified, and empirically validated the efficacy for promoting well-individual well-being (Jankowski et al., 2020), six virtues associated with optimal functioning (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Peterson & Park, 2011; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Despite its popularity in other social sciences, and its recent emergence within business ethics, the virtues concept has yet to gain a substantial foothold in more general discussions within the management literature. Therefore, for the purposes of curricular and pedagogic application towards management students’ identity construction, we offer a definition of professional virtues as: “trait-like characteristics that are contextually positive, consistent, and manifest through action in one’s professional role.” The distinction as trait-like is especially important in that it denotes that virtues are both learnable (via identification with, and internalization of, salient characteristics) and can be obtained through behaviors aligned with a targeted social group or role (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007). That is, unlike traits, which are inheritable and unchangeable (e.g., height, eye color, etc.), virtues are malleable and attainable via proper developmental pathways of: a) enacting virtuous behaviors in a desired domain, b) obtaining timely and critical feedback on the efficacy of these behaviors from “experts” within the domain, and c) refining behaviors based upon this feedback (Ericsson, 2004; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993).

Context in our definition refers to the fact that different virtues are germane to different social categories and different professions. For instance, in some professions it is desirable to be “caring” as a primary virtue (e.g., nursing and childcare) while other professions might place a higher value on “combativeteness” (e.g., prosecutorial law and MMA fighting). Contextually positive actions in a professional category are actions practitioners uniformly identify as “good” or “appropriate”, and essential to their professional identity. Alternatively, contextually negative actions or “vices” are actions that practitioners would uniformly identify as “bad” or “inappropriate” and antithetic to their identification with a profession. While some virtues and vices might seem universal (e.g., the taking of a life might seem to be a universal vice and honesty might seem to be a universal virtue) there are really no absolutes when the entirety of professions is considered. Furthermore, the weighting of the importance of different virtues will inevitably vary both between and within professions given the temporal and spatial boundedness of the constructs (Peterson & Park, 2011). That is, any profession’s virtues both change over time and might be different if we looked at that profession in different parts of the world.

In addition to being contextually positive, to ascribe a virtue to the self or others also requires consistency of action. For example, people generally do not ascribe the virtue “honesty” to people who only tell the truth on occasion or to social groups whose members are known to manipulate the truth to further self-interests. Honesty as a virtue is something ascribed to individuals or groups only when violations are heavily scrutinized and excused in only the most extreme circumstances. In addition, as noted by Dyck and Kleysey (2001, p. 567), “for virtue theory to be useful to understand management, and for it to be most helpful to develop students’ [competencies], there should be consistency [regarding recognition and interpretation] of the measures of a virtue’s enactment.” Specifically, these authors contend that there needs to be a high degree of agreement among group members and stakeholders regarding members’ behaviors and their compliance with virtues-based standards. Thus, when assessing consistency, we refer to both the actions of the individual in question and the ability of relevant observers to assign behaviors to a professional ideal.

Finally, to ascribe a virtue to self or others requires that one’s contextually positive and consistent actions have consequences in the real world. This means simply that virtues are ascribed to people based on how their actions affect others. For example, it is not virtuous—although it may be good advice—to be honest to oneself. Virtues are only ascribed to social groups and their members when they publicly behave in ways that are observable by, and influence, others within and beyond their boundaries. Duchon and Drake (2009) distinguish between organizations that develop ethics programs, noting that only those whose programs actually align employees’ behaviors with professional norms are actually perpetuating virtues. As management educators, we find this concept especially intriguing because it necessitates objective and observable changes in both behaviors and prosocial outcomes among students that embrace professional virtues.

To critically explore the possibility of the virtues concept as an aid to meaningful prosocial identity construction among management students we proceed to examine two professional schools where, given the high emphases placed on practitioners’ shared knowledge and skills, we’d originally expected to find little in the way of virtues-based identity construction. Much to our surprise then, conversations around identity construction and virtues are not only longstanding but are active and vibrant within these professional schools and their respective literatures. Thus, we now turn our attention to the professional schools of law and medicine to examine their conversations regarding virtues-based identity construction in an effort to see if there are insights to be gleaned for management educators.

Early discussions regarding identity construction in legal education occurred as individuals confronted perceived incongruities between gender-based and profession-based identities that accompanied the shift towards coeducation in leading law schools (Jacobs, 1971). More recently, legal scholars have expressed concerns that their students’ professional identities overemphasize doctrine and abstract analysis (Alexander, 2010) at the expense of real-world skills (Rhode, 2015). Rhee (2011, p. 310) suggests that “…legal education and practice are more disconnected than they should be [and are failing] to produce more market-ready lawyers who … add value in a complex and challenging practice environment.” Sommerlad (2007) highlights an additional contemporary challenge to law students’ identity construction, noting that an increasingly heterogeneous organizational landscape, similar to that in management mentioned above by Reed (2018), complicates their students’ identity processes.

To reconcile this challenge several legal scholars have attempted to explicate, and provide instruction centered on, the professional virtues emblematic of successful lawyers (e.g., Blomquist, 2005; Feldman, 1995). Their intent is to help students construct an identity grounded in these professional virtues (e.g., courage to challenge flawed legal precedent, creativity in crafting legal arguments, actively pursuing justice, etc. (Blomquist, 2005)) as part of their formalized education. Floyd and Kerew (2016, p. 768), for example, discuss pedagogic interventions that “not only teach students how to think like lawyers and how to perform the skills of a lawyer, but also to develop the professional identity they will need to draw upon as lawyers.” Such interventions, which have shown promising early results at several leading law schools, are intended to “cultivate virtues appropriate to the practice of law and to develop habits of action that will support future work as lawyers [because …] good lawyers are [those that] act effectively in the moment because they have developed virtues and habits of effective and ethical practice.”

In some ways medical education has always promoted professional virtues via the widespread adherence to the Hippocratic Oath (Kao & Parri, 2004). However, Brody and Doukas (2014, p. 984) caution that “despite considerable advances in the incorporation of professionalism into the formal curriculum, medical students and residents [still confront] a mechanical, unreflective version of the topic that fails to convey deeper ethical and humanistic
aspirations.” The authors recommend that identity construction for medical students go beyond “rules-based ethics” where students learn what not to do (e.g., avoiding harm or violations of confidentiality as prescribed by the Hippocratic Oath (Markel, 2004)). Instead, the authors promote “virtues-based ethics,” which are, according to Pellegrino (1993), a profession-specific code of conduct that sets forth behaviors that conform to the highest aspirations of its practitioners. In a later publication, Pellegrino (2002, p. 383) posits that medical school educators need to be more actively involved with modeling professional virtues as they manifest within the highest standards of contemporary medical practice:

“Once a medical student or resident has chosen a field for concentration or specialization, consciously or not she shapes her self-image as a physician. She begins, in fact, to practice the virtues (or vices) of that model. Character formation cannot be evaded by medical educators. Students enter medical school with their characters partly formed. Yet, they are still malleable as they assume roles and models on the way to their formation as physicians” (our emphasis added).

As with law schools, the inclusion of professional virtues in medical education (e.g., humanity when diagnosing and treating patients, temperance in regards to invasive intervention, etc. (Seoane, Tompkins, De Conciliis, & Boysen, 2016)) has shown promising early results in catalyzing identity construction among students and generating real-world prosocial outcomes for their stakeholders. For example, Seoane and colleagues’ (2016) National Institutes of Health study demonstrates that a simple in-class intervention (15 hours of content regarding the application of medical virtues in a clinical context) diminished the loss of empathy and “burnout” that accompany students’ journeys through medical school. Another recent study bolstered these results by demonstrating that a virtues-based pedagogic approach (through a mixture of in-class and real-world interventions) increased students’ empathy towards patients and, in doing so, enhanced their professional practice and developing identities (Schweller, Ribeiro, Celeri, & de Carvalho-Filho, 2017).

In sum, despite the paramount importance of lawyers’ and medical doctors’ profession-specific knowledge and skills, educators within their respective professional schools have realized that knowledge and skills alone fail to move many of their students beyond “mechanistic and unreflective” practice and towards an embodiment of prosocial professional ideals. Research within both of these schools has shown early promising results in engendering professional ideals through curricular and pedagogic interventions that use virtues as central to their students’ identity construction. We believe that these results invite consideration regarding if, and how, similar interventions might also be used within the management profession, which largely lacks the distinct knowledge and skill set given the aforementioned dynamism and heterogeneity of its applied contexts. In the next section, we build upon the virtues-based insights gleaned from these other professional schools and use insights from various social sciences to explore management educators’ abilities to facilitate virtues-based identity construction among both graduate and undergraduate students.

5. Pedagogic exploration of virtues-based identity construction within management schools

Thus far, we have posited that identity construction is a vital but overlooked element of management students’ professional aspirations, and that it can potentially be assisted by, among other things, a specific set of virtues. We believe that profession-specific virtues, given the promising early results from medical and law schools, might hold potential for advancing management education. In this section, we build upon key elements from past work in the management literature, other social sciences and from the aforementioned professional schools of medicine and law to explore whether a virtues-based pedagogic approach might compliment traditional knowledge-based approaches to management education. We offer the following conceptual model as a means to introduce and integrate the temporal and spatial challenges that we believe would be inherent to this hybridization (Fig. 1).

As the model conveys, virtues-based identity pedagogies would first require management educators to evaluate the physical layout of the classroom space, the syllabus and other traditional class elements (e.g., assignments, learning management systems, readings, etc.) for their compatibility with virtues-based approaches to management education. Second, management educators would need to carefully navigate the introduction and the students’ acceptances of the virtues concept as it pertains to their specific course’s (s’) goals. Third, management educators would need to establish some degree of collaboration with active management practitioners to diminish students’ misconceptions about managerial virtues and to afford resources for students’ later identity work and professional aspirations. Lastly, management educators would need to adopt a more diachronic approach to their overarching pedagogic strategies to ensure that identity work extends beyond the temporal and spatial confines of one semester or classroom. In the following sections, we explore each of these high-level pedagogic challenges further before concluding with implications for contemporary management research and practice.

5.1 Challenge 1: Priming management classrooms for virtues-based identity construction

In their work, Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) identify several unique challenges that management educators might face when supplementing traditional classroom instruction with opportunities for students’ identity construction. First, management educators must recognize and mitigate the influence of preexisting arrangements that offer social barriers to students’ identity construction. Thus, beyond simply altering their syllabus or moving into a new classroom space, management educators would need to holistically consider how elements of their course, their teaching style and other elements (e.g., work techniques, classroom subcultures) might prepare, or fail to prepare, students for something other than a passive lecturer/learner classroom experience. Iszatt-White, Kempster, and Carroll (2017, p. 583) note that in order to begin this process educators should look inward and embrace risk and humility as they shed their traditional role as “purveyors of knowledge” in favor of a different role as “facilitators” with students themselves determining more of the agenda and classroom interactions.

Management educators should also anticipate a degree of “cognitive and emotional turmoil” associated with identity construction that they have probably not encountered in their past teaching experiences (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 49). In regards specifically to the management profession, there will likely be “significant uncomfortable emotions” as students confront the discrepancy between the “social identity of a manager and the [ir current] notion of [self]” (Hay, 2014, p. 514). Management educators will then likely need to embrace some version of the currently popular “flipped classroom” and/or group assignments to allow dedicated attention to the emotions, both positive and negative (e.g., “anxiety, guilt, frustration, and worry” (Hay, 2014, p. 519)), that frequently accompany professional identity construction (Sturdy, Brocklehurst, Winstanley, & Littlejohns, 2006). Petriglieri
push educators to structure opportunities for students to reflect on changes to their behaviors and to their identities and to be candid about their failed attempts to align their ‘before’ identities with desired ‘after’ states (Ricoeur, 1995). These opportunities likely need to be included throughout the course and, ideally, facilitated throughout the entire curriculum.

5.2. Challenge 2: Introducing, and dispelling myths about, managerial virtues

After ensuring that classroom culture, syllabi and other collective arrangements are conducive to fostering students’ identity construction, educators can introduce the concept of managerial virtues as central to professional identity. An attempt to codify these virtues has already been published by Whetstone (2003) who posited that managerial virtues include: a) focusing on the customer, b) actively serving their community, c) developing people, d) manage by “walking around”, e) communicating well, f) effective planning and organizing, g) controlling important variables, h) working hard and i) behaving ethically. Although these virtues certainly represent a starting point for discussion, the study’s limited empirical sampling restricts its applicability as an unchanging and authoritative list. In fact, one of the unique strengths and challenges with developing pedagogy around the concept of professional virtues is its inherent dynamism (i.e., virtues are inherently bound to both place (e.g., we wouldn’t necessarily expect the same virtues around management in capitalist vs. communist societies) and time (e.g., virtues assigned to exemplary managers within the manufacturing-based U.S. economy of the early 20th century might not be those assigned to contemporary managers (Peterson & Park, 2011)).

In addition to the dynamism of virtues, past work also indicates that students must believe managerial virtues to be both personally desirable and achievable before they will undertake the emotional, social and psychological risks needed to identify with these virtues and to enact them through new publicly-lived behaviors (MacIntyre, 2000; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). As previously mentioned, both undergraduate and graduate students possess misperceptions about the management profession. Consequentially, students at all levels of studies might be encouraged to critically evaluate an initial set of virtues (Whetstone’s (2003) virtues or others) presented by the educator and to publicly scrutinize the veracity of these virtues, and others, as constitutive of the managerial profession. This classroom-wide construction of a set of virtues seems especially important as students’ ongoing individual identity work involves an interplay between a disparate evolving understanding of self and its fit with the local discourses and cultural scripts attached to managerial professions (Alvesson et al., 2008; Brown & Coupland, 2015; Svenningson & Alvesson, 2003).

5.3. Challenge 3: Facilitating virtue-based identity construction

It is only after students individually and collectively embrace a set of managerial virtues that educators can begin to use these virtues to direct students’ identity construction. As noted by Hay (2014, p. 512) management students “self-identities are … powerfully constrained by available social identities.” Unfortunately, even though choice is possible in the face of internal and external pressures associated with social stereotypes, determinism is too often the outcome (Reedy, 2005). To avoid this determinism, educators need to help students minimize perceived incompatibilities between their individual pre-existing social identities and managerial virtues. For example, an assignment might require students to interview a practicing manager, to scrutinize their interviewee’s use or non-use of virtues and then to reflect on elements of their own social identity that they believed to be incongruent with a managerial identity and how their interview helped to confirm or challenge these beliefs. Students will likely benefit from collectively discussing the presence or absence of these, or other, virtues among active practitioners. As others have found, there are many “contemporary tensions and contradictions between the lived reality and orthodox ideology of ‘being a professional’ [manager]” (Reed, 2018, p. 222) and, as law scholars (Floyd & Kerew, 2016) have demonstrated, interactions with these professional exemplars can help students reconcile these incongruities.

Ultimately, the overarching goals of exercises designed to facilitate virtues-based identity construction among an entire classroom of unique individuals need to be twofold (Kaufman, 2003). First, students should experience processes of associational embracement, where they uncover dimensions of managerial virtues that are complementary (or at a minimum compatible) with their pre-existing social identities. It is equally important, and often overlooked, that students shed previous misconceptions about what it means to be a manager within their aspirational profession. Ideally, professional exemplars can be found who embody some of the above-mentioned traits (e.g., race, gender, etc.) in order to dispel societal stereotypes about these traits and their association with managerial success. By attending to both the past (via distancing processes) and the present (via embracement processes) students can confront any perceived dissonance between their current behaviors and beliefs and those consistent with managerial virtues as pathway to a coherent and genuine future self (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

5.4. Challenge 4: Perpetuating managerial virtues beyond the classroom

To recap, in order to go beyond disseminating management knowledge and to assist students’ identity construction centered on managerial virtues educators must: 1) transform classrooms into identity workspaces, 2) establish a shared acceptance regarding a set of virtues and 3) encourage students to reflect on current behaviors and beliefs and their fit with managerial virtues and a desired future identity. We acknowledge that these are not small tasks and educators who undertake these changes will likely still discover a typical 15-week semester insufficient to meaningfully initiate and sustain students’ identity construction. Consequently, we encourage management educators to consider if, and how, they can perpetuate students’ nascent professional identity construction beyond their classroom.

First, it is important for both management educators and students to understand that for longstanding identity change to take root individuals must align an aspiring identity with sustained patterns of behavioral enactment (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Quite simply, to affect meaningful and long-lasting identity change students must do more than simply espouse a newfound appreciation of, and fealty to, managerial virtues. For real change to occur both during and after a semester, students must also commit to a regime of deliberate practice where they enact behaviors consistent with these virtues. Ultimately, students will decide for themselves as they progress in their university studies not only whether the managerial virtues are a fit for them, but also how this emerging professional identity fits within the context of their complete self. Of course, management educators will have to take it on faith that students’ behaviors (both outside of the classroom and after the semester) are changing. However, we believe that thoughtful pedagogic design (e.g., assignments that ask students to write a letter to their future self about their successful internalization of
the virtues) and in-class motivations (both intrinsic and extrinsic) can potentially be applied to mitigate potential shirking.

Lastly, it is important that educators communicate that even when students have fully constructed a coherent and enabling managerial identity, the work required to sustain this identity is never truly complete (Parker, 2004). It is inescapable that new situations will emerge throughout the course of their professional careers that will challenge both their adherence to managerial virtues and the efficacy of these virtues in the face of temporal and geographic changes (Peterson & Park, 2011). Furthermore, students need to understand that the educator has purposefully designed their classroom to facilitate open and honest discourse “with fellow students that allows their rational, non-emotional, super-human facade ... to slip” (Ford, Harding, & Learmonth, 2010, p. 575). Because the real-world rarely provides contexts for purposive identity work it’s imperative that students establish ways to solicit candid feedback from relevant others, including peers, their professional exemplars from class and future professional mentors, about their continued adherence to managerial virtues.

6. Discussion

In this paper, we have critically explored if, and how, a virtues-based pedagogic approach might be incorporated into management education to facilitate students’ professional identity construction. Specifically, we have looked to medical and legal schools’ successful use of virtues-based pedagogic interventions as opportunities to explore the possibility of professional identity construction among management students. In this work, we have presented a generalized overview of managerial virtues and pedagogic challenges, as such we have likely only scratched the surface regarding a virtues-based approach for facilitating students’ professional success. For instance, we believe that management educators might also use the virtues concept to potentially promote better ethics, social responsibility and environmental sustainability as business schools endeavor to promote “good business through good behaviors” (Robinson, 2018, p. 1). In the remainder of this paper, we explore additional theoretical and practical implications of this work before offering several immediately relevant research and pedagogic opportunities around the concept of managerial virtues.

6.1. Theoretical and practical implications

Because this paper’s exploration of managerial virtues inherently straddles academic and real-world contexts we simultaneously need to both its theoretical and practical implications below. First, we posit that the most immediately pressing implication of further exploring managerial virtues is to continuously align the concept of “professional management” with the shifting real-world demands likely encountered by current students and future management practitioners. In a recent study, Frey and Osborne (2017) estimate that forty-seven percent of today’s jobs are at risk of being rendered obsolete by automation within a few decades. Specifically, jobs that demand a strict adherence to “routine tasks involving explicit rule-based activities” (p. 273) will likely experience the highest incidence of obviation. This automation will not only alter the types of jobs managed by future graduates but also invites a critical and candid discussion about the validity of the historic antecedents (i.e., learning and credentialism) to professionalism across industry contexts. After all, if learning and credentialism are directed primarily towards the “mechanistic” implementation of professional knowledge and skill, then these might only be hastening the demise of traditional professions in changed competitive landscapes. Thus, we believe that the concept of virtues, as demonstrated in the professional schools of medicine and law, provides an opportunity to promote the most-humanistic and deeply-ingrained elements of different professions (e.g., lawyers’ creativity in crafting legal arguments and medical doctors’ temperance in regards to invasive intervention) in ways not-easily replicated through automation.

In addition, “management learning has traditionally stranded the parallel universes of [managerial] development and management education, between which there has been little dialogue or research” (Sambrook & Willmott, 2014, p. 39). We believe that the concept of managerial virtues holds great promise for engaging academics from both of these historically-disparate domains around a shared conversation regarding the possibilities of better developing managers (and their identities) via university-based education. Promoting and continuing this shared conversation is both important for advancing theoretical and practical insight within and between both of these respective domains but also stands the possibility to positively affect students’ matriculation towards successful management professionals.

Lastly, we believe that the concept of, and continued discussion around, managerial virtues has theoretical and practical implications for the role of business schools and educators as we move further into the 21st century. In a 2005 publication that continues to attract attention, Bennis and O’Toole posit that many business schools have “lost their way” by measuring successes more on their faculty members’ “A-list” research productivity and less on students’ competences and post-graduate career attainments. This imbalance, they assert, stems from universities incorrectly categorizing business as an academic discipline akin to chemistry or geology while business is in fact a professional discipline that requires the application of insights derived from an array of disciplines. As a result, many business educators excel at generating and imparting discipline-specific scientific knowledge but struggle to help students translate these into real-world practices that confer successes in their post-graduate lives. We believe that continued exploration of managerial virtues and their pedagogic efficacy holds promise in addressing this gap. Out hope is that this concept generates a generalizable framework for an array of management educators wishing to supplement their unique, valuable and research-derived knowledge with identity work focused on infusing students’ emerging identities with elements aligned with successful professional practice.

6.2. Next steps and future directions

In terms of immediate next steps for future research, the three most pressing seem to be: 1) the codification of managerial virtues across contexts, 2) the development and dissemination of effective pedagogic techniques and 3) assessing the long-term implications of virtues-based pedagogies. First, as previously discussed Whetstone’s (2003) study is a laudable preliminary foray into the examination of managerial virtues but has limited applicability because of its narrow empirical context (108 grocery stores owned by a single host organization). We think it especially germane then for additional exploration into codifying additional managerial virtues and examining patterns among these virtues as affected by place, time and other situational characteristics. Although the “correct” virtues and identity for successful managers will never be fixed, given the dynamism inherent in the virtues concept, it would be interesting to explore situational correlations as fodder for future theoretical frameworks and decision-making tools. Second, as this paper was intended to be an exploration of, and not advo- cation for, the efficacy of managerial virtues as a pedagogic tool we stopped short of detailing explicit techniques for virtues-based identity development. However, we think that this concept has
the opportunity to catalyze a tremendous amount of pedagogic and curricular innovation as the virtues concept is easily malleable to meet the needs of different educators, their students and other stakeholders. Third, assuming management educators adopt a plethora of virtues-based pedagogical techniques, a discussion needs to be forthcoming about measuring the efficacy of these techniques. Capturing the success of educators’ purposeful virtues-based identity pedagogic approaches might require the collection of long-term and unconventional data (e.g., “professional success” might require the collection of more than just financial gain or organizational titles as these might not be the measure of success for many practitioners).

7. Conclusion

In this paper we critically explored the possibility that we, as management educators, could do more to facilitate students’ identity construction towards their aspired careers as professional managers. In doing so, we outlined foundational psychological premises regarding identity work, talked about the challenges inherent in facilitating a “managerial identity” (because of both the heterogeneity and fluidity of the management profession and because of factors inherent to management education itself) and drew upon other profession schools’ use of the virtues concept as an opportunity for both theoretical and practical advances. We believe that this nascent discussion around managerial virtues and identity work represents an opportunity to reconcile many of the perceived incompatibilities between predominant approaches to management education and the ever-changing demands of contemporary real-world management. In closing, as management educators we bare a responsibility to train, educate and to facilitate students’ identity construction towards the greatest humanistic aspirations of their chosen profession. It is somewhat unconscionable then, that we would neglect any of these elements and leave students’ professional identity construction to be determined by students’ postgraduate employers and chance. We do not purport to suggest that virtues are the only pathway towards this often-overlooked element of identity construction, but hope that this paper spurs additional conversation regardless of the ultimate pedagogic outcomes.

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