



Learning (not) to be different: The value of vulnerability in trusted and safe identity work spaces

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Abstract

This paper explores how senior executives learn (not) to be different in Action Learning Set spaces (ALSS) as part of a business school Executive Education programme. We take a relational social constructionist approach in an empirical study and analyse senior executives' narratives. This illuminates how executives co-construct action learning set spaces of openness, honesty, confidentiality and challenge and engage in relational processes of learning, vulnerability and identity work. In doing so executives *learn to be different* in relation to dominant discourses and norms of what it means to be a leader or manager which is personified through claims of vulnerability in the education context. Executives make sense of and work through learning to be comfortable with being uncomfortable, practising learning over time in a 'safe enough' space. We offer insights into identity work spaces, as leaders reconceptualise vulnerability as positive and as strength and how claiming vulnerability can defuse the power of fear and negative connotations often associated with vulnerability. With agency, executives express feeling better equipped to decide how and when to be different (vulnerability) or *not be different* (invulnerability) in their organisations. Practically we extend consciousness to the value of vulnerability for leader and manager identity and learning.

Keywords

Action learning sets, identity work, identity work spaces, relational learning, relational vulnerability, senior executives

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Introduction

I think to learn you have to be uncomfortable. You have to be put into that position where you feel slightly vulnerable, that's how you get honest [Luke]

In this paper learning to be different is conceptualised as to become vulnerable and therefore different to socio-cultural norms of what leaders and managers are expected to 'be' in organisations. To advance understandings of relational learning, vulnerability and identity work, we theorise how senior executives learn (not) to be different by engaging in Action Learning Set space(s) (ALSS) as part of a business school Executive Masters Programme. Prolonged executive education programmes can function as identity work spaces by supporting leaders and managers in 'understanding and shaping who they are' and providing a "holding environment" (Winnicott, 1975) for identity work' (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010: 44). Here we advance Petriglieri and Petriglieri's (2010: 55) call for 'future research studies on identity work spaces and on identity work within business school courses' by providing 'a clearer understanding of what properties enable courses to function as identity work spaces and facilitate identity work'. We analyse senior executives' narratives of experiences in ALSS and surface overlapping processes of relational learning, relational vulnerability and identity work. The ALSS provides levels of safety for personal disruption and enables senior executives to engage in identity work, claim vulnerability and construct themselves as different in relation to leader and organisational norms. Reflecting on their ALSS experiences, senior executives express how they learn to be both different and *not* different, by choosing how and when to be different or not in other spaces.

The research extends scholarship into learning, identity work and leader and manager vulnerabilities. Notwithstanding the growing interest in vulnerability and managerial learning, the processes which may support claims of vulnerability remain underexplored. We respond to Corlett, Mavin and Beech's (2019) call to conduct studies in non-research contexts, such as action learning sets, to theorise the implications of recognising and claiming vulnerability for identity work and managerial and leadership learning. A starting point is to recognise that dominant masculinised leadership and managerial discourses shape constructions of leader, leadership, manager and management (Hay, 2014; Watson, 2008). Of import is how these discourses shape norms and expectations of leaders and managers to be strong, contained, 'in control, right and knowledgeable' (Hay, 2014: 512). Within this context, Corlett et al. (2019: 557) contend not displaying vulnerability is likely to be valued and 'not surprisingly, when managers experience vulnerability, they commonly adopt a mask of invulnerability to protect themselves'.

In relation to these socio-cultural norms, senior executives are not expected to be vulnerable. In this paper learning to be different is conceptualised as to become vulnerable and therefore different in relation to norms and expectations of 'being' leaders and managers in organisations. In learning *not* to be different, individuals become equipped and, with agency, can decide whether to be different (e.g. vulnerable) or not (e.g. invulnerable) in various contexts. We theorise how this is accomplished through relational processes which take place in co-created trusted and safe spaces with others which facilitate openness to learning (not) to be different. New understandings are offered about how, in the ALSS, senior executives learn to become comfortable with being uncomfortable, are able to drop the mask of invulnerability, claim difference as part of their self-repertoire and can choose how and when to be different or not. The research therefore extends consciousness to the value of vulnerability for leader and manager identity and learning (Corlett et al., 2019; Hay, 2014).

The paper is structured as follows. We outline our understandings of identity work spaces, learning, identity work and vulnerability and review how existing scholarship acknowledge their interconnectedness. Next we consider what is known about relational processes in action learning

sets. The qualitative research approach, the wider research and current study are then outlined. Our analysis of senior executives' narratives and theorisation of how they learn to be different or not in the action learning set spaces follow. Finally, we discuss the value of vulnerability in trusted and safe identity work spaces within educational contexts, and consider the implications of learning (not) to be different.

Identity work spaces

Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010: 44) propose that prolonged Executive Education programmes 'host participants' identity work' by supporting managers to develop understandings of who they are and, given the fluidity of contemporary corporate environments, are 'increasingly invested with the function of identity workspaces'. While Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) conceive an identity workspace as a '*physical as well as a social and psychological space*' (p. 46, italics in original) our focus here is the social. Their conceptualisation integrates elements of systems psychodynamics theorising including workspaces as institutions that provide 'a "holding environment" (Winnicott, 1975) for identity work' (p. 44), in which 'cognitive and emotional turmoil give way to meaning' (p. 49) and where individuals may, amongst other things, 'soothe their distress and facilitate their sense making' (p. 46). Complementing this systems psychodynamics perspective, our relational social constructionist approach advances understandings of ALSS, in educational contexts, as holding environments, by surfacing the importance of honesty, openness, challenge and vulnerability, in creating trusted and safe identity work spaces.

We share Petriglieri and Petriglieri's (2010: 45) interest in contributing to research that 'draws attention to the emotional and processual aspects of management learning and education, and presents them as inextricably linked to managers' identities'. A particular emotional and processual or, in our terms, relational aspect of interest to our research is vulnerability which emerged as a key theme in the data analysis as senior executives' developing capacity to recognise and claim vulnerability (Corlett et al., 2019). Next we consider learning, identity work and vulnerability as relational processes.

Learning, identity work and vulnerability

We understand learning as: relational, whereby 'reality construction and sense-making are relational processes' (Cunliffe, 2008: 126) which take place in relation to others whether present or not, and; dialogical, as we explore different ways of interpreting issues, share sense of situations and create possibilities for change (Cunliffe, 2002). Learning to become a leader or manager 'incorporates relational practices (processes) within social interactions' (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011: 1430) and, in our case, relational processes within ALSS. Identity work processes are integral to relational learning and our perspective, which assumes we are 'selves-in-relation-to-others' (Cunliffe, 2008: 129), recognises the reciprocal interplay between learning and identity work (Hay, 2014; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010; Warhurst, 2011). We understand identity as who we and others think we are and should be (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008) in particular contexts. '[L]earning to understand oneself as a manager [or leader] and to enact ("become") this understanding in one's day-to-day life' (Bolander et al., 2019: 2) involves identity work, such as incorporating, modifying or rejecting 'notions of the manager' (Watson, 2008: 129) into one's identity. Identity work, conceived as forming, maintaining, revising or repairing understandings of self (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) in relation to others, is therefore an important part of managerial (and leadership) learning (Corlett et al., 2019; Hay, 2014; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010; Warhurst, 2011).

Dominant discourses of leadership and management have power and influence in identity work and, to counter the masculinised discourses noted earlier, we follow Hay and Samra-Fredericks' (2019: 59) call to bring back the 'human', the 'heart and soul' and to recognise emotion in learning. Scholarship is beginning to appreciate the importance of emotion (Hay, 2014; Tomkins and Ulus, 2016) as an integral part of being human and, rather than seeing emotions as 'taboo' and too messy to deal with (Tomkins and Ulus, 2016: 168), to explicitly recognise them in learning processes. Theoretical recognition of the role of vulnerability for managerial learning and identity work is burgeoning (Corlett et al., 2019; Hay, 2014; Warhurst, 2011) and, for us, 'vulnerability is the core of all emotions and feelings. To feel is to be vulnerable' (Brown, 2012: 33).

Corlett et al. (2019: 557) reconceptualised vulnerability for managerial identity and learning, theorising relational vulnerability as comprising 'processes of recognising and claiming vulnerability, developing social support to share vulnerability with trusted others and recognising alternative ways of conceptualising and responding to vulnerability'. These processes involve 'interdependency; risk of harm and loss *and* connection, through our relations to others; emotional expressions; power; and recognition' (Corlett et al., 2019: 560, emphasis in original). Their research highlighted how when 'vulnerability is reconceptualised and recognised, conceptually and practically, as strength rather than weakness, more realistic and acceptable managerial identities may be constructed' (p. 561). As noted, we advance their call to explore how managers, from different sectors, share vulnerability in learning sets, as contexts where vulnerability might be more culturally acceptable.

Management education can support managers' identity work by 'provid[ing] alternative discursive resources' (Hay, 2014: 520) which recognise the realistic limits of available managerial identities and acknowledge 'a greater degree of . . . vulnerability' (p. 521). Nevertheless, dominant managerial discourse constructs vulnerability as weakness (Corlett et al., 2019; Hay, 2014) and encourages leaders and managers to deny or hide it. Expressing emotions, and particularly vulnerability, can be risky and place leaders in a greater vulnerable position (Raelin and Raelin, 2011). However, vulnerability involves not only seeking to protect oneself but also acknowledging that it is human, for instance, to lack knowledge sometimes (Corlett et al., 2019). Sharing vulnerability with trusted others mutually reinforces the safe space where leaders may 'take off the mask' (Brown, 2012: 115), to reveal perhaps turmoil and shifting identities and, we argue, allows leaders to learn to be different and *not* to be different in various contexts. We turn to action learning sets as the space for this research.

Relational processes within action learning sets

Action learning is a relational process leading to change (Raelin, 2009); with the support of peers in an action learning set, participants tackle a problem through processes of action, learning and reflection (Pedler and Abbott, 2013). Action learning sets provide a sense of community and acknowledgement of social learning from and through each other (Marchand, 2017: 92; O'Hara et al., 1996). Using dialogue and insightful questioning, peers work together to tackle an individual's problem; they 'generate, consider, discuss, argue about the nature of issues and problems' (Mumford, 1997: 11) challenging each other in action and in learning (Pedler, 2008). Insightful questions by peers are important as they may at times lead to turning points or even disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991), where participants gain courage from others' support to challenge their assumptions and habitual ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Disorienting dilemmas are occurrences or triggers which cause participants to question and re-think long-held beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions, and to recognise that their current way of making sense of events and processes is not working (Mezirow, 1991). Disorienting dilemmas can, at times, result in

participants experiencing ‘abrupt shifts in consciousness’ (Dirkx, 2012: 404). The efficacy of this process in action learning ‘depends on people’s willingness to admit mistakes and to subject themselves and their experience to constructive criticism’ by other participants (Marsick and Watkins, 1997: 306). Participants depend on each other for questioning and support, in moving towards understanding, reframing and agreeing actions for their problems.

Action learning can be powerful and frightening (Marsick and O’Neil, 1999) therefore necessitating the crafting of a trusted and safe space. When participants feel unsafe or sense a risk attached to disclosure, learning can be inhibited and opportunities missed (Dunphy et al., 2010). The requirement for trust and safety in action learning supports, and has the ability to enhance, learning (Edmondson and Lei, 2014). The potentially challenging nature of action learning can lead to uncomfortableness (Dunphy et al., 2010) and insightful questioning inherent in the action learning process can be an emotional process where emotions such as anger, anxiety, fear, surprise and, at times, joy can be triggered. O’Hara et al. (1996: 18) discuss the ‘anxiety’ that can be experienced and Dunphy et al. (2010: 307) found ‘the level of self-disclosure’ required in the process can generate discomfort. Marchand (2017: 92) too describes action learning as a challenging and emotional process that can leave participants ‘exposed’ and ‘exhausted’. However, anxiety is not something necessarily to be avoided, controlled or fixed and can be a ‘productive’ and effective part of the learning process (Vince, 2010: 36). Anxiety and sometimes a sense of fear of the unknown can support learning (Kolb and Kolb, 2009).

To summarise discussions so far, we aim to theorise how senior executives learn (not) to be different by engaging in action learning set space(s) as part of a business school Executive Masters Programme. We consider how the ALSS provides trust and certain levels of safety for disorienting dilemmas or personal disruption and enables relational learning, relational vulnerability and identity work. To provide context to the empirical and theoretical insights we next detail the research approach of the wider and our current study.

Research approach

The wider study

In line with our relational social constructionist approach we adopted a qualitative approach to explore senior executives’ experiences in the ALSS. This ‘engages us with things that matter, in ways that matter’ (Mason, 2002: 1), takes an emic view which values the context of the situation and strives to generate rich data and insight (Cohen et al., 2011). This paper’s data are drawn from a wider study with 13 senior executives who completed, at an Irish business school, an Executive Education Masters programme, underpinned by an action learning philosophy where action learning sets supported learning. The executives were drawn from the four completed cohorts of the programme and selected to provide a multi-industry (pharmaceutical, healthcare, IT, retail and services) perspective. The seven women and six men participants were either senior leaders in multinational organisations (six participants) or owner/leaders of small and medium enterprises (seven participants). Given the combination, we label the participants ‘senior executives’; those at the top of hierarchies with day-to-day tasks of leading and managing organisations. We return to the executives’ hierarchical levels and contexts in the analysis.

In the wider study, data generation and analysis by the second author, occurred in two phases. Phase one involved individual in-depth semi-structured interviews with seven senior executives. The interviews comprised open questions and conversation, were flexible and conducive to emergent thoughts, reflections and ideas and enabled the co-construction of learning experiences (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Interviews, which included broad topics and questions (such as ‘Tell

me about when you first joined the programme’, ‘What was your first ALS like?’, ‘What were the subsequent ones like?’, ‘Can you tell me about any significant moments during your ALS?’ and ‘How did you engage with others in the ALS?’) provided scope for executives to elaborate and clarify their learning while also made it possible for the second author to follow the ‘participant down their trails’ (Riessman, 2008: 24). The interview data were analysed using Savin-Baden’s (2004) six steps for narrative analysis, comprising: 1. writing a short participant story; 2. supporting the story with quotes; 3. analysing language use and narrator positioning relative to the story; 4. analysing how what is said links to how it is said; 5. rewriting the story taking into account the analysis and interpretation and; 6. identifying overarching themes. The output of phase one was a single story of participant learning, incorporating seven characters, centred on six overarching themes: trusted safe space; openness and honesty; emotion and feelings¹; being supported, learning with and from others; becoming and being reflective; change and transformation.

Phase two of the wider study generated data by sharing the phase one story of learning with six new senior executives across two group interviews, designed to gain further insight into their learning experiences and gauge resonance of the phase one story with their experiences. The two group interviews were conducted similar to the programme’s ALS with a catch up about work activities and participants taking turns to share their thoughts on the phase one story and asking each other questions. Within the group interviews, participants engaged in learning through reflexive dialogue (Corlett, 2013) in that some gained insights into their own experiences as they talked and listened, whilst others re-framed their thinking as they answered questions posed. Analysis followed the same pattern as phase one and an epilogue to the story was crafted. This second story illuminated additional insights into vulnerability and provoked this current study.

The current study

Both phases of data collection produced senior executives’ narratives of their experiences of the ALSS. All authors returned to the original narratives to complete a new analysis for the current study, with an aim of advancing understandings of the relational processes at play in the ALSS. We view identities as constructed in and through narratives (Brown, 2006) and, as interpretive lenses, narratives are sense-making devices where leaders construct identities in the narratives they tell about themselves (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004). Our assumption is that the senior executives’ identities are not fixed but continually shifting within the narratives. To complete the new analysis, we drew upon relational learning, vulnerability and identity work theory and were guided by Corlett et al.’s (2019) processes of relational vulnerability, namely interdependency, risk of harm and loss *and* connection, through our relations to others, emotional expressions, power and recognition. In doing so, we asked what the narratives convey about: the action learning set spaces, disorienting dilemmas, vulnerability and identity work processes.

In what follows we present a thematic analysis and have selected illustrative narratives which have resonance across the participants. Senior executives are identified using pseudonyms.

Relational processes: Learning to be different

When presenting senior executives’ narratives of how they learn (not) to be different by engaging in ALSS, it is difficult to separate out the interrelated relational processes at play. The structure of our findings may appear at times to be linear, however, as the relational processes are intersecting, they do not follow straight lines, are intertwined and often simultaneous. We begin by discussing senior executives’ learning to be different. From their narratives, as members of the action learning set, they are interdependent and in relation to each other; they develop a learning space of trust,

confidentiality, openness and honesty. Here executives engage in relational vulnerability by expressing emotions, acknowledging social support, claiming vulnerability and risking possibilities of harm, loss and connection. In doing so executives experience ‘disorienting dilemmas’ (Mezirow, 1991) or personal disruption, which we interpret as relational learning. They practice this learning with others in the ALSS and learn to become comfortable with being uncomfortable in being different to socio-cultural norms. This is surfaced in the narratives as becoming more open and more honest, revealing more about themselves, disclosing sensitive information and being less guarded/unguarded. Integral to these processes, senior executives’ identity work is evident in the narratives through processes of constructing sameness in relation to other learners, being prepared to drop the mask of invulnerability, choosing to behave differently and uniquely in the ALSS and revising their self-identity constructions.

Next we outline the intertwined relational processes of the ALSS followed by relational vulnerability and learning to be comfortable with being uncomfortable.

ALSS: Trust, confidentiality, openness and honesty

We focus on the relational processes of the ALSS where the executives’ narratives convey the space as one of trust, confidentiality, openness and honesty. Trust may be paradoxical in relational processes as it can reflect ‘stable instability’² and, in viewing trust as continually negotiated, we acknowledge that it may not be possible to say that trust is fully there, or not. Here our positioning of trust comes from our interpretations of the narratives. It took time to build trust but, once formed, executives trusted each other not to break confidentiality. Considering the executive level nature of their work context, this space is unusual for the senior executives; organisational power plays, political risks and normative expectations are suspended. Cormac, naturally a guarded individual, ‘it’s just not natural for me to be honest, it’s just not natural for me’, was not comfortable initially with sharing sensitive organisational issues. However, in this trusted space he felt able to share:

I don’t think I said that to anyone else in the factory so it was probably the only place at the time that I mentioned it, you know. I thought about it before I went into that ALS, I probably did think about whether or not I should be saying this, it’s a small town [Cormac]

Cormac’s narrative illustrates conscious identity work and awareness of possible constraints on how he should act, expressed as ‘I probably did think about whether or not I should be saying this’. Compared to ‘anyone else in the factory’, he chose to behave differently and uniquely in the ALSS as ‘it was probably the only place . . . that I mentioned it’. The ALSS was conveyed as like a sanctuary where, no matter what was said, they trusted each other not to break confidentiality – this was ‘sacred’. As Cormac said, confidentiality ‘wasn’t just implicit, it was explicit’:

. . . you know it really was like the sanctity of the confession box, and I felt that anything that was said in there was sacred and would not be breached, and I think we all felt the same you know, so if that wasn’t there and there was any risk of anything leaving that room I wouldn’t have spoken about something like that, you know. That whole thing was massive, confidentiality was absolutely massive, you wouldn’t get that anywhere else. . . . It wasn’t just implicit, it was explicit, it was constantly said. I think we did all trust each other, you know, so there was no fear of asking any stupid questions or anything like that, it was fantastic like really good [Cormac]

Cormac’s narrative speaks of a felt sense of sameness with others and how the social support, trust and confidentiality of the ALSS enabled him to open up and say things he would not otherwise have done. He is unable to be open at work and is aware of the risk of harm (making himself

vulnerable) by opening up, because ‘it’s a small town’. However, due to confidentiality in the ALSS, Cormac chooses not to engage in defensive identity work where ‘I wouldn’t have spoken about something like that’ and rather takes the risk within the ALSS and, in doing so, becomes vulnerable. Furthermore, Cormac’s narrative illustrates how participants were able to drop the mask of invulnerability as ‘there was no fear of asking any stupid questions’.

Openness and honesty did not come easily to all. Initially executives, similar to those in Burger et al.’s (2013) research on ALS, felt unsure and struggled to be open and honest with their peers, with some expressing personal disruption. Charles’ narrative conveys the risk, his difficulty and discomfort with being honest and also acknowledges when it became ‘most uncomfortable’ as the risk of being open, honest and trusting his ALSS peers:

I found, me being as honest as what I was, difficult. I found it uncomfortable talking about that [the risk of people losing jobs], particularly when others had similar experiences, so that would have been when it got most uncomfortable. And I think, I think in hindsight, when we started talking about that, that’s when trust developed, because I think we all realised then that if people are that open, and they’re sharing that type of information we’re all from the same community. We all know our respective employers. You wouldn’t have otherwise chosen to reveal that type of information, but I think we all knew that we were never going to solve the problem unless we were honest [Charles]

Similar to Cormac’s claim that, without confidentiality, ‘I wouldn’t have spoken about something like that’, Charles’ narrative illustrates conscious identity work in deciding ‘to reveal that type of information’, something he ‘wouldn’t have otherwise chosen’ to do without the relational processes of trust and openness within the ALSS. Charles highlights the value of honesty to make progress in the ALSS. Aware that he is in a space of social support, where ‘people are that open, and they’re sharing that type of information we’re all from the same community’, he takes the risk and claims his vulnerability.

Relational vulnerability

Advancing Corlett et al.’s (2019) theory of relational vulnerability which incorporates how managers recognise and claim vulnerability through expressions of emotion, the narratives are imbued with emotion and convey how the expressions of emotion indicate something significant and, for some, personal disruption. Nina expresses how ‘emotion is what pushes you over the edge. . . You feel anger, fear, scared and annoyance when being questioned about your problem’. Within the ALSS, they did not hide or lessen their emotions for fear of losing their executive identity. Yet emotion made learning uncomfortable at times, especially when asking themselves, or being asked, very difficult questions. Executives experienced the ALSS as emotional, tough and challenging; Orla called the ALSS ‘exhausting’, Luke ‘brutal’ and James explained how ‘you are wrecked’ at the end of a meeting. Yet emotion, as integral to vulnerability, was viewed as a process of learning. For example, Aoife says ‘I think when there was a breakthrough it was definitely linked to emotion, when you felt vulnerable or challenged you made a breakthrough’. Alex appreciates how others are deeply affected, interpreted as experiencing personal disruption and reflects on the emotional experience of the ALSS:

you see how these things can affect them deep down. And how it consumes them because it’s a massive part of their life and sometimes they got emotional bringing that out because it’s constantly on their mind. When people get emotional obviously it means they’ve been bottling something up and when they get it out it all comes out. It’s difficult to watch them going through the process but then, at the end of the process, they feel a lot better but during it, sometimes it’s hard [Alex]

‘Bottling something up’ is interpreted as executives engaging in identity work to meet normative expectations of leaders as invulnerable. Maintaining the mask of invulnerability to protect themselves is psychologically and emotionally intense and depleting – ‘It consumes them. . . it’s a massive part of their life. . . constantly on their mind’ and, although a destabilising and disorienting dilemma as ‘when they get it out it all comes out’, the claim of vulnerability, which is socially supported by peers, is liberating. Furthermore, the contrast between ‘bottling something up’ and ‘get[ting] it out’ implies a shift in identity work, away from processes of self-regulation to self-expression and a learning to be different. Suzanne illustrates executives’ struggles, ‘I can’t f***ing do this’, with normative expectations of ‘being strong’ and ‘in control’, in contrast with the ‘tough’ ALSS where showing emotion brings a ‘sense of relief’:

I do remember that particular session being tough, I do remember that one, because most other sessions you would find challenging, but not to the point where I ever would have been emotional like, but I remember being emotional and I remember thinking “I can’t f***ing do this”, you know? My learning definitely had an emotional element, very much so, and I wouldn’t have considered myself an emotional person at all, but when you actually step back and look at why you make the decisions you make and how you make them, everything’s underpinned by emotion. I remember coming out and feeling a sense of relief in one sense, that you could finally see what needed to be done [Suzanne]

Suzanne’s narrative illustrates how identity work is an important part of leadership learning. Suzanne has revised her self-understanding as previously ‘I wouldn’t have considered myself an emotional person at all’. The narrative indicates personal disruption, a disorienting dilemma, expressed as a turning point in her understanding of decision making. Making a claim of vulnerability, and having it recognised and supported in the ALSS, reconstitutes vulnerability and changes its meaning (Corlett et al., 2019) giving her the agency to ‘finally see what needed to be done’. Moreover, Suzanne’s new found appreciation of the role of emotion in managerial decision making may enable her to influence dominant masculinised rational decision making processes.

Having trust, a certain level of safety in the ALSS and social support provides executives a secure context in which to learn to be different, in allowing executives to show vulnerability. Like Suzanne’s narrative, Anne’s reflects how claiming vulnerability, by ‘verbalising’ ‘one of my biggest fears’, helps reduce the fear as ‘it doesn’t sound so bad’:

one of my biggest, biggest fears was being unemployed . . . So I was able to discuss that and talk about that, and everything, that was huge. I think, once you have verbalised it, that was something, for me, anyway. There was something in that I think that verbalising it is almost like, now it doesn’t sound so bad, now that it’s not inside any more, it’s actually out, it doesn’t actually feel as bad as it did [Anne]

Anne’s narrative implies defensive identity work, perhaps keeping her fears ‘inside’ in line with dominant discourses of vulnerability as something to hide (Corlett et al., 2019; Hay, 2014). However, the safe and trusted ALSS enabled her to drop the mask of invulnerability, such that ‘it’s not inside any more, it’s actually out’. Suzanne and Anne’s narratives are examples of how claiming vulnerability, when mutually recognised and supported, has the power to change its meaning and reconstitute vulnerability (Corlett et al., 2019), expressed respectively as ‘feeling a sense of relief’ and ‘it doesn’t actually feel as bad as it did’.

Learning to be comfortable with feeling uncomfortable

The executives’ narratives surface how they learn to become comfortable with being uncomfortable. Learning to be different is experienced over time through the ALSS which enables them to ‘lay yourself bare and dig really deep’ [Rachel], to become more open and honest, revealing more about

themselves, disclosing sensitive information and being less guarded. At the top of organisational hierarchies, it is unusual for senior executives to be questioned and challenged as, in line with normative expectations, they are used to expectations of/having the answers. Aoife was ‘totally uncomfortable not having the solution to her problem’ and her narrative conveys her identity work struggles:

Seeing that other people have the same problems – that is where openness comes and honesty – realising you are not alone. You don’t want to admit to others that you have problems then you realise here we are all with the same problems [Aoife]

Aoife’s narrative indicates the natural guarded identity work processes to convey a level of confidence and mask vulnerability, ‘not want[ing] to admit to others that you have problems’. However, the sense of connection in relation with others, in having ‘the same problems’ and in ‘realising you are not alone’ in a ‘safe enough’ space, enabled her to behave differently in being more open and honest. Although valuing learning to be different in the ALSS, Luke’s narrative highlights the identity work struggles for senior executives as they negotiate socially available identities, impacted by dominant masculinised discourses of leadership and management and position self-identities in socio-cultural contexts rife with power and politics:

At work, sometimes, you are trying to convince people everything else is ok even when it is not – you have a mask of sorts on you because you cannot always tell it as it is. Then you go into an ALS where you can drop the pretence and admit you do not have everything under control and do not have all the answers, that is when the emotion comes out [Luke]

For Luke, the norms of leadership in ‘convincing people everything is ok when it is not’ are extremely powerful and he is conscious of the defensive identity work he does in that ‘you have a mask of sorts on you because you cannot always tell it as it is’. Luke’s narrative speaks positively of lessening the need for defensive identity work in the ALSS, where ‘drop[ping] the pretence’ of ‘demanding expectations’ (Hay, 2014: 510) of ‘hav[ing] everything under control’ and ‘hav[ing] all the answers’ is permissible. However, learning to be different, through claiming vulnerability, can be difficult and emotional. In Luke’s continuing narrative, he described leaving an ALS feeling ‘really irritated and annoyed’. The ALSS stirred up emotion such as anger or anxiety which resulted in feelings of discomfort and pain but, on reflection, he realised that ‘you have to go through the pain to make progress’:

It wasn’t until someone was really challenging that my emotions were triggered. You have to go through the pain to make progress. I think to learn you have to be uncomfortable. You have to be put into that position where you feel slightly vulnerable, that’s how you get honest [Luke]

Luke’s passive expression of ‘be[ing] put into the position where you feel slightly vulnerable’ implies some resistance and learning to be different, in repositioning self as vulnerable, involves ‘learn[ing] . . . to be uncomfortable’. Orla also talks about having ‘to get comfortable with being uncomfortable’. Her narrative begins with how she perceived other ALSS members as meeting normative norms of leadership, in being ‘so on top of their jobs, confident and in control of the issues they faced’ and that, in relation to others, she initially ‘felt a bit overwhelmed’:

When I first joined the ALSS I felt a bit overwhelmed to be honest. The others just all seemed so on top of their jobs, confident and in control of the issues they faced. However, over time I came to realise they were just like me putting on a front of being in control. When I saw that we were all facing the same types of problems I realised we were all in the same boat and that made me more comfortable and willing to open up. I think it made me more confident in myself too, in a way it gave me courage and belief in myself [Orla]

Over time Orla realised ‘they were just like me putting on a front of being in control’, thus conforming to normative expectations of leaders to be strong and contained, and masking vulnerability through defensive identity work. Orla’s construction of sameness in relation with others, expressed in a similar way to Aoife (above) as ‘we were all facing the same types of problems’ and ‘we were all in the same boat’ enabled her to behave differently in the ALSS by becoming vulnerable. Becoming comfortable with vulnerability, which we understand as learning to be different to leader norms, is reflected in Orla becoming ‘willing to open up’, ‘more confident’ and building ‘courage and belief’.

In summarising our discussions, learning to be different involves making sense of and over time working through being uncomfortable and practising relational learning in the ALSS to become different in relation to dominant discourses and norms. This relational learning enables executives to develop their self-identity repertoire by becoming equipped to challenge unrealistic leader expectations by becoming comfortable with openness, honesty, challenge, emotions and vulnerability, that is learning to be comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Relational processes: Learning not to be different in the workplace

As senior executives experience personal disruptions, become comfortable with being uncomfortable and practise relational learning to be different in relation to normative expectations, they develop new knowledge about themselves. This new knowledge strengthens the agency to decide whether to be different or not in the workplace. How they choose to practise their changed self-repertoire is up to them, dependent on context. Numerous narratives express how executives now feel equipped to be different or not, in ways they choose. James, Robert and Suzanne express how ways of thinking and leading have changed from constantly doing to accepting they do not always need to have the answers and in letting go of control:

I’m not taking the front seat anymore; I’m saying “What do you think? Where do you think you should be going? Come back and let’s see it again”. So that’s worked really well. . . I would have been the person who is very out the door, everything is done, everybody knows what they need to do, great, move on. . . Now I’m taking time to take that step back, count to ten, let other people have their say and actively listening, writing down what people are saying. I didn’t do this before, that whole area of active listening I wasn’t being fair to people. I don’t like it when it’s being done to me and yet here I am doing it to people, so definitely, yeah, transformed. [James]

I am more considerate of others; I reflect now and am much more strategic in my thinking. I am a more devolved leader. The ALS changes how you work as a person, as a manager [Robert].

It actually did make you sit back and think “God, I really don’t, I don’t take other people’s feelings or perspective into account at all when I make a decision, I was like a bull in a china shop. . . I would have classified myself as a complete control freak before, I would’ve had to have input into every single decision that I made, and I would’ve bottlenecked things within the company where people were waiting on me to make a decision on something and they were perfectly capable of making it themselves. [Suzanne]

The narratives illustrate the ALSS as a space for identity work processes which imply learning not to be different in the workplace, as shown through expressions: of past and present selves changing over time – ‘I would have been the person who . . .’ (James), ‘Now I’m . . .’ (James), ‘I didn’t do this before . . .’ (James), ‘I reflect now’ (Robert), ‘I would have classified myself as a complete control freak before’ (Suzanne) and: of different ways of acting – ‘I am much more strategic in my thinking. I am a more devolved leader’ (Robert), ‘I would’ve had to have input into every single decision . . . I would’ve bottlenecked things’ (Suzanne).

Reconceptualising vulnerability

Relational vulnerability emerged as a significant process of becoming equipped to be different or not in the workplace. As the executives learn to be different and become ‘comfortable with being uncomfortable’, their narratives convey how they reconceptualise vulnerability as positive and a strength. In doing so, they construct alternative identities where they can choose to be different or not be different. Nina’s narrative illustrates how being open to vulnerability was positive, in enabling her to realise her unknowing, ‘I do not have all the answers’. Reconceptualising vulnerability opened up new ways of thinking and being as ‘now I see things differently’:

I became quite vulnerable, questioning my authenticity³ and my ability to do things. I have come to realise that I do not have all the answers, that others approach things differently based on their values. I cannot expect them to be the same as me. I used to be so set in my way of thinking now I see things differently [Nina]

Following engagement in the ALSS, Rachel’s narrative expresses the courage which comes from the relational processes and sharing vulnerability; ‘that confidence definitely comes from the ALS and from the support. It gives you the courage to change’. Similarly, Orla felt ‘better equipped now for dealing with difficult situations. Better able to cope without being overwhelmed’. Anne’s narrative illustrates how her changed self-belief has enabled her to reconceptualise vulnerability as non-threatening, allowing her to be different in the workplace:

The biggest benefit to me is my self-belief and my self-confidence. I think it is down to my self-belief and I’m allowing that part of me to come through more and feel, I don’t feel threatened by showing my vulnerabilities or showing that caring side of me [Anne]

The senior executives’ narratives highlight how sharing vulnerability with trusted others in the safety of the ALSS is important for learning in enabling leaders’ ‘meaning-making, critical self-reflexivity and becoming aware of and changing [their] language use (Corlett, 2013). Changing the language of vulnerability, away from weakness to strength, enable[s leaders and] managers to be more reflexive’ (Corlett et al., 2019: 572).

Sharing vulnerability with others in the ALSS provided a safe and trusted space where leaders could engage in non-defensive identity work and practise learning not to be different in the workplace. However, the ‘properties’ of the ALSS – of trust, confidentiality, openness, honesty, social support and relational vulnerability – which enable them to ‘function as identity work spaces’ (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010: 55) are unique to an education programme and organised in ways where socio-cultural tensions and complexities arising from work hierarchies, with embedded issues of power and politics, are suspended. Corlett et al. (2019) explain how ‘responding alternatively to vulnerability may be particularly challenging in certain hegemonic structural conditions and power relations, and may be inappropriate in some contexts’ (p. 571). In their narratives, the executives speak of how their organisations are not, or may not be, the right places to ‘be different’ and, rather, are places where they have to self-protect and be invulnerable.

Survival

We end our analysis with Julie’s narrative as a powerful illustration of the interconnectedness of the relational processes of learning, personal disruption and vulnerability at play in the ALSS and in the workplace, and of the need to choose where and when to be different or not. Julie’s narrative describes her work context where social support to share vulnerability with trusted others (Corlett et al., 2019) was absent:

because it was stressful for me as well to be working in that environment [at work] and all the time wondering how I was going to handle, sometimes, you know you can let it (. . .) take over your whole situation. . . . You know I was wasting so much energy on that I probably wasn't doing what I should be doing every day. It takes its toll. I don't think at the time that I realised how much it was getting me down, to see how dealing with that situation was so difficult. I wasn't going to get support from anybody in my organisation, I had to find a way of dealing with it or get out of it [Julie].

Julie's narrative conveys her ongoing identity work in 'all the time wondering how I was going to handle . . . [the] situation' and its emotional 'toll', in 'wasting so much energy' and 'getting me down'. The relational processes, experienced in the ALSS, where she might have learned to be different in claiming vulnerability were absent from her work organisation, where she 'wasn't going to get any support from anybody'. Julie could not risk the harm of being different and sharing her vulnerability at work. Instead she takes a risk in the ALSS by discussing her serious problem [involving a person at work]. Her narrative conveys how being able to show vulnerability in the ALSS 'outlet outside work' had such powerful impact that she 'survived' in her role, otherwise she would have left the organisation. Julie constructs her claim of vulnerability positively which transforms her distress, 'I don't know if I'd been able to cope with it', into a different way of being in how she now does her job:

At the start I thought if I can get him to change how he looks at things. . . . But at the end of it, he didn't change at all, I had to change, that's what I realised at the end of it, nothing is going to change in the situation unless I change. And before I started the ALS I would never have thought that. . . . I think it was so important, I don't think I'd have been able to survive in my job if I hadn't that at that time. . . . because I was able to work through those challenges where if I hadn't had that outlet outside of my work I don't know if I'd been able to cope with it. I don't know if I would have left, it would probably have made the situation even more difficult going on. I don't know what would have happened. I don't see any way of it having got better if I hadn't been able to look at it differently. . . . I can only see what I could do myself within these four walls, I couldn't see outside of it. So it had a huge impact on the way I do my job now. [Julie]

We interpret Julie's narrative as expressing the 'courage to remain vulnerable' within the ALSS and to work with, for instance, the anxiety of one's unknowingness, 'to harness its energy, rather than to flee from it' (Raab, 2004: 269). Julie's vulnerability in the ALSS as a 'safe enough' space outside of work, enabled her to look at things differently, engage in vulnerability, accept the need to change and learn how to cope so that she was able to stay in the organisation. Learning to be different for Julie was about survival at work, achieved through relational processes in the ALSS.

Senior executives learning (not) to be different

Our aim was to advance understandings of relational processes of learning, vulnerability and identity work by theorising how senior executives learn (not) to be different by engaging in Action Learning Set spaces (ALSS) as part of an Executive Masters Programme. The empirical analysis demonstrates how as co-creators of the ALSS executives are interdependent, in relation to each other and engaging in relational processes. Through these processes executives develop a learning space of trust, confidentiality, openness, honesty and social support, where they challenge, express emotions, recognise and reconceptualise vulnerability, thus taking risks of harm, loss and connection. Within the ALSS, executives experience personal disruption or 'disorienting dilemmas' (Mezirow, 1991) which are integral to their learning. They become comfortable with being uncomfortable; learning to be different to socio-cultural norms. In the ALSS, senior executives engage in relational learning, relational vulnerability and identity work processes, where they recognise themselves as different (to the leader norm) and are able to choose whether to be

different at work or not. In other words, they learn (not) to be different and appreciate the value of vulnerability. We offer learning to be different as theory which outlines how executives become equipped to challenge dominant masculinised discourses, norms and expectations of leaders by making sense of and working through being uncomfortable over time, while practising learning in a 'safe enough' space. This enables executives to become comfortable with openness, honesty, challenge, expressing emotion, dropping the mask and becoming vulnerable which becomes part of their self-identity repertoire.

The co-constructed ALSS is a facilitator of learning to be different through intertwined relational processes which create a trusted and 'safe enough' space for senior executives. Research on psychological safety provides little detail of how perceptions of safety unfold for people (Edmondson and Lei, 2014). We provide empirical and theoretical insights by advancing 'understanding of what properties enable courses to function as identity work spaces and facilitate identity work' (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010: 55). The 'properties' of the ALSS, understood here as the relational processes of trust, confidentiality, openness, honesty, social support and relational vulnerability, facilitated what we interpreted as conscious identity work.

In considering the identity work question 'who am I?', the senior executives' narratives spoke of sameness in relation to others within the ALSS. Through this construction of sameness the executives acknowledged their connection with, and support from, others and this 'connection, through our relations to others' (Corlett et al., 2019: 557) supported processes of relational vulnerability within the ALSS, for instance in acknowledging the risk of harm by opening up but still choosing to do so. In considering 'how do I act?' in the ALSS, the executives engaged in conscious identity work, in that they thought about alternative actions and chose to behave differently and uniquely in the ALSS.

This choosing to do things differently was related to vulnerability conceived as strength (Corlett et al., 2019) in that, rather than conceal vulnerability and protect themselves through defensive identity work, the executives were conscious of the unique properties of the ALSS, as a particular context, and were willing to drop the mask of invulnerability. Rather than engaging in identity work processes of self-regulation, for example in 'bottling something up' (Alex) to meet normative expectations of leaders as invulnerable, within the ALSS the executives were able to 'drop the pretence and admit you do not have everything under control and do not have all the answers' (Luke). Over time the executives revised their self-identity constructions and, within the ALSS, they learned to be different to dominant discourses and leader norms and practised new ways of self-expression and related liberation, by claiming vulnerability and learning to become 'comfortable with being uncomfortable' (Orla).

The ALSS facilitated the reciprocal processes of trust, safety, openness and vulnerability; trust creates trust (Serva et al., 2005) and recognising and claiming vulnerability in trusted and 'safe enough' spaces enabled others to be open in expressing vulnerability (Corlett et al., 2019). Witnessing others becoming vulnerable creates a sense of connectedness in not being alone and shapes cultures by giving others permission to reciprocate by claiming their own vulnerabilities. The ALSS, as a particular context where executives could risk expressing vulnerability, facilitated learning through interdependent 'qualities' of 'peer-connections, helping, commitment to process and 'whole-self' presence' (Bradbury-Huang et al., 2010: 123).

Corley and Thorne (2006: 42) question whether action learning sets can be 'too safe', in providing a place where participants can avoid rather than deal with conflict and challenge. The narratives illustrate how the ALSS was 'safe enough' for them to open up but not too safe that they were still able to take the risks of claiming vulnerability. The executives were challenged in the ALSS and they/were provided social support during the discomfort and self-doubt generated by challenge (Dunphy et al., 2010; O'Hara et al., 1996). Feeling 'safe enough', executives

unburdened themselves and experienced a sense of relief, for instance, in dropping the mask of invulnerability. The ALSS is a relational ‘safe enough’ space, where executives were comfortable to speak ‘without fear of ridicule or punishment’ (Edmondson and Lei, 2014: 39), openly ‘dar[ed] to share’ (Svalgaard, 2016: 55) and unburden themselves, and felt the relief of dropping an identity mask (Hay, 2014).

Without the ALSS in a higher education business school setting, senior executives may not experience this safety or ‘sanctuary’, as Cormac called it. We raised earlier how executives did not perceive their own organisations as safe spaces where they could be different. It would be naïve to recommend that the ALSS environment be simply replicated in a work environment, where power and politics are at play and where ‘culturally coded discourses of vulnerability and local work cultures’ (Corlett et al., 2019: 572) can inhibit people from sharing vulnerability. There are limits to what a ‘safe enough’ space can offer, as this is ‘a temporary ensemble improvisation which will often work but not with any guarantee and never in the same way’.⁴ However, in learning to be different, senior executives develop new knowledge about themselves which changes their self-repertoire.

Learning to be different surfaced as: not having the answers; letting go of control; seeing things differently; being more devolved, strategic, reflective; trusting others at work; developed self-belief, confidence and; the courage to change. Executives learned to be different to, and to challenge, stereotypical notions of what it means to be a leader or manager (Corlett et al., 2019; Hay, 2014). Therefore, we extend Hay’s (2014: 520) research by providing further empirical evidence of how ‘individuals can work with the emotional response in opening up to others to question accepted understandings of notions of manager’. Conveying their agency, the executives express feeling equipped to decide whether to be different (removing the mask of vulnerability) or *not be different* (holding onto the mask; invulnerability) in their organisations.

Relational vulnerability emerged as a significant process in becoming equipped to be different or not and offers new understandings to vulnerability and identity work scholarship. Embracing vulnerability is easier and less risky to do in an ALSS in an education context with ‘strangers’, than in an organisation where there is greater risk of misrecognition (Corlett et al., 2019). However, in learning to claim vulnerability the executives come to de-mystify the dominant discourse of vulnerability as inherently negative, as weakness and instead recognised its strength in diluting fear, and developing self-belief and confidence. Executives reconceptualised vulnerability as positive, as strength and offer new understandings of how being able to claim and show vulnerability can defuse the power of fear and negative connotations often associated with vulnerability.

Extending beyond understandings of managerial vulnerability, the study illustrates how embracing vulnerability can lead to courage in leadership action in the right contexts; where vulnerability no longer constrains action to the extent that it does when it is denied or concealed. The ALSS allowed for expressions of emotion and uncertainty. Uncertainty is not necessarily a bad thing; if we are uncertain we tend to consider other perspectives and are open to new ways of doing things. The study contributes how the ALSS, as a particular context, enables executives to explore alternatives, ask probing questions of serious issues and become vulnerable without risk of appearing weak. Executives are able to recognise and claim vulnerability (Corlett et al., 2019) without fear of being exposed (Marchand, 2017) and took ‘responsibility to face up to vulnerabilities’ (Antonacopoulou, 2014: 89); they dropped their identity masks and allowed others to see their vulnerabilities. The study therefore offers empirical illustrations of ‘learning to feel safe being vulnerable’ (Antonacopoulou, 2014: 89, italics in original) in the right context; by recognising their own vulnerabilities, executives feel empowered to tackle unknowns and increasing complexities. Although unknowing can generate anxiety, for the executives, being ‘willing to feel the vulnerability implicit in not knowing’ (Antonacopoulou and Bento, 2010: 74) led to gaining insight

into how they might resolve organisational problems which in turn led to relief. They became 'better equipped now for dealing with difficult situations' (Orla).

In advancing Corlett et al.'s (2019) study of the value of vulnerability for managerial identity and learning, by empirically illustrating how executives can be open in claiming vulnerability in educational contexts, there are practical implications for action learning facilitators on Executive Education programmes. Further understanding is needed of the importance of facilitating participants to co-construct a trusted and safe space for their learning and of approaches which prepare them for the vulnerability and discomfort this may entail. In other words, we need to get comfortable with what Robertson and Bell (2017) call the paradox of creating a 'safe enough' space.

Conclusion

We have outlined how, in trusted and 'safe enough' Action Learning Set spaces, executives learn to be different, in becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable and become equipped to decide in which contexts they are able to be different (dropping the mask of invulnerability) or not different (holding onto the mask). Whilst this is a small participant group selected from one Executive Education programme, the executives reflect experiences across the total number of cohorts, providing a compelling account of the value of vulnerability in their learning. We admire the executives' courage in claiming vulnerability and in realising the power of doing so in this context.

In a reflexive process, when making sense of a reviewer's comments on this paper and their provocation of 'who benefits?', we became aware of how this study may be interpreted as aligned with neoliberalism. As a form of governmentality and mentality, neoliberalism works through generalising the enterprise form to all social domains and relations, including human subjectivity (Brown, 2003; Foucault, 2008). Leaders are expected to be autonomous, 'hyper-individuated, entrepreneurial subjects required to self-regulate and monitor and focus on self-care' (Mavin et al., 2019: 2) and align themselves to business needs to meet certain requirements. We wish to make clear that we do not subscribe to or advocate individuals' claiming vulnerability as a means to further neoliberal economies. We oppose and/or resist, where we can, 'the instrumentalising tendencies of neoliberalism, where we are all subjected to the needs of the market and hope that by creating more opportunities for thinking and reflection this crafts space for privileging what makes us human'.⁴ Our motivations are to support learners to practise criticality, increase their agentic options and to encourage facilitators to provide, both themselves and learners, critical breathing space from within the neoliberal discourse. We raise consciousness to the value of relational learning through ALSS and of vulnerability as a strength which may be of benefit to individuals learning to be different, or not, and to advance understandings and scholarship.

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Notes

1. Emotions are subconscious and a physiological response to a stimulus whilst feelings are a manifestation or expression of felt emotion/s (Fineman, 2004).

2. Thank you to a reviewer of the paper for this provocation.
3. As we understand identity as relational and processual, we view the notion of an authentic self as problematic and, while we have chosen to include Nina's narrative, we do not have the space to discuss the theoretical tensions.
4. Thank you to a reviewer of the paper who provided this reflection.

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