

Article

# Academic Identity and Communities of Practice: Narratives of Social Science Academics Career Decisions in Taiwan

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**Abstract:** Academic identity is an important aspect of organizing an academic career. An academic identity is distinct and unique and can be defined as the core attitudes that determine how individuals approach the concept of work. In the current era of neoliberalism, changes to university governance in Taiwan have transformed working conditions and hiring practices in academia. Inevitably, role conflicts have emerged, and work stress within higher education institutions has increased. The current study summarizes the narratives of nine academics from the social sciences. The study is anchored in the concept that academic identity formation is rooted in the doctoral education stage. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry lens, interactions between different communities of practice during the doctoral education stage are analyzed, along with later career decisions and the role communities of practice play in those decisions. The findings show that doctoral mentors and fellows all contributed to the formation of a core academic identity, while later career decisions were equally affected by neoliberal policies. It is hoped that by recognizing the role of academic identity, administrators may be able to influence how academics adapt amidst the competing pressures within the academe.



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**Keywords:** higher education; sustainable career; role conflicts; university governance; doctoral education; career decisions; community of practice; narrative

## 1. Introduction

Universities around the globe have never been as challenged as they have been by the changes the COVID-19 pandemic has brought. Higher education institutions have had to adapt by making changes to their institutional policies and governance and by introducing restrictions affecting teaching and learning, academic mobility, research initiatives, and many other areas of academic life [1]. More importantly, COVID-19 has shed light on some perceived disparities within academia, such as gender equality in promotion and tenure [2], and the challenging career situation for early academics [3] that were prevalent even before the pandemic. For instance, gender inequality in academic hiring, tenureship, and promotion has been a highly controversial issue [4–8]. Many academics are very much affected by the various stresses brought about by these situations [9]. Studies have shown that the transformation within the academia is increasingly diversified and polarized causing drastic managerial and structural changes [10]. The structural and systemic changes of recent years can affect how academics perceive their career and, consequently, their academic identity [11–14]. Usually these are referred to as the evolution of higher education governance under neoliberalism or neoliberal management strategies [15].

In Asia, higher education institutions (HEIs) follow the Western model and aspire to become world class. These aspirations have led to various conflicts, such as mass education versus elite education, academic responsibility versus academic freedom, personal interest versus public interest, and marketization versus liberalization of higher education. Specific issues include a preference for hiring academics with foreign degrees and the added value placed on foreign language capabilities [16]. High value is also placed on the ability to

publish in top-tier journals [17], which is also linked to tenureship and promotions [8]. Commonly, such practices are visible in management schemes that are part of neoliberal higher education institutions [18–21].

These changes in Taiwanese higher education governance mirror those that have occurred in Western systems and the problems they have generated [22]. Besides their decreasing number of incoming university students, Taiwan HEIs are also faced with the issue of aging faculties. Not only are academics in Taiwan paid less than their counterparts in developed countries within Asia (such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan), more than a third of faculty in Taiwan are 55 years old or older. This means that a third of all faculty are due to retire within the next 5 to 10 years. With decreasing numbers of incoming students, reducing the number of faculty seems a logical solution. However, this will not work unless universities close down degree programs, as institutions still need to hire faculty for these programs to operate and function. Hence, hiring contractual faculty and part-time teachers rather than tenured ones has become common practice in Taiwan.

Rising numbers of contractual faculty in higher education have various negative consequences. Bess [23] noted that faculty employment status affects teachers' motivation. Simply put, faculty work performance is greatly affected by their employment status. A study by Merritt Boyd [24] showed that while perceptions regarding institutional support, trust, and acceptance vary among non-tenured faculty, this group tends to consider themselves as university workhorses and second-class citizens, which affects the formation of their academic identities.

In Taiwan, all faculty are expected to teach effectively, expand their professional knowledge through research, and develop their university's competitive advantages. Inevitably, role conflicts have emerged, and work stress within Taiwan HEIs has increased. The changing work environment and evolving hiring practices have affected the future prospects of doctoral students and the formation of teacher and professional identities [25]. Hence, several recent academic identity studies have focused on academic identity formation during the doctoral education stage [26–29].

Similarly, there is a growing body of research showing that scholarly identities are strongly associated with membership in communities, which are predominantly academic disciplines [30]. Thus, the science and social sciences would have different systems of academic identity formation [31]. The study of social sciences is quite important [32]. As the study of society, social science provides insight into the social environment that we lived in, it also examines the way people behave and communicate, and analyzes how they form relationships with others. Additionally, it also analyzes how individual behaviors influence the socioeconomic, political, and cultural climates around the globe. Currently, neoliberal management schemes present many challenges for social science academics [33]. However, the number of studies focusing on social science academics in Taiwan is quite limited.

Importantly, academic identity formation during the doctoral education stage is highly influenced by how doctoral students interact with faculty and peers [29] and how these relationships are maintained [34]. Among these relationships, the doctoral student's interaction with their mentor is seen as crucial for determining their future career perspectives. Most of the time, the mentor–student relationship is helpful and provides a rich learning experience [35]. Notably, such relationships are also important for learning the norms that exist within the social community [36], which also provide doctoral students with opportunities to identify with their learning community through engagement in academic exercises and research activities [37–40]. Connectedness to these communities motivates individuals' inclination toward continued self-improvement [41]. A community of this sort is known as a community of practice (COP).

Within the formation of academic identities, COPs are considered among the most important agents within the socialization process [42]. When an individual joins a community and interacts with its members, identity formation plays an integral part in fostering growth and participation [43]. A COP represents a concern or passion for doing something that is shared by a group of individuals [44–48]. A COP can even be described as an

intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge [44] (p. 98), highlighting the importance of shared cognitive understanding for knowledge creation. Members of a COP should be able to negotiate their competencies through direct engagement and participation [46]. Hence, Wenger's [45] concept of a COP links identity formation and practice through interactions between members of a community.

In sum, understanding how academic identity is formed is similar to understanding the meaning and value of a sustainable academic career. This is how academics make sense of their work, and it directly explains their career decisions. In addition, social science academics are becoming increasingly important under the current age of neoliberalism. Thus, the primary objective of the current study is to understand how academic identity is formed and how this can affect an individual's career decisions. The following specific research questions are addressed:

- Which actors are key to academic identity development during the doctoral education stage?
- Which actors are most influential during later career decisions?

## 2. Literature and Theory

### 2.1. *Academic Identity as a Social Process*

Academic identity formation is a highly social process. Howard [49] (p. 367) proposed that identity is highly influenced by one's environment. Importantly, identity is often formed within an organizational context [50] and is continuously affected by any changes within that organization [51]. In other words, identity provides individuals with an idea of who they are and how they relate to the surrounding environment [52]. Regarding academics, Becher [53] noted that an individual's professional discipline acts as a social framework, grouping academics with similar fields of study together. In fact, this social interaction among academics of the same discipline influences the formation of academic identity [54]. This is quite natural, since individuals tend to relate better to those within the same domain of understanding [55]. For instance, it is easier for a group of statistics scholars to relate to each other and discuss issues involving mathematical computations than it is for them to relate to scholars from other disciplines; such affiliations lead to the formation of distinct academic communities. This disciplinary identity tends to exert a strong influence and can either support or restrict the subsequent formation of new identities [56].

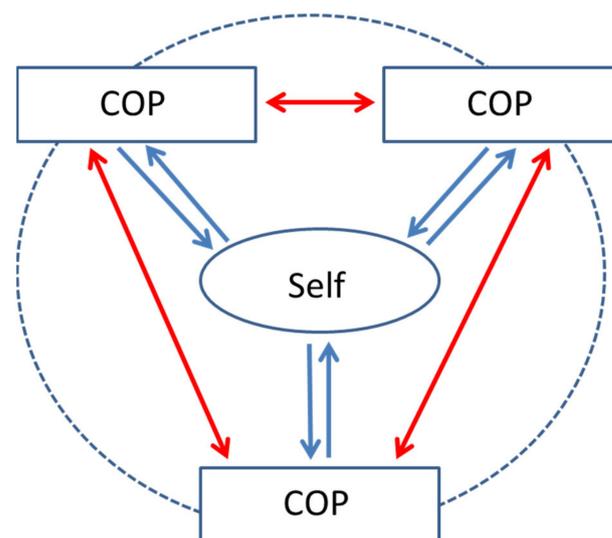
For new entrant faculty, the value they placed on teaching is highly influenced by their previous experiences (mostly during their doctoral education stage) of how teaching and learning occurs [57], the socialization process also helps them to understand the acceptable norms within their new environment [58]. Thus, academic identity formation can be said to begin as early as the start of the graduate education experience. For instance, how doctoral fellows interact with new entrants and how new entrants interact or transact with their peers are seen as core aspects of the doctoral education process [59].

During the process of socialization within a university, an academic is also exposed to the mechanisms of power within that institution. According to Giddens [60], power in an institution can be authoritative, which refers to control over activities within an institution, and allocative, which refers to control over the distribution of material resources. For instance, within a university setting, this control (or power, which may or may not be legitimate) might be exerted by senior academics or administrators in terms of dictating which activities doctoral students are expected to undertake and what resources are made available to new faculty entrants. Although the idea of power within structures has been criticized as outdated and not applicable to current social practices [61], the findings of Cheng [62] show that some academics still believe in the necessity for power over assessment processes and subject expertise.

Studies of academic identity formation have analyzed how individuals engage or negotiate with their COP. Teng [63] used a narrative inquiry lens to understand how the doctoral experiences of language teachers influenced their academic identity formation. His

findings suggest that COPs are not limited to institutions but also encompass broader societal academic communities. In addition, interactions with different COPs provide insights into a multi-perspective domain and are critical conduits for identity development [36]. Furthermore, these interactions also generate opportunities to experience meaningful roles within various COPs [64].

Currently, academics struggle between having an academic identity that is inclined toward scholarship and one oriented toward professional work [65]. Figure 1 shows a graphical representation of how interactions between an individual and different COPs work. It should be noted that during the doctoral education stage, as an individual engages with various COPs (peers—are students who entered the program within the same year, classmates—includes senior and junior students within the same program, or fellows—students under the same mentor, departmental or institutional colleagues, and even broader societal level communities), in most instances, the different COPs also interact with each other. The concept of agency is an important aspect of these interactions [36,63,66]. Agency is the idea that an individual acts on their own behalf or intent [67–69], which means that they assume responsibility for their personal development [70]. As doctoral students interact with different COPs, they form new identities; likewise, old identities can be transformed. It is, in fact, these intricacies that make academic identity formation unique and meaningful.



**Figure 1.** Interaction between self and COPs.

In sum, it would seem that both doctoral students and academics tend to affiliate more with their academic discipline and the HEI with which they are associated. This aligns with Henkel’s [12] claim that despite the policy changes stemming from current neoliberal managerial practices, academic identities are still formed and sustained through affiliations based on individual and collective (or institutional) values. In essence, as academic identity is highly influenced by how social systems operate, these interactions, either supportive or restrictive, form a narrative that is crucial for the development of a sustainable career identity [60,71].

## 2.2. Academic Identity as a Developmental Process

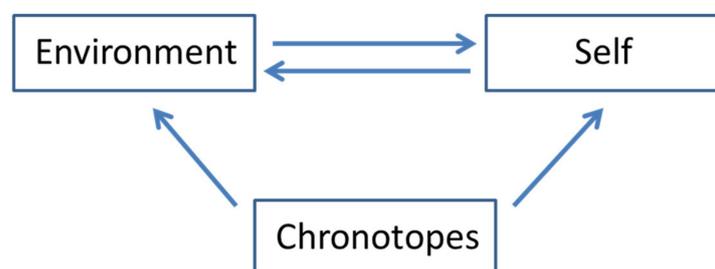
In his seminal study on the concept of identity as a developmental process, Marcia [72] noted that identity progresses through four distinct stages (diffused, moratorium, fore-closed, and achieved) during adolescence. After three decades, a meta-analysis of 124 studies conducted over three decades found that identity development can continue well into adulthood, lasting until the mid-30 s [73], while another study found that identify formation continues until age 50 [74]. These theories suggest that identity persists over a

long period [75] but that it can also change due to varying life conditions [76]. Importantly, identity development is said to be mostly geared toward one's inner self [77].

Academic identity, besides being complex and unique [78], is also closely related to self-development and achievement [79]. As a developmental process, academic identity formation is said to be oriented toward attaining a sense of fulfillment [80], relevance [26], and respect [81], and even toward becoming accepted and appreciated [25]. During the doctoral education process, although some personal characteristics, such as ethnicity, age, gender, personality, socio-economic status, and learning styles, might affect one's identity development, this is partly due to how an individual identifies with and values themselves in relation to their specific needs and goals [27]. Such motivations are equally important for doctoral students to create a sense of purpose and position themselves as future academics [82]. Nonetheless, anxieties and insecurities can hinder their career progression [66]. Importantly, while identity is highly personal and intrinsic, it is also highly affected by environmental factors [83,84].

During the doctoral education stage, the developmental process happens in multiple spaces and spans a considerable amount of time [85]. This can mean that doctoral students have to cope with many conflicting roles [86]. Key events that occur during this period constitute critical junctures that either benefit or hinder their future academic careers [66,87]. These incidents have been called chronotopes, a term popularized within the field of literary theory to describe how time and space are portrayed within narratives [88]. Many have incorporated the concept of chronotopes into narrative inquiry to explain how academic identity is decided, defined, or changed by various trigger events that happen within a certain timeframe or context [89,90].

The use of the concept of chronotopes to highlight key events within doctoral students' narratives can lend clarity to issues that were previously only vaguely understood [91]. Chronotopes within narratives can clearly describe the dynamic interaction and influences that occur between a doctoral student, faculty (including their mentor), their peers, and their environment (their organization or institution) [90]. Figure 2 shows the relationship between chronotopes and doctoral students' narratives. According to the concept by Watson [92] and adapted by Pick [90] and his associates, chronotopes are events within narratives that result in the deciding, defining, or shifting of academic identities. In addition, these chronotopes can occur in varying timespans, spaces, and contexts. Interactions between the self and the environment (including at the institutional or organizational levels) form an interplay of influences that can either reinforce or modify an individual's academic identity [90].



**Figure 2.** Relationship between chronotopes and doctoral students' narratives.

In sum, throughout the doctoral education period and the academic career, interactions (interplays or negotiations) with the environment take place almost all the time. For academics, these interactions might happen in different places and may last for just a brief moment in time. Even though such interactions may become small and personal, they are determined by higher or broader forces (organizational or institutional), which can be regulated. As previously mentioned, many forces are currently at play in Taiwanese higher education, which are causing disruption and dislocation and which are beyond the control of university administrators. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the current study, by adopting a

narrative inquiry lens, can expose some common chronotopes unique to Taiwanese higher education and contribute to an understanding of how academic identities are developed.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Design

The current study adopts a qualitative narrative inquiry paradigm. A narrative inquiry approach involves documenting and analyzing sequential personal accounts or events in relation to a specific discourse [93] (p. 8). During a narrative interview process, participants are encouraged to tell their stories about the discourse that they deem significant or important [94]. This approach is very similar to storytelling [95]; it is a social and purposeful procedure intended to generate meaning from a situation [89] (p. 204). In essence, narrative inquiry is a helpful approach for recollecting and reflecting on formational experiences [96]. Importantly, these experiences may be normal day-to-day activities [97].

Recently, many academic identity scholars have employed a narrative inquiry approach to explore unique experiences of the doctoral education stage [63,81,90]. Using narrated stories, academics can reflect back on how their identities have been shaped [63] and negotiated from a range of possible identities [98]. Within each of the narratives, connections are made that represent the passage of time and that reveal the intentions of the individuals [99], which relates to the idea of agency [36,63,66]. Most importantly, identities are inherently personal. By understanding these sequential personal narratives, we can gain a sense of the individuals' career inclinations [100].

#### 3.2. Research Context and Participants

After the study protocol was evaluated and approved by the institutional review board, invitations to participate in the study were sent to 30 academics within the social sciences working in the Northern Taiwan area. Academics were chosen to represent different fields of study within the social sciences. Moreover, to collect data within a broad timeframe, participants were chosen to represent senior (at least 20 years' work experience in academia), mainstream (more than 10 years' work experience), and new entrant academics (less than 10 years' work experience). Academics were also selected with regard to their type of institution (public/government-owned or private) and employment status (tenured/full-time, contractual, or part-time). This design was deliberate, with the purpose of collecting varying perspectives on how academic identities are formed within inherently different types of institutions and fields of study [101].

A total of 11 academics initially agreed to take part in the study. However, only nine academics followed through with the interviews. Table 1 shows the participants' backgrounds and career descriptions. Two senior academics (with the pseudonyms Amy and Dan) were both tenured and had around 20 years of work experience. Amy, Dan, and Carol (the youngest participant) received their degrees from American institutions, while the rest obtained their degrees from local Taiwanese universities. Amy and Bea both worked in a public or government-owned university. Three mainstream academics (Eddie, Hank, and Ian) worked at private universities for more than 10 years. Among these three, Ian was contractual, while Eddie and Hank were tenured faculty. The rest (Bea, Carol, Frank, and George) were new entrant academics. Among these four, Carol was contractual (renewed every three years), while the others only taught part-time at university. Of those who taught part-time, Bea and Frank also had full-time jobs outside their universities. Bea worked as a senior psychometrician for the government, while Frank was a senior civil service officer who worked for the Ministry of Education. George was the only academic with no permanent position; he taught part-time at four HEIs.

**Table 1.** Participants' backgrounds and HEI career descriptions.

Code	Gender	Age	PhD Degree	Country	Years in HEI	HEI	Status in HEI
Amy (F1)	Female	58	1991 (Psychology)	USA	21	Public	Tenured
Bea (F2)	Female	37	2013 (Psychometrics)	Taiwan	6	Public	Part-time
Carol (F3)	Female	35	2016 (TESOL)	USA	3	Private	Contractual
Dan (M1)	Male	59	1990 (Business Administration)	USA	20	Private	Tenured
Eddie (M2)	Male	50	2009 (Education)	Taiwan	11	Private	Tenured
Frank (M3)	Male	45	2011 (Public Administration)	Taiwan	3	Private	Part-time
George (M4)	Male	60	2016 (Management)	Taiwan	6	Private	Part-time
Hank (M5)	Male	44	2018 (Music)	USA	12	Private	Tenured
Ian (M6)	Male	43	2018 (Philosophy)	Taiwan	10	Private	Contractual

### 3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The current study followed Riessman's [95] procedure for narrative inquiry, which encompasses the processes of attending and telling, transcribing, analyzing, and validation. As mentioned in the previous section, the first step was to contact the respective representative academics from the social sciences. Voluntary informed consent was obtained from all nine participants, and confidentiality and anonymity of the collected data was assured. The participants were assigned pseudonyms. Two or three individual interviews were conducted with each participant. Each face-to-face interview lasted between one and two hours and was held either in the participant's workplace or in a place suggested by the participant.

The first interview focused on understanding the participant's educational background, their doctoral education experiences, and how these experiences related to their perception of what their future career would be like. The second and, where applicable, third interviews were centered on their academic career experiences and how these experiences related to any changes to their academic identity. All interviews took place in Mandarin Chinese and were audio-recorded with the participants' approval.

During the interview sessions (the attending and telling stage), participants reflected on previous experiences or incidents and shared their personal stories. To encourage the participants to reveal more about important moments in their doctoral education and academic career (critical junctures or chronotopes), a facilitating (or guiding) context was provided. The focus was on encouraging the participants to tell their stories regarding how they became academics, the key reasons for that decision, the actors influencing the decision, any experience of identity conflicts, and other related issues within their doctoral education and academic career experiences. Focus was also placed on the various interactions with different COPs, how the participants became members of different COPs, how they negotiated or engaged with other members, conflicts between various COPs, and other related issues that arose during their experiences with different COPs. Lastly, participants were asked to reflect on any events or incidents, whether personal, organizational, institutional, or socio-political, that might have influenced their identity formation.

The collected data were carefully transcribed and chronologically coded. Coding notations were adapted from Labov's [102] framework for organizing simple narratives. The thematic analysis method for narrative inquiry [103] was used for data analysis, whereby recurrent themes (or, in Labov's terms, actions and results) were noted and organized. To refine the collected data, cyclical analyses were performed throughout the study [63]. Then, a summative evaluation was conducted to identify recurrent themes. Lastly, the results were distributed to the participants for cross-verification and final annotations.

In sum, research into the nature of academic identity in Taiwan HEIs is important for understanding how academics can establish a sense of purpose in their role and find meaning in their academic practice as a whole. Furthermore, understanding how academic identities are formed is similar to understanding the meaning and value of an academic career. Having a distinct academic identity is how academics make sense of their work within higher education, which directly impacts their performance. It is hoped that by

recognizing that academic identities can only change when personal intrinsic values are affected, school administrators and curriculum designers can influence how academics (including doctoral students) can adapt (or resist) in a more positive way amidst the competing pressures within academe. In addition, since academic identity takes various forms, a once-size-fits-all policy should not be in place in academic institutions. Hence, the current study may provide valuable information for policy revision and university governance.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

To understand how academic identity is formed, the collected narratives were first organized into trigger events or chronotopes (time and context) that resulted in academic identities being decided or changed. Table 2 shows the different chronotopes. The findings show that all the participants had a goal in mind prior to the start of their doctoral education, which comprised a perceived future academic identity. This is deemed important, as even though an academic's final career might be strongly influenced by their race, class, and gender status [104], it is still helpful to have an initial career target. Later findings showed that persistence in aiming for their initial goal helped the academics persevere and make decisions that helped shape their career, thus enabling them to form a sustainable academic identity.

**Table 2.** Timing and context of academic identity decisions.

Chronotopes	Explanation
Prior to doctoral education	The initial goal for taking up doctoral education.
Doctoral education process	This includes all types of learning experiences, together with the interactions with classmates, fellows, and faculty.
Choosing their mentor	Deciding on a mentor.
Mentoring process	Overall experience with mentor.
New entrant job	The first job after graduation.
Career change	This might include a change of employment, responsibility, or status.
Shift in HEI governance	Changes in school policies, but not limited to issues in hiring, tenureship, promotion, and retirement.
Change in life priorities	These might happen at any time and may be either be positive (marriage or birth of a child) or negative (personal illness or death of a relative).

According to previous studies, participants believe that doctoral education opened up many doors, which, in turn, affects academic identity construction. On the extreme, this even led to some of their classmates choosing to drop out of their studies and pursue other career options. This is in line with Antony's [105] findings in relation to a decline in academic hiring, which has resulted in many doctoral students seeking employment outside the academy. In addition, the interactions between classmates, fellows, and faculty also provided various options and opportunities that helped the participants identify the actual career outlook within Taiwanese academe.

Another interesting finding is that participants chose their mentor based on the perceived support that they would receive in pursuing their future career trajectories. Studies have shown that when a doctoral student's academic identity is congruent with their mentor's values, this increases the chance of a productive mentoring experience [106,107]. Furthermore, the mentoring process itself is a crucial part of academic identity formation. Seven out of the nine participants noted that the guidance and opportunities provided by their mentor paved the way to the realization of their present academic career identities.

Beyond the doctoral education stage, all participants agreed that their first job came as a culture shock [108] in terms of the various differences between their perceptions of what an academic career would entail and the reality. Issues such as job description disparity (whereby certain job responsibilities were not mentioned during the interview process or in the contract), heavy workloads (class contact hours, mandatory office hours),

publication requirements, and the need to secure research grants were just some of the common aspects of academia that they had to get used to. Similarly, as academics were promoted or transferred to another HEI, new responsibilities or a change of status translated into a restart of the acculturation process. Moreover, as institutional priorities changed, policy shifts became inevitable, which are common within neoliberal management schemes. Henkel [12,13] identified such a shift in HEI governance as a key contributor to conflict within an individual's academic identity.

Lastly, many of the participants mentioned the importance of changing life priorities that could happen at any time. For instance, two participants mentioned that the birth of a child in the family would translate into increased financial responsibility and, hence, the need to rethink their career priorities.

To better understand the context of subsequent findings and discussions, initial career aspirations were collated and organized from the best to the least desirable choice. In this section, participants were typically asked, "If money had NOT been an issue, where would you have liked to study? Why?" and "What would be an ideal career for academics? Why?" Participants' responses according to priorities are as follows:

- A degree from a foreign university (mainly in the US or UK) was the typical first choice for all participants. It was commonly accepted among the participants, whether they were senior, mainstream, or new entrant academics, that the prestige attached to a foreign degree translates to better career opportunities in Taiwan. Amy, Carol, and Dan all claimed that their in-depth doctoral training in the US strongly established their interest in shaping their current careers in either teaching or research.
- A degree from a local national university was the second-best option among participants. However, this does not mean any national university. According to the participants, the HEI would have had to rank among the top-tiered national universities; otherwise, they would prefer to have studied in any of the top private comprehensive universities. Importantly, participants agreed that there were some advantages to studying in Taiwan. Participants acknowledged that studying in Taiwan opens up opportunities to establish local social networks that could eventually be helpful for local career development.
- A degree from a local private comprehensive university was the last choice. According to the participants, there are, in fact, many very good private HEIs in Taiwan, and depending on the field of study, some are even better than the national universities. However, the issue concerns tuition fees, as students sometimes have to pay twice as much for private universities as for public ones.

As for the participants' employment aspirations and preferences, the findings were as follows:

- The participants were divided on the advantages of working in the US or the UK, either in a university or another research institution. Although many would have liked to have worked in the US, Amy, Carol, and Dan, who trained in the US, would have liked to have gained some experience working in a foreign country but would still have chosen to return home to Taiwan. They believed that the experience of working abroad would have been very valuable on their return to Taiwan.
- Regarding tenured work in a national HEI or within the Taiwanese government (e.g., in the Ministry of Education), participants agreed that a tenured position in any government-owned institution sets an academic up for life. Not only are the retirement benefits far better than in private HEIs, the prestige is far greater, as national universities have more resources than private ones. In addition, the salary for tenured work in government research institutions or the Ministry of Education is almost the same as that of academics within the universities (sometimes even higher).
- Tenured work in a private HEI in Taiwan was regarded as the next-best option. As long as it is a tenured position, there is security of employment. In fact, the salary for academics in the private sector is similar to that of those working in national univer-

sities. However, there may be differences in terms of governance and institutional policies.

- Contractual or part-time work in HEIs was perceived as the last resort. Participants mentioned that if there were no available tenured position, they would take contractual employment (ranging from one to three years). In some universities, there are even opportunities for contractual academics to transition to tenure track positions. The worst-case scenario was to work part-time or, more specifically, to teach part-time for an hourly rate. As noted in the literature, there are currently very few open tenured positions in academia. Most available job openings for academics are for contractual roles with no chance for transition or part-time instructors. Additionally, it should be noted that the requirements for contractual roles differ from those of part-time instructors. As an example, publication count is less of a factor to consider when hiring part-time instructors than contractual faculty.

Now that a picture of the preferred career scenario for participants has been established, the subsequent findings and discussion are presented in two sections: development during the doctoral education stage and the academic career stage.

As noted in the literature, academic identity formation is not only developmental but also social. To further understand the various interactions that take place during the doctoral education stage, specific narratives were selected and organized. Table 3 shows the different COPs of which the participants were members during their doctoral studies and the role of their mentors. In addition, participants' prior and current academic identities are also provided. The reasons for their initial identity formation and the agents who influenced that identity are also provided.

**Table 3.** Participants' academic identity formation during the doctoral education stage.

Code	Prior Identity <sup>1</sup>	Agency/Reason <sup>2</sup>	COP <sup>3</sup>	Role of Mentor	Current Identity
Amy (F1)	Research (USA)	Parents/Prestige and value	Fellows <sup>4</sup>	Research opportunity	Teaching (TW)
Bea (F2)	Research	Self/Value and contribution	Fellows	Research opportunity	Administration/Teaching
Carol (F3)	Teaching (TW)	Parents/Financial	Classmates	Thesis completion	Teaching (TW)
Dan (M1)	Teaching (TW)	Parents/Financial	Taiwanese students	Thesis completion	Teaching (TW)
Eddie (M2)	Research	Self/Value and contribution	Fellows	Research opportunity	Teaching
Frank (M3)	Administration	Family/Prestige and value	Workmates	Teaching opportunity	Administration/Teaching
George (M4)	Teaching	Family/Financial	Classmates	Teaching opportunity	Teaching
Hank (M5)	Research	Self/Value and contribution	Fellows	Research opportunity	Research/Teaching
Ian (M6)	Teaching	Family/Financial	Fellows	Teaching opportunity	Teaching

Note. <sup>1</sup> Can be considered as the goal of doctoral education. <sup>2</sup> Influencer and reason for prior identity. <sup>3</sup> Main community of practice besides their mentor during the doctoral education stage. <sup>4</sup> Fellows are students with the same mentor.

The findings show that the participants' reasons for pursuing a doctoral education, and established an initial academic identity were both practical (financial) and personal (a sense of calling). This is in line with Rosewell and Ashwin's [109] observation that academic identity goes beyond pre-defined roles to the extent that it might be considered a calling. Interestingly, around half of the participants admitted that they chose an academic career for financial reasons, while the main agents affecting their decisions were self, parents, and family (husband or wife). Thus, it can be established that participants' career paths were highly dependent on their parents and family. This affirms the findings of previous studies on Taiwanese students, which suggest that career decisions are very much influenced by parents and other authority figures [110].

Regarding the COPs during the doctoral education stage, the findings show that most participants interacted most with their fellows. Only Carol and George claimed to have spent most of their time with their classmates, while Dan (who studied in the US) stated that he preferred to interact with co-nationals (Taiwanese students). It should be noted that

participants who preferred not to interact with their fellows also had a different relationship with their mentor. For instance, Carol and Dan both mentioned that their mentors did help them substantially but only in terms of thesis completion. As for George, he acknowledged that his mentor was able to provide some part-time teaching opportunities for him. The findings suggest that the quality of mentorship is highly dependent on the student's willingness to devote time to interacting with their mentor. Interaction with fellows also opened up various research and teaching opportunities that are deemed crucial in their academic identity construction.

Regarding their current academic identity, many maintained their initial preferences, while some had to embrace another one or reconsider their academic identity. Of those who maintained their academic identity (or career goals), most of them reported that their initial identity choice did not come about by chance but that they considered it carefully and discussed it with their parents and family. The key for them was to persevere and make smart decisions that helped make their goal a reality. For instance, Bea, Eddie, and Hank aspired to become researchers after graduation. For them, the opportunities provided by their mentor to participate in research projects opened up many opportunities for publication, which are crucial for securing a job. Similarly, for Frank, George, and Ian, their willingness to interact (or socialize) with their mentors and fellows also provided fruitful teaching opportunities. Furthermore, Bea, Frank, and Hank all claimed to have dual identities due to having a main career or job that was not university related (see Table 4; Bea is a government researcher, Frank is a career civil service officer for the Ministry of Education, and Hank is a tenured researcher in an independent research center funded by a private HEI). Subsequent clarification on experiences during the academic career stage revealed that even participants who reported having a single academic identity (as seen in Table 3) actually performed diverse roles.

**Table 4.** Participants' academic identity transformations during their professional careers.

Code	Main job	Dual <sup>1</sup> /Inclination <sup>2</sup>	Career Change <sup>3</sup>	Agency/Reason	COP	Conflict <sup>4</sup>
Amy (F1)	Tenured faculty	Yes/Research	2	Family/Prestige (transfer to top-tier HEI)	Field	Yes
Bea (F2)	Gov't researcher	Yes/Administration	3	Self/Stability (contractual to tenured)	Fellow	Yes
Carol (F3)	Contractual teacher	No/Teaching	3	Family/Stability (part-time to contractual)	Coworker	No
Dan (M1)	Tenured faculty	Yes/Teaching	2	Self/Stability (industry to tenured faculty)	Coworker	Yes
Eddie (M2)	Tenured faculty	Yes/Teaching	2	Self/Prestige (transfer to better HEI)	Field	Yes
Frank (M3)	Civil service officer	Yes/Administration	1	Mentor/Find value of doctoral degree	Coworker	Yes
George (M4)	Part-time faculty	No/Teaching	1	Self/Find meaning after retirement	Field	No
Hank (M5)	Tenured researcher	Yes/Research	1	HEI/Change in university policy	Fellow	Yes
Ian (M6)	Contractual faculty	Yes/Teaching	1	Family/Stability (part-time to contractual)	Coworker	Yes

Note. <sup>1</sup> Multiple academic identity (may not be limited to only two). <sup>2</sup> Major focus of academic identity. <sup>3</sup> Change of employer (HEI) or change of job responsibility or priority. <sup>4</sup> Conflicting academic identity.

Table 4 shows the participants' current main job, academic identity conflicts, number of career changes, the agency behind and reasons for career changes, and the COP that mattered most during their academic career. It can be observed that participants who are university faculty (Amy, Dan, Eddie, and Ian) have diverse roles. As mentioned earlier, academics in Taiwan are expected to both teach and conduct research (which may include administrative duties and thesis advising). Hence, they have dual or even multiple academic identities. Importantly, Amy, Bea, and Eddie had to make compromises to attain their preferred academic identities. For Bea, administrative duties made up a large part of

her government researcher's job, while for both Amy and Eddie, research and teaching typically went hand in hand for them as university faculty.

Table 4 also shows the number of times the participants changed employer, work status, or responsibilities. In the majority of cases, the reasons for such changes were personal, with only a participant reporting an institutional reason. Many participants acknowledged that financial stability was the most common reason, followed by prestige of the institution.

Some rather unique reasons were to renew a career after early retirement from a previous profession (George) and to give meaning and value to a doctoral education (Frank). The following examples provide a glimpse into the complex nature of career decisions.

*George joined the military right after senior high school. After 25 years of service, he was eligible for early retirement, and he began to pursue a career in management, aspiring to teach in a university.*

*Frank had a career as a civil service officer and occasionally gave lectures on topics related to his work. Recently, he felt that his doctoral degree should mean something else and decided to teach part-time in a university.*

*Hank was a researcher in an independent center sponsored by a private university. However, due to a recent change in university policies, he was also required to teach a minimum of two credit hours per semester.*

Under the age of neoliberalism, whether the career changes were voluntary or required, in each case, the participant's academic identity was affected.

Regarding gender equality at Taiwan's HEIs, only one of the participants noted some irregularities. As Amy narrated, the department's direction was typically controlled by male senior faculty during her first year of appointment. However, this was over 15 years ago. It is true that Taiwan has in place multiple policies to endorse gender equality in all levels of education [111]. However, some Taiwanese universities might still be skewed towards pinning down gendered power through mentoring responsibilities, research opportunities, organizational culture, tenure reviews, and management practices despite the presence of gender equity regulation [112]. Even so, the study participants noted that gender equality is not a hindering factor when it comes to forming academic identities.

Regarding their COPs during the academic career stage, most participants acknowledged that they were mostly aligned with their own department (their colleagues at work). However, some academics who were more mobile were affiliated with researchers in their field of study. This relates to a seminal study by Gouldner [113], who introduced the concepts of local and cosmopolitan academics. Cosmopolitans are said to be loyal to their discipline of study. They are considered experts in a certain field of study, prefer research activities to teaching, score highly with regard to mobility, and are considered to have an academic identity inclined toward their discipline. By contrast, locals are said to be loyal to their institution, are considered to possess general skills (teaching), prefer teaching activities to research, score low for mobility, and are considered to have an academic identity inclined toward their institution.

Importantly, the findings show that some participants had close-knit COPs with their fellows. For Bea and Frank, their fellows played an important role in their current career. Besides providing opportunities for collaboration, continuing interaction with their fellows (including new doctoral students) strengthened the bond with their mentors. Lastly, all the participants except Carol and George experienced conflicts with respect to their academic identities, wherein their goal since the very beginning is clear, which is to teach in the university.

## 5. Conclusions

The current study has some limitations. The primary objective was to explore how social science academics in Taiwan pursued their doctoral education and academic careers in a specific institutional and socio-political context while deciding on their academic identity. Even though nine cases cannot be generalized to the entire scholarly social science

community, nonetheless, this study provides an in-depth analysis of the participants' doctoral education and career experiences. In doing so, a better understanding of the unique characteristics of Taiwanese higher education and its doctoral and academic careers can be gained.

Using a narrative inquiry lens, the current study identifies various strategic principles, either personal (internal) or environmental (institutional), that interact with each other and ultimately affect academic identity formation. The findings show that besides teaching or research experience in foreign universities, the prestige brought by graduating from a top-tier institution in the US is considered valuable for securing career opportunities in Taiwan. Those with local doctoral experiences are more keen on developing a close relationship with their fellows and mentor, which are considered crucial in helping them realized what their future career might be like. In comparison with the foreign graduates, local doctoral students have the upper hand in the enhancement of their local networks. Although consideration might be given to foreign degrees during faculty hiring, sometimes the phenomenon of inbreeding takes precedence.

Academic identity formation during the doctoral education stage was highly influenced by how the doctoral students interacted with their faculty and peers and how relationships were maintained. Within these relationships, the doctoral students' interaction with their mentor was considered an important factor in determining their future career perspectives. Generally, mentor–student relationships were helpful in providing rich learning experiences. More importantly, these relationships also assisted doctoral students in learning the norms within their social community.

In addition, the narratives also suggest that the transition from a starting (new entrant or novice) scholar peripheral within the institution to an expert professor with a core inner role is not simple. For graduates during the 90 s, rank promotion was straightforward; publishing a book or a peer-reviewed article sufficed. However, in the past 10 years, academia in Taiwan has become tough and competitive. Under the neoliberal management policies, academics have to either publish or perish. Doctoral students from the past decade have had to participate in academic conferences and publish in an indexed peer-reviewed journal prior to their graduation. For some, this undertaking is not easy, and many prefer not to aim for tenured roles and instead teach part-time.

Furthermore, the socialization process was also crucial in determining the direction of the participants' career trajectories. Socialization within the different COPs during their doctoral education stage was instrumental in shaping their future career trajectories. A COP can be considered one of the most important agents within the socialization process. Importantly, academics can be categorized into either local or cosmopolitan, which can be highly influenced by the communities with which they are affiliated.

Finally, using a narrative inquiry lens has shed light on how social systems function. Furthermore, by taking advantage of COP, and understanding how chronotopes are able to define academic identities, career counseling (or any other type of support mechanism) can be offered to doctoral students. As well as mutual recognition (between the faculty) and affirmation of academic identities can be achieved. Ultimately, academic interaction is encouraged. A positive manner in which these interactions are conducted, whether they are small or personal, should be able to assist in the advancement of one's career.

Future research is also encouraged. Using a comparative approach, researchers can investigate different disciplines of study (science and non-science), departments, or even countries. Alternatively, a quantitative approach can also shed light on the causal and mediational roles played by the various actors that are essential to academic identity development.

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