

**CONCEPTUALISING ROLES AND  
IDENTITIES AND RE-  
CONCEPTUALISING  
COMMUNITIES AND SPACES IN  
TODAY'S RESEARCH  
MANAGEMENT**

RESEARCH MANAGERS AND ADMINISTRATORS AS  
SERVANT LEADERS OR INVISIBLE INTERMEDIARIES  
- SHEDDING LIGHT ON HYBRID IDENTITIES AND  
ROLES - PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS FROM  
DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES AND CULTURES

WORKSHOP DELIVERED AT THE  
NARMA CONFERENCE IN  
STAVANGER ON THE 17<sup>TH</sup> OF  
FEBRUARY 2020  
(FREELY INSPIRED BY THE  
PRESENTATIONS DELIVERED  
AT THE EARMA CONFERENCE  
2019 AND AT SEVERAL OTHER  
CONFERENCES HELD BETWEEN  
2015 AND 2019)

# STRUCTURE OF THE SESSION

1. Moving through ideas and concepts describing today's research managers and administrators (RMAs)
2. Doing conceptual analysis of ideas and concepts - for example, on attitudes [servant leadership] and identities [blended professionals], and also on spaces [the shifting arena and third spaces of collaboration] - to gain an understanding of the role and identity of today's RMAs and their positioning in settled/emerging working spaces and communities
3. Distinguishing between forms of knowledge to rely on
4. Re-conceptualising communities and working spaces in light of these roles and identities.

# CONCEPTUAL IDEAS EXPLORED

## ROLE AND IDENTITY

- Being on the border between different forms of identity
- Having multiple identities (and social networks), for example RMAs and their blend of academic/non-academic domains of expertise
- **Creative** professionals
- **Otherness** and RMAs regarded as the others from different viewpoints and **Invisibility** for RMAs
- **RMAS regarded as an Elite group** professionals (as opposed to 'standard' professionals), a 'prestige' group, and also 'fringe' groups and niche professionals.

## IDENTITIES

- **Bounded** and **Cross-boundary** professional
- **Blended** professional with their **Hybrid** identities
- **Third space** and also **Borderless** professional
- **Servant** leaders, and **Supportive** professionals
- **Super-administrators**

## SPACES and COMMUNITIES

- Third spaces of collaboration
- Shifting arenas
- Third space community/community of practice
- Networking circles
- Informal communities of blended RMAs

# FIRST PART - EARMA SESSION ON RMAS AS SERVANT LEADERS

1. Context: data collected from three italian universities (UniCAM, PoliTO, UniBO)
2. Methodology of data collection and analysis – A study with no intention to do any comparative analysis between the three institutions in a same context of HE
3. Thematic coding analysis
4. Outcome: results and what was found in each university

# SECOND PART - THE FOLLOW-UP STUDY ON RMAS AS SERVANT AND INVISIBLE LEADERS

1. Context: data collected from an Italian university (UniBO)
2. Methodology of data collection and analysis – A pilot study using the concept of servant leaders and adding the new one of invisible workers
3. Outcome: results found at UniBo



# THIRD PART – LONG-TERM STUDY ON BLENDED IDENTITIES OF TODAY'S RMAS

1. Context: data collected from three European universities (Tilburg, LSE, and UniBO) placed in different contexts of HE
2. Methodology – Using the concept of blended professional/identity used by Whitchurch and applying it specifically to research into RMA
3. Focus on: peers and the admin zone of belonging, freedom and control, what type of knowledge they use, among others
4. Outcome: results from each of the three institutions

# FIRST PART - MORE IN DEPTH ON THE STUDY OF RMAS AS SERVANT LEADERS

1. Context: data collected from three italian universities (UniCAM, PoliTO, UniBO)
2. Methodology of data collection and analysis – A study with no intention to do any comparative analysis between the three institutions
3. Thematic coding analysis
4. Outcome: results and what was discovered in each university

# BRIEFLY ON CONTEXT AND TYPE OF HEI

- **Comprehensive university**
- **Small size and multi-campus**
- **Academics from different fields**
- **F/M equally represented**

UNICAM



- **Technical university**
- **Medium size**
- **Academics from engineering and architecture**
- **M > F**

POLITO



- **Comprehensive university**
- **Large size and multi-campus**
- **Academics from different fields**
- **F/M equally represented**

UNIBO





# METHODOLOGY OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS – A PILOT STUDY

## Literature analysis

- Updated and relevant literature on RMA all across Europe
- Two papers discussing definitions of RMAs as servant leaders from a US context

## Methodology

- Semi-structured interviews and an interview guide
- *5 RMAs and 5 academics from each university (30 in total)*
- *Different levels of seniority, covering a wide range of research support activities*
- *More or less specialised roles in RMA*

## Outcome

- Thematic analysis: similarities/differences, theory-related issues, and outliers

## Bias and limitations

- Small sample
- Three very different universities
- No aim of comparing universities and their research divisions

# **LITERATURE: THE RMA AS A SERVANT LEADER**

***Their 10 characteristics: listening, empathy, community building, stewardship, foresight, healing, persuasion, awareness, conceptualization, and commitment to the growth of people.***

***First to serve, and then to lead (and serve).***

***RMA goals are “to both serve and lead our researchers (faculty), while still keeping in mind our responsibilities to our institutions, sponsors, and community”***

# METHODOLOGY: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To RMAs and academics:

- Current and ideal role of RMA at your Uni
- Main skills RMAs should have
- Soft skills RMA should have
- Is the RMA role visible/acknowledged from academics?

To RMAs only:

- Your inner motivation to do this job
- Do you feel humble in doing your job?
- Can you empower others/colleagues at work?
- Do you feel understood by academics?
- Do you see your role as RMA as essential?

# 1. CURRENT AND/OR IDEAL ROLE OF THE RMA

RMA:

- Bureaucrats
- Facilitators
- Intermediaries



Very conceptual and focused on the role  
in all its facets

Academics:

- Proposals writers
- Matchers of funding opportunities and research groups
- 360-degree managers



Very practical: support me, please, and do  
whatever you can

## 2. MAIN SKILLS OF RMAS (DESIRED)

### RMAs:

- Soft skills
- Interpersonal relationships/networking
- Leadership
- Problem solving
- Team work
- PCM



### Academics:

- Soft skills
- Networking → social capital
- Knowledge of the field of research
- Knowledge of the funding opportunities → cultural capital
- PCM



# 3. SOFT SKILLS OF RMAS

Academics



Listening

Empathy

Healing

Persuasion

Awareness

Conceptualization

Foresight

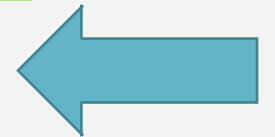
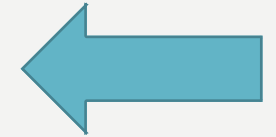
Stewardship

Commitment to the growth of people

Building community



RMAs



# 4. IS THE RMA ROLE VISIBLE TO ACADEMICS?



## RMAAs:

- *I see misunderstanding around our role and what we could do for researchers*
- *I could do more at a higher level but they want me to do admin stuff (filling forms)*
- *More visibility for those working in depts or CA depending on university*



## Academics:

- *It seems to me that many of my colleagues are not aware of RMAAs role and activities*
- *It seems to me that most of them work just for selected, strategic research group*
- *I see those in depts but I don't know what others in the CA do*

# WHAT UNUSUAL RESULT/OUTLIERS TO FOCUS ON IN EACH UNIVERSITY?

- **The RMA is a ghost and facilitator perceived by the research groups as one of its members and by traditional sectors of administration as something like a particular secretary: the invisible workforce and “the other”**

UNICAM



- **The professional role is not perceived as the same one among all the RMAs in the sample**

POLITO



- **Feeling sometimes as the secretary of the research group**
- **From an academic perspective: only supporting selected research groups + some misunderstanding may arise when you refer to the Research Office (instead of the Research Support Office)**

UNIBO






# CONCLUSIONS – CAN RMAS BE INVESTIGATED AS SERVANT LEADERS? (1/2)

On definitions: servant leader, ghost and facilitator, blended professional are all definitions of the role of these RMAs and how they are regarded.



On spaces: a third space is intended as the fluid, safe research space where RMAs activities are carried out together with researchers. It is a miscellaneous of academic and administrative domains, multicultural issues, rules and norms, forms of knowledge and of understanding.



On relationships/communities: a relation of trust is more often sought between academics and RMAs when supporting the research enterprise → social and cultural capital as key components.

# CONCLUSIONS – CAN RMAS BE INVESTIGATED AS SERVANT LEADERS? (2/2)

The development of this relation of trust is facilitated by the attitude of RMAs as servant leaders but researchers see the RMA (and not the office/research division) and count on you for a much wider range of expectations.

There is a downside: low visibility of what RMAs do and different perceptions of their role may keep RMAs back from showing attitudes as servant leaders.

More types of knowledge - cross-cultural, intersectorial, cross-disciplinary - are understood by researchers and appreciated more than before.

# SECOND PART - A FOLLOW-UP ANALYSIS AT UNIBO WITH MORE CONCEPTUAL LENSES

- Identities and roles and more conceptual lenses used
- Servant and invisible [workers] leaders
- Methodology: survey
- Results at Unibo from different perspectives, including academic leaders
- Serving whom? How we term the office's name and why serving a few research groups
- Blended or alternately borderless identities → stress on background/career path more than on attitude
- The Centre vs the Periphery's clash and why so
- Do RMAs feel they belong their institution? To their function, division or office? To their community? Which one?

# SOFT SKILLS OF RMAS AT UNIBO

Academics



Listening

Empathy

Healing

Persuasion

Awareness

Conceptualization

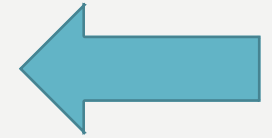
Foresight

Stewardship

Commitment to the growth of people

Building community

RMAs



# THIRD PART - STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY ON BLENDED IDENTITIES

1. Context: data collected from three European universities (Tilburg, LSE, and UniBO)
2. Methodology – Using the concept of blended professional and identity introduced by Whitchurch and applying it to research into RMA
3. Thematic analysis
4. Small samples from each uni and their research division
5. Survey first and semi-structured interviews as a follow-up
6. Outcome: results from the three institutions, same voices and outliers



# WHERE DO WE SPOT THE BPS?

- Researcher developer
- Knowledge exchange broker
- Research facilitators
- R&D managers
- Learning technology experts
- Academic and teaching development
- Project managers
- Grant officers
- Policy advisors
- 'Professors of Practice'
- Impact professionals
- Et cetera ...

# CASE STUDY

LSE (UK)	UniBo (Italy)	TiU (The Netherlands)
Research excellence	Comprehensive university	Specialised SSH university
Width and breadth of SSH research	Entrepreneurial eco system	Teaching and research equally important
Policy influence	Both EU and third mission as core business	Growth target
Global outreach	Strategic collaborations with industry and social innovation coming to the front	Policy influence (National Research Agenda)

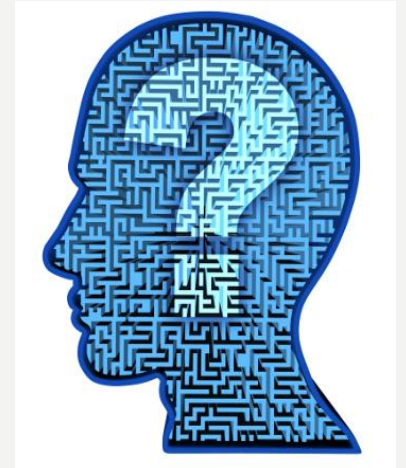


What role and skills for 'blended' RMAs?

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To understand the concept of the Blended Professional (BP) in academia with a focus on these 3 institutions.

- **How do BPs see their identity?**
- Do they experience **freedom or control** in their daily jobs?
- Who are their **peers**?
- Are these BPs able to do research into practice or reflection in action?





# CASE STUDY: LSE

**Identity and peers:** 4/5 see their roles highly linked to academic sphere; I see it operational.

**Freedom/control:** overall freedom but limitations due to external factors.

***“Often they [academics] see me as an agent of the government’s agenda” (Resp #2).***

***“I think we experience tensions around our identity and how we see ourselves” (Resp #1).***

# CASE STUDY: BOLOGNA

**Identity and peers:** 5 see themselves more as admin/professionals. But they don't feel to be just professionals or just academics: so professional only on occasion.

**Freedom/control:** overall freedom and the right distance from the boss; determination to move boundaries; so to feel BP in a very real sense.

**“ ... since this is the community that has given me opportunities and overall a career”  
(Resp #4) AND “I say I belong to the professional community only on demand”  
(Resp #1)**

**“ I feel as the person who should not say anything, but I keep having my say” (Resp #3)**

# CASE STUDY: TILBURG UNIVERSITY

**Identity and peers:** 4 see themselves more as administrative, only one as academic.

**Freedom/control:** lots of freedom but also loneliness and vulnerability felt.

***“I see myself more as an administrator, but I bring in content. My academic background is important: this [university] is my habitat” (Resp #2).***

***“I should report to the vice dean of research, but it is free what I do” (Resp #4).***

# FINDINGS

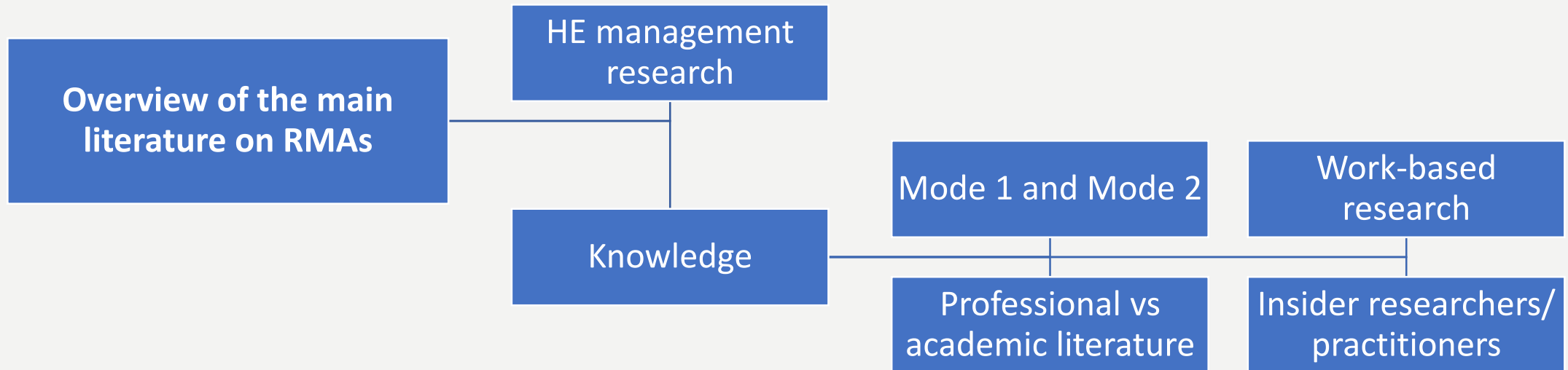
- Identity construction, awareness, and a bit of research
- Insider researchers
- Maverick or not?
- Blended vs third space professionals (past and present?)
- Third community (Carvalho *et al*, 2015) vs blended CoP



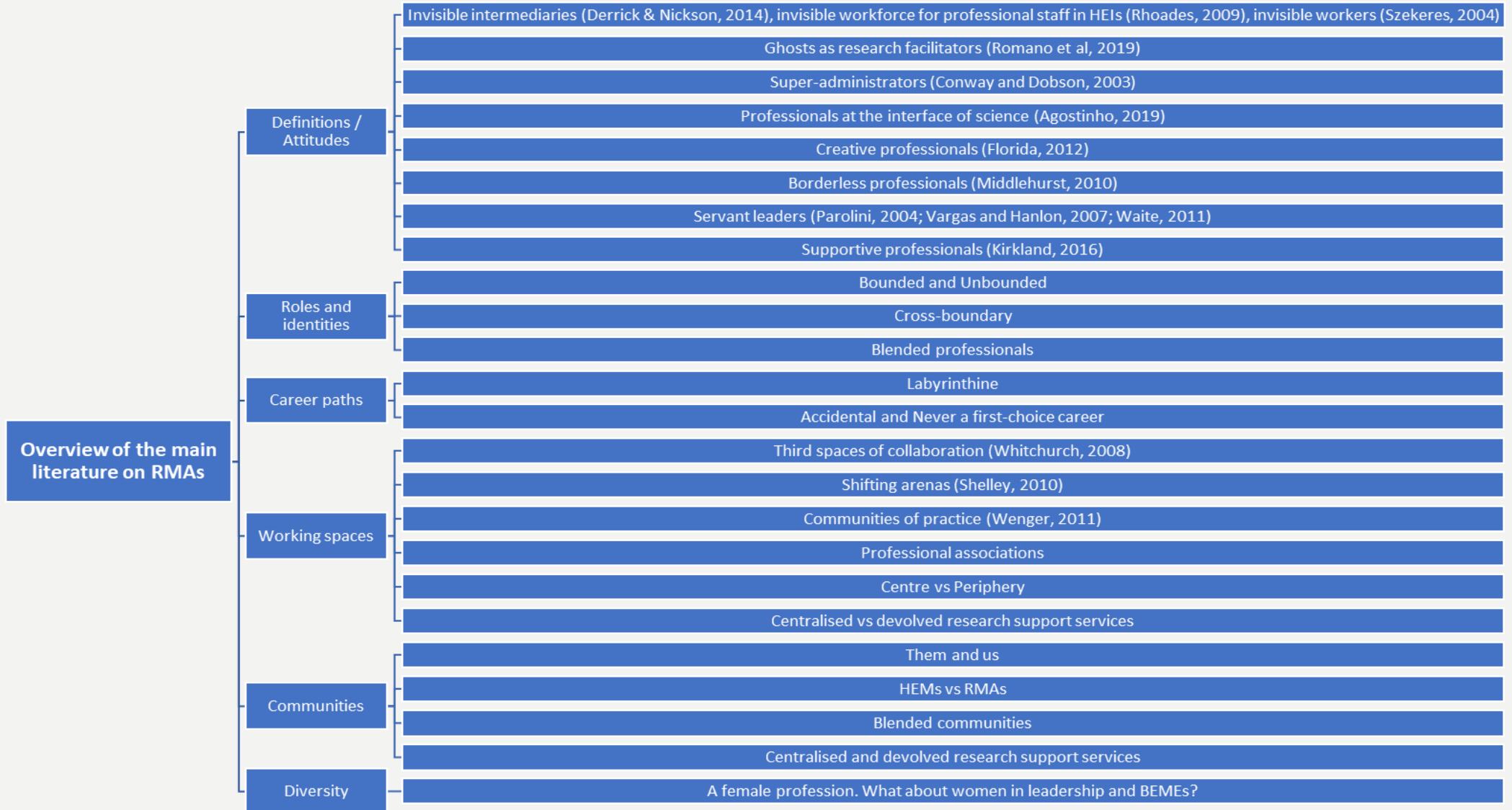
# **FOURTH PART FOR OUR DISCUSSION - MORE CONCEPTUAL LENSES - COMMUNITIES AND SPACES - STILL (TO BE) UNCOVERED**

- Exploring identities/roles using more conceptual lenses while building up further studies
- Adding more lenses: professional communities compared with academic tribes and working spaces with academic territories (Becher and Trowler, 2001)
- Explaining and discussing the shifting arena and third spaces of collaboration as described by Shelley (2010) and by Whitchurch (2008)
- Discussing cases of communities and spaces in today's RMA.

# OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN LITERATURE ON RMAS – FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE



# MORE ON IDENTITIES, COMMUNITIES AND SPACES



# IDENTITIES, COMMUNITIES AND SPACES

## Identities

Collective and individual

## Communities

- CoPs
- Informal, blended
- Professional associations
- Networking circles

## Spaces

- Third spaces
- Shifting arenas
- Centre vs periphery
- Centralised or devolved research services





# COMMUNITIES IN RMA AND THE 'THEM AND US' DIVIDE

- Professional communities compared with academic tribes (Becher and Trowler, 2001)
- Admin and academic staff as the two terms of this divide (past or still present, depending on country? Or on single institution? Even depending on field/discipline?) characterised by overlapping of roles, disregard of boundaries, and with no clarity about who is expected to do what
- The divide as one of the dynamics helping understand/investigate communities and spaces in today's research?
- Three phases of this 'divide' found (Veles and Carter, 2016): Contestation, Reconstruction, and Reconciliation
- In the Contestation phase → Shifting arena to prevail, while in the Reconstruction phase → Third space to emerge.

# COMMUNITIES IN TODAY'S RMA FOR DISCUSSION

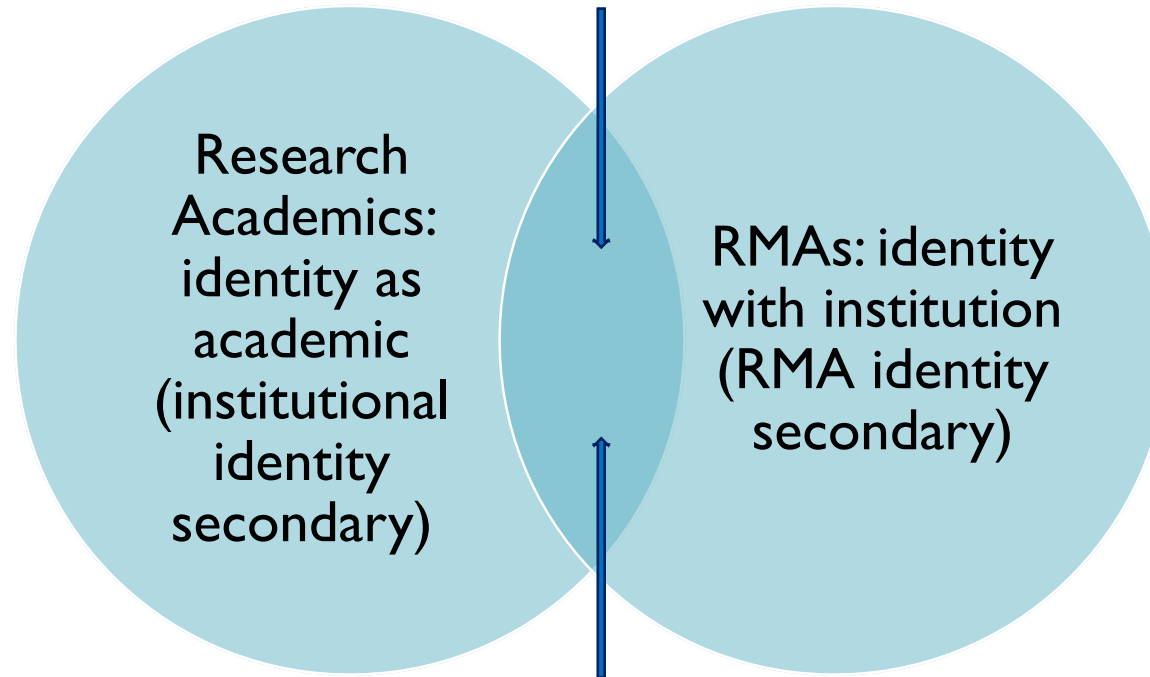
- Can we describe professional communities as kind of academic tribes (Becher and Trowler, 2001)?
- Can we identify communities of practice in RMA? And main networking circles around you?
- Which communities can we identify in today's RMA?
- Which community/ies can you see at work? And in your institution?
- Which community do you feel closer to?
- Do you feel to have an individual and/or a collective identity?
- How many communities do you feel to have? Do identity and community match for you?
- Discussing the interaction between community and identity even in relation to spaces in RMA.

# SPACES: THE SHIFTING ARENA

- A space of tension described by Shelley (2010) within the Contestation phase
- Academic and admin staff very likely to clash when interacting within these shared spaces, with no wish to understand each other or to mediate
- While sharing research and creating cultural capital, that's tacit knowledge derived from practical experience and reflection on research and research support management.

# SHARED RESEARCH AS CULTURAL CAPITAL

The Shifting Arena (Shelley, 2010)



Shared research as cultural capital:

- Research grant capture
- RAE involvement
- Management of research projects
- Research bidding experience
- Writing research policy and strategy
- Networking with policy makers
- Membership of research council boards

# SPACES: THE THIRD SPACE OF COLLABORATION

- A fluid, multi-project, multi-team space (Whitchurch, 2008)
- Characterised by an extreme interaction between academics and professionals [spaces, domains of expertise, communities, cultures]
- Also characterised by a search for understanding [within the Reconstruction phase]
- Academic and admin staff meant to work collaboratively and match their skills and domains of knowledge
- No tension here but mutual understanding so that [academic and professional] cultures as tribes can shape their identity and internally align
- So that these spaces of interaction help each community make clearer their identity.

# MORE PROFESSIONALS CONCEPTUALISED: THIRD SPACE PROFESSIONALS

- *Bounded* are those that see themselves as working within clear structural boundaries (their specialist function/office) which can be given to them through a job description or even that they can have constructed for themselves → search for continuity, standards, and procedures and boundaries define this group
- *Cross-boundary* use boundaries to build strategic advantage and institutional capacity, capitalising on their knowledge of territories. They are likely to display negotiating and political skills, to become actors in institutional decision-making, and to see their future in HE → search for opportunities and, again, boundaries are a defining mechanism for this group
- *Unbounded* display a disregard for boundaries to focus on and identify with broadly based projects. They are likely to draw on external experience and contacts, and more likely to see their future outside HE → search for new spaces (Whitchurch, 2012:8).

# BORDERLESS PROFESSIONAL

- Lesson learnt from the context of ‘borderless education’ to highlight the need for HE professionals to invest in cross-functional knowledge and intercultural skills (Middlehurst, 2010)
- Range of professional development capabilities getting wider and more interconnected and across-sectors
- Networking, negotiating, and intercultural sensitivity
- Political capabilities and business acumen
- Knowledge of practices and innovations across sectors and also of professional communities as key actors
- Familiarity with languages and with the discourse of other sectors
- Creativity to support constant innovation.

# CREATIVE PROFESSIONAL

- Florida divides the workforce into three main occupational classes: the Creative Class, Working Class and Service Class where the creative class works with knowledge, while the working class is engaged in physical work, and the service class performs routine service
- The creative class is divided into two sub-groups; the *super-creative* core (computer and math occupations; architecture and engineering; life, physical, and social science; education, training, and library positions; arts and design work; entertainment, sports, and media occupations), and the *creative professionals* (management occupations, business and financial operations, legal positions, healthcare practitioners, technical occupations, and high-end sales and sales management).



# CONCEPTUALISING MORE ON SKILLS IN TODAY'S RMA

- Networking; navigating complex, multiple relationships; social capital (for men and for women)
- Cross-cultural capability and team building in multicultural/sectoral groups
- Creativity and super-creativity
  
- Coaching, emotional intelligence and positive psychology
- Happiness at work, all about how to make others around you thrive
  
- Diversity and inclusion at work and in all groups
- Ethics and integrity but also academic freedom as a core of today's research
- Public engagement and a bit of activism
  
- Conceptual skills not to be left out
- HE management and RMA to get the big picture upon where we are
- What's more?



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**THANK YOU FOR  
YOUR ATTENTION  
AND FEEDBACK**

**DR SUSI POLI  
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE  
LONDON/INSTITUTE OF  
EDUCATION, WOMEN'S HIGHER  
EDUCATION NETWORK-WHEN  
EQUALITY, BOLOGNA  
UNIVERSITY AND AEQUIP  
[SUSI.POLI@UNIBO.IT](mailto:SUSI.POLI@UNIBO.IT)**

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