# Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) Thesis

*Understanding the value of an MBA by exploring the*

*perspectives MBA students and graduates have of their MBA:*

*An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*



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*Abstract*

This thesis explores Master of Business Administration (MBA) candidates' and Alumni perspectives of the value of an MBA degree, seeking a holistic understanding of the reasons why they chose to pursue their MBA, what they expected and gained from it.

Business education has long been seen as a medium to facilitate strategic change within and across industries. Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs are often regarded as the most preferred programs for organisational leaders and managers. Although an MBA education offers the opportunity to study a functional area in depth, a cross-disciplinary literature review identified an over emphasis on teaching the Knowledge, Skills, Abilities, and Competencies (KSACs) and a lack of focus on the role of MBA candidates' value systems that apparently influence their learning of the taught KSACs and likely impact their work behaviour and ethical decision-making ability. This study drew from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), with fourteen individuals from one university's MBA sharing their experiences in a series of semi-structured interviews. These were supported by participant observation of formal classes, providing further insights into the learning environment. This research design helped make sense of the ways MBA students interact with each other and their lecturers. Although following the idiographic ideal of IPA, the analysis also utilised imagined, integrated dialogues to analyse and present both their stories and researcher interpretations of those stories. These dialogues situate the research participants in a fictional setting to bring both individual and collective worlds to the surface. This seeks to connect readers to the worlds of these fourteen participants, the way they view them individually and researcher interpretations of their worlds, in line with IPA's double hermeneutic. This helps explain why the participants chose to pursue an MBA, what they expected from it, what they experienced in this learning

journey and how their 'mindsets' changed throughout their studies. Using this integrated dialogical method to present the research findings shows how qualitative research can be fictionalised and reflexively framed in a novel and illuminating manner. By situating different participants' views together in a theme-based dialogue, this thesis discovers and discusses phenomena that the participants experienced and defined during their MBA journey. The application of additional interpretative techniques, such as the integrated dialogical method, contributes to a richer interpretation of phenomena in qualitative research, making a significant contribution to the methodology literature.

The discussion of the findings suggests that the participants went through a significant change in their pre-MBA 'mindset' during their studies. The findings shed light on how and why some participants may seem to pursue an MBA at the *wrong* time in their career, how their study could make them feel *too* psychologically safe, potentially causing psychological *un*safety at work, and how participants could identify their MBA as a means to an end or an end in itself. The findings also revealed how MBA courses are often taught in isolation, handicapping participants from the inter-course (or intra-program) application of theoretical concepts. This can serve as a block to participants making use of their learning in one course to understand the concepts taught in others. This further restricts participants from making connections between different facets of their work, falling short of making holistic use of their KSACs. Besides, the thesis suggests that networking, lectures' teaching methodology and trust in practitioner-lecturers were the three most vital aspects contributing to the value of an MBA for the participants.

The thesis concludes that *the MBA* - the notion that all MBAs are same and MBA programs that business schools offer, offers clear and consistent learning experiences and

outcomes, is problematic and, to no small extent, incorrect. Arguably, every MBA candidate and their learning experience is unique. Thus, the thesis shifts the focus onto each participant's value system and how it interacts with their work environment more than the KSACs they gain in their MBA. However, it cautions that if employers continue to share narrower, homogeneous, and stereotypical views of MBA programs and their occupational value, the disconnect in relative expectations of MBA outcomes is likely to continue.

*Declaration*

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

I give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

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both. I feel proud of my decision to wait patiently for an email reply from you, Peter, in 2014, for a meeting about supervising my thesis and pursuing my Doctorate under your supervision. You are lovely, Peter. I have learnt so much from you. I wish I could develop my ethics to the standard that you have set. Sam, you have been a pillar of strength throughout my PhD. You have shared your experiences, good ones and not-so-good as well. You have identified and educated me on my flaws, which many would have brushed aside, thinking they were unimportant. But you ensured that I am aware of those in a most appropriate, gentle, and caring manner. Never you have used harsh words or given up on my stubbornness. You have a way of showing your affection, which, if understood, can be so soothing and rewarding. I have learnt from you how to be gentle and, at the same time, firm while conveying ideas to others around us. You both are exceptional. Without you both, I could not have experienced the freedom to experiment with unconventional ideas and, on occasions, even problematic ones. You both have helped me and encouraged me at every step of this experience. Those out-of-the-world discussions about this world, be it political, sports, literature and so on, that we discussed right at the start of all our PhD meetings, led me to form some of the ideas that are now a part of my PhD. Thank you for everything you both have done for me!

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Never regard your study as a duty, but as the enviable opportunity to learn the liberating beauty of the intellect for your own personal joy and for the profit of the community to which your later work will belong.

(Einstein 1933, cited by Calaprice 2005, p.66)

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*Glossary*

| | |
|---|---|
| *IPA* | Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis |
| *PO* | Participant Observation |
| *KSACs* | Knowledge, Skills, Abilities and Competencies |
| *MBAs* | MBA graduates |
| *An MBA* | An MBA degree |
| *Participants* | Research participants in the study |
| *MBA aspirants or aspirants* | Future MBA students |
| *Students* | General reference to MBA students |

1.0 Introduction

Business education has long been seen as a medium to facilitate strategic change within and across industries (Walton 1999). According to Segon and Booth (2010), Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs are often regarded as the most preferred programs for organisational leaders and managers. An MBA degree is often seen as a differentiator for working professionals from diverse areas of work (e.g. accounting, finance, information technology [IT], banking, engineering), especially when seeking career advancement (Chen & Doherty 2013; Hay & Hodgkinson 2006; Mihail & Elefterie 2006). This is because, according to conventional wisdom, individuals with an MBA generally perform better in managerial positions than do non-MBAs (Baruch & Peiperl 2000; Mihail & Elefterie 2006).

This study examines the value of an MBA from participant perspectives. Its focus is exclusively on the perspectives of MBA candidates and alumni concerning an MBA's value. Using both face-to-face semi-structured interviews and participant observation (PO), I explored participants' perspectives to gather an understanding of their pre-MBA, during-MBA and post-MBA (alumni) 'mindsets'. Dweck's (2008, p.1) research discovered that 'a person's success - their ability to grow, adapt as well as face and tackle challenges is most impacted by their conceptions of their own intellectual capacity.' Dweck describes this belief as a mindset, 'a framework in which people understand and respond to the world.' In this research, I have used the term 'mindset' to explore how the participants developed their beliefs and attitudes and understanding towards their MBA.

I adopted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) lens to analyse the interview transcripts and understand the story *behind* the stories that participants narrated in their interviews. Following this, I imagined a dialogue to bring the participants' worlds to the reader as they saw it and my interpretation of it. Doing so enabled me to focus on IPA's idiographic element to present participant worlds separately and the collective world together, understand the underlying reasons behind these 14 participants deciding to pursue an MBA, and gather a holistic understanding of their learning journey. In this introductory chapter, I explain how my interest in understanding the value of an MBA developed and provide a brief outline of the concept on which I draw.

1.1 Background

A discussion with my principal supervisor on employability led me to discover how an MBA degree often seems to be seen as a way to secure higher positions and salaries (at least in the minds of people looking to pursue an MBA). Every time we discussed employability, in one way or another, the MBA took centre stage. It made us think of the instrumental rationality of seeing an MBA as an end in itself and focusing on achieving it, rather than evaluating whether an MBA is what practicing managers need and why. Sitting in my co-supervisor's office on Level 11 of the Nexus building in Adelaide, I read an Einsteinian quote written on his whiteboard: 'I'd rather be an optimist and a fool than a pessimist and right'. This further made me dwell on what made an MBA, *an MBA*. My interest in identifying the *value of an MBA* was first stimulated by the works of Henry Mintzberg, who criticises MBA degrees that claim to create managers in a traditional classroom environment, and Mark McCormack, the author of *What they don't teach you at Harvard Business School* (McCormack, 1984), who shares his experience of employing MBAs in the International Management Group (IMG) he founded.

I found that an MBA is often seen as a differentiator for working professionals, especially when seeking career advancement (e.g., Chen & Doherty 2013; Hay & Hodgkinson 2006; Mihail & Elefterie 2006). I also found that the business community has criticised business schools for not producing ethical leaders (e.g., Gupta, Saunders & Smith 2007). This made me wonder about the reason for creating an MBA degree in the first place. Reviewing the works of Frederick Taylor (1911, 2004) and Henry Mintzberg (2004, 2013), as my next step, I made a contrasting study between both their beliefs. This helped me differentiate the two as the Taylorist MBA and the Mintzbergian MBA.

Knowing that there was already a substantial body of literature on why people pursue an MBA, how business schools administer MBA degrees and the role of accrediting bodies in curriculum development, it was important to explore this further in a context that would eventually be of benefit to stakeholders (business community, business schools, future MBA candidates). Reviewing the literature, I read that MBAs had been in existence for over a century, although they went through a radical change in the 1950s. Further, recent calls have been made for business schools to explicitly include ethics in their MBA curricula (Gupta, Saunders & Smith 2007). This led me to review the literature on axiology, which helped me frame my conceptual framework for this research thesis and uncover how MBA education has evolved over a period. As part of this thesis research, I also found that even though the literature focuses on a growing interest in understanding MBA candidates' perspectives on the value of an MBA, few studies have explored this in depth.

1.2 Description of context for the study

There are different types of MBA programs, such as the Executive MBA (for the experienced working professional with 8+ years of managerial experience; also known as EMBA), the Global MBA (combined programs between different schools in different corners of the globe for middle- and upper-level managers; known as GEMBA), the Early Career MBA (for recent college graduates with no managerial experience), and the Post Experience MBA (sometimes known as Executive MBAs for students with a specified amount of managerial experience; PE MBA). In this study, I have focused on one PE MBA program in Australia to understand what experienced MBA students expect from their MBA and the value systems they carry to their MBA and how they evaluate these during their MBA journey. To gain entry into the concerned MBA program, applicants require a minimum of two to three years relevant work experience and a completed Bachelor degree or a minimum of seven years' related work experience and a satisfactory Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) score is required for applications without a completed Bachelor degree. In this MBA program, applicants can choose to attend evening classes or study intensively over the weekend and vary the number of courses they undertake each trimester. They also have the option to pause their studies at any time, with up to five years to complete the program or they can choose to fast-track their studies by taking an MBA summer school course for two weeks in January. This MBA program admits students from various work areas. It consists of eight core courses (i.e. Accounting for Managers, Managerial Finance, Economics for Management, Strategic Management, Fundamentals of Leadership, Managing Contemporary Organisations, Marketing Management, Research for Decision Makers) and two elective options (from Entrepreneurship, Business Performance Improvement, Systems Thinking for Management and so on) and a final year Business Project.

Although it may seem narrow to concentrate on just one business school in Australia, the qualitative aspect offers a greater and more in-depth understanding of MBA students' perspectives of their MBA. The approach enabled me to understand their underlying expectations from an MBA and aspects that matched and did not match their expectations. Using Smith's (1996) IPA approach helped me to dig deeper into the participants' stories to make sense of their worlds, using their words and seeing their worlds from their perspectives. IPA represents a qualitative approach to the detailed analysis of a participant's lived experiences, the meaning of those experiences to participants and how participants make sense of their experiences (Smith 2011; Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009). It helped me recognise the role an individual's value system plays in their learning and work behaviour.

1.3 Concept

As mentioned, my intention at the outset of this research was first to identify the norms and practices of MBA education. Second, to explore the perspectives of the MBA participants regarding the value of their MBA. Third, to gain a deeper understanding of what led these participants to pursue an MBA in the first place. Fourth, to develop a means of using my findings to inform business schools, in particular by highlighting areas in which they might further build their MBA curricula, the business community and their expectations from MBA candidates, and future MBA candidates on what the MBA entails and how it might differ from their expectations of an MBA, as well as the role their value system plays in learning and development. On this basis, I formulated four research questions:

- What made an MBA the preferred degree for these participants?
- What were the implications of values, beliefs and attitudes for MBA candidates' and graduates' learning and practice?

- What changes in perspective, attitude, philosophy, learning had the MBA candidates and graduates gone through during their MBA education?

- Whether and how the MBA participants apply their learning in their work?

To address these four questions, I recorded and transcribed interviews and developed narratives to make sense of the meaning behind what participants shared in their interviews. I describe this process in detail in Chapter 3. Further, I present, with examples, how I made sense of the participants' worlds and developed an integrated dialogical method to ensure my sense-making was explicit for readers. I used a storytelling technique derived from Watson's (1995, 2000) ethnographic fiction and Watson, C.'s (2006, 2011) suggestions about semi-fiction, using Smith's (1996) IPA lens to uncover those stories that I have chosen to present in the findings in Chapter 4.

1.4 Outline of the thesis

In this chapter, I have outlined the theoretical framework and my interest in exploring the value of an MBA, particularly by examining the perspectives of MBA candidates and alumni from a particular university's business school in Australia. I have also outlined what I set out to achieve in this study and how. The remaining chapters are organised as follows:

- Chapter 2 contextualises this study in regard to the relevant literature.
- Chapter 3 provides an account of the research methodology and method, and research design.
- Chapter 4 analyses and presents findings as a dialogue between the 14 participants categorised into themes.
- Chapter 5 presents a detailed discussion of the findings and how they sit with the cross-disciplinary literature that I have reviewed.
- Chapter 6 identifies implications for future MBA students, business schools and the business community, makes future research suggestions and concludes the thesis.

People are living now [after the war] just as they were before … and it is clear that they have learned nothing from the horrors they have had to deal with. The little intrigues with which they had complicated their lives before are again taking up most of their thoughts. What a strange species we are.

(Einstein1945, cited by Calaprice 2005, p.86)

This chapter reviews the literature on business and management education, professions and the concept of values. It discusses the conception of an MBA, the underlying notion behind developing an MBA degree and criticisms of MBA education. The discussion brings forth the interconnection of the business community's expectations from MBAs, business schools' deans' promise to MBA candidates and MBA aspirants' expectations from an MBA degree. The chapter reviews studies on MBA candidates to understand what has been published and the areas already examined by researchers worldwide. It also critiques Taylorist and Mintzbergian views and their influence on MBA education, identifying the fundamental difference between a century-old MBA and the MBA degrees that business schools offer in the 21st century. This discussion further links with the concept of values and how candidates' value systems play a significant role in their learning of the taught content. Following this, the chapter identifies a literature gap, the reasons for this gap and the rationale for focusing on MBA candidates' value systems.

2.1 The conception of an MBA

According to Hoskin (1990s, cited in Currie & Knights 2003), management education first emerged in the military institution at West Point, Pennsylvania in the United States (US) in the mid-19th century. Redlich (1957, p.35) observes 'a close relationship between the educational philosophy embodied in the founding of the Berlin school [Berlin Handelshochschule] in 1906 and in that of the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration in 1908'. He argues that this relationship was not accidental. The establishment of these institutions in Berlin and the US marked a decisive point in a long history beginning in the 18th century. Spender (1989, p.259) traces the first appearance of management education back to the Prussian School of Bureaucratic Statecraft, which developed a plan for education institutes that sounded very much like business schools today (Mintzberg 2004). Spender (1997, p.13) argues that this plan involved

> the application of the scientific method, meaning rigorous measurement, data collection, record-keeping, statistical analysis and the development of rational-legal modes of order, decision-making and control over social activities.

Upon his visit to the Prussian school, Joseph Wharton, an American businessman, found himself inclined towards the Prussian ideas. He criticised the *learning by doing* methodology, drafting a proposal for a business school that led to establishing the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania in 1881 (Mintzberg 2004; Robinson 1995). This made the university the first to establish a Bachelor program in business based on Prussian philosophy, followed by Dartmouth as the first college to offer a master degree in business in 1900 (Mintzberg 2004, pp.21, 59, 61). However, Redlich (1957, p.35) argues that in the 1900s, despite many promising experiments in European countries and the US, 'a sound

foundation for high-level business training was still lacking'. He argues that Jastrow's *Handelshochschule* was the first institution that focused on the real world of business and identifies it as 'truly academic in nature' (p.35). He further asserts that the same combination was also achieved at Harvard, where the primary objectives were implemented by reformed teaching techniques and a continuing research program on business subjects (Redlich 1957, p.35).

In 1908, Harvard Business School in the US became the first institution to offer an MBA, followed by Stanford University in 1925. In the period between Harvard's and Stanford's MBA programs being introduced, an accrediting agency, the Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (ACSB), was founded in 1916 by 17 universities from the US. In 1925, ACSB name changed to the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), which developed new standards for admission to the association. AACSB approved minimum accreditation standards for schools seeking membership (AACSB, 2021). It is now known as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). The Harvard MBA had a slow start, enrolling only 33 students in the first cohort of its MBA, with only eight returning in the following year (Mintzberg 2004). Mintzberg (2004, p.22) states that neither Harvard nor Stanford had an easy time, 'having to contend with unenthusiastic sponsors from the business community, sceptical students, cynical university colleagues and trustees' (see also Schlossman et al. 1994, pp.9–10). It saw only four MBA degrees being granted in 1919 (Mintzberg 2004). However, in the late 1950s, MBA education went through some radical changes based on the recommendations of two reports published in 1959 by the Ford Foundation (Gordon & Howell 1959) and the Carnegie Corporation (Pierson 1959). Since then, an MBA education has become a very popular program of study (Baruch & Leeming 2001; Mihail & Elefterie 2006), representing a more general trend towards specialisation in higher

education (Hall 2008), carrying substantial weight with employers, working professionals and business schools across the globe.

Following these changes, within a decade, in addition to AACSB, the Association of MBAs (AMBA) was established in 1967. The AMBA (2020) is an impartial authority on postgraduate management education and the only professional membership association that claims to connect MBA students and graduate-accredited business schools and MBA employers worldwide. According to Lister (2019), the AMBA currently accredits 257 schools worldwide, but only MBA, Doctor of Business Administration and Master of Management (MoM) programs. The AACSB, in contrast, accredits business schools in both graduate and undergraduate programs. Only four universities in Australia are AMBA accredited. Thus, the duty to uphold the standards of MBA education remains with the business schools alone, at least in Australia.

2.2 What is an MBA all about

Baruch and Leeming (1996, p.27) suggest that MBA programs aim 'to prepare graduates for managerial roles, help them gain a better understanding of the […] business world and its needs, enrich their skills and provide them with competencies relevant to their careers'. However, the term *business administration* does not identify content as being about management. Professor Gavin Staude, formerly head of the Department of Management at Rhodes University and director of the Rhodes Investec Business School, states:

> the competitive advantage of an MBA is that it provides managers with
> a holistic perspective of management and business and it equips them
> to assist their organisations to deliver superior business results by

immersing them in the 'enabler' and cutting-edge disciplines (cited in

Jordan 2004, p.40).

Although an MBA education offers the opportunity to study a functional area in depth (Gupta et al. 2007), it also equips students with the required knowledge in all the basic functional areas. Staude's argument suggests that education is a rational entity that decides what it seeks to do. However, this is only an assumption, considering that MBA programs are administered differently in different business schools. For example, taking an example of South Australian universities, the MBA programs have different requirements for entry (see Table 2.1).

**Table 2.1: Entry requirements for MBA programs at three South Australian universities**

| MBA1 | MBA2 | MBA3 |
|---|---|---|
| A minimum of 2 years relevant work experience with a completed Bachelor degree or a minimum of 7 years related work experience and a satisfactory Graduate Management Admission Test score; for international students, a minimum International English Language Testing System of 7.0 overall with no less than 6.5 in any band | A minimum of 3 years full-time management experience with a recognised university undergraduate degree, equivalent professional qualifications or a Graduate Certificate or Graduate Diploma in Business Administration | A minimum of 3 years post-degree work experience with a Bachelor degree or equivalent qualification from an approved tertiary institution, and performance at interview |

According to Menez (2014), an MBA education is beneficial for working professionals who are looking to develop or further improve specific skills and competency in a variety of

functional areas, such as marketing, management, accounting, finance, business law and strategic decision-making processes. This introduces MBA candidates to the different functions within an organisation, enabling them to understand how independent parts of the organisation are interlinked and affect a business's overall functioning. Murray (1988, p.72) opines that these specialist MBA programs 'seek to provide, a general grounding in business concepts and techniques, specific skills and specialised knowledge'. However, Ference and Ritti (1970, p.648) critique this notion, suggesting that 'a caveat is in order […] since these designations of importance stem from what MBAs are doing now, not from what they are capable of doing in five, ten, or twenty years from now'. Even if this is the case, a general understanding of MBA education suggests that this would enable individuals to seek significant entry or re-entry into chosen business areas (Murray 1988). This type of outlook towards the business world has paved the way for MBA programs. It goes some way to explaining why an MBA degree has become the norm for several managerial positions and a preferred degree in the business world, to the extent that Sir Martin Sorrell, founder of the global advertising giant WPP once said, 'if you put two candidates together and one has an MBA and the other doesn't, then with other things being equal, I'd take the MBA' (cited in Dearlove 2006, p.6).

Sorrell's statement is a testament to the notion that MBAs are preferred over other degree holders. Although it fits the conventional wisdom concerning MBAs (Baruch & Peiperl 2000; Mihail & Elefterie 2006), in the absence of an understanding of what Sorrell meant by 'other things'—which is problematic—his overall meaning remains somewhat unclear. Also, this sort of determination obscures

> the fact that the unequal distribution of cultural capital potentially
>
> influences who has the capacity to acquire the degree in the first
>
> instance and who does not (for example, cultural assumptions about

race, sex and gender often impact how accessible education is for certain subjects) (Gillespie 2019).

Sorrell's statement sheds light on employers' inclination to select MBAs over non-MBAs and retain employees with an MBA over non-MBA employees. He assumes that MBAs possess a greater level of general business skills and required knowledge than candidates holding other business or management degrees, making MBAs preferable over other master degrees (Gupta et al. 2007). This assumption is consistent with graduate feedback presented by the AMBA (2020) on its website. Although such feedback does not explain how an MBA helps MBA candidates learn these skills, such perceived benefits and success stories from MBAs have made an MBA *the* degree to obtain. This presents the opportunity to explore an MBA as a means by which individuals seek to educate themselves. Thus, the label is potentially misleading as it tells prospective employers nothing about someone's ability, but their performance in a set of formalised assessments. According to Baruch and Leeming (2001), MBA program's goal is 'to add value to its graduates and make them better managers'. This sort of preconceived idea leads MBA candidates to *expect* that possessing an MBA will place them 'at a higher level in the pecking order for jobs' (Donnelly 1981, p.63) and qualify them for various positions within and outside their organisations.

McCormack (1984, p.12) develops the conditioned reflex that 'if you have a problem, hire' MBAs. His conditioned reflex stems from the reasoning that 'by virtue of their education, the MBAs were the best people' to administer areas in which his organisation had less expertise, or even confidence for that matter. However, over many years during which he employed MBAs in the IMG, he discovered that 'a master's in business can sometimes block an ability to master experience' (p.12), suggesting not all MBAs have *mastery* in business

administration. McCormack concluded that some MBAs adjusted 'to the real world quite nicely', but many employed by IMG were 'either congenitally naive or victims of their business training' (p.12). This is where focusing on MBA candidates' value systems becomes essential, as I discuss later in this chapter. McCormack argues that these MBAs had an uncanny knack for forming misconceptions. Although he did not identify all MBAs as naive, his words suggest an underlying belief that amid all the success stories that an MBA enjoys, several issues surround MBA education (e.g. what do MBA degrees actually provide to their graduates; and what is their focus?). Despite these issues, MBA degrees have grown in number. Although MBA credentials may land graduates in managerial positions, Mintzberg (2014, p.14) questions 'with what consequences?' for both graduates and employers.

2.3 Criticism of MBA education

For many years, MBA programs have gained admiration, respectability and prestige in academia and the business world. This has led MBAs to enjoy being in a pool of graduates whose pay packages have increased to new heights (Bennis & O'Toole 2005). Wall Street data ranks the Executive MBA and the MBA as the two highest paying degrees in 2018 (see Figure 2.1).
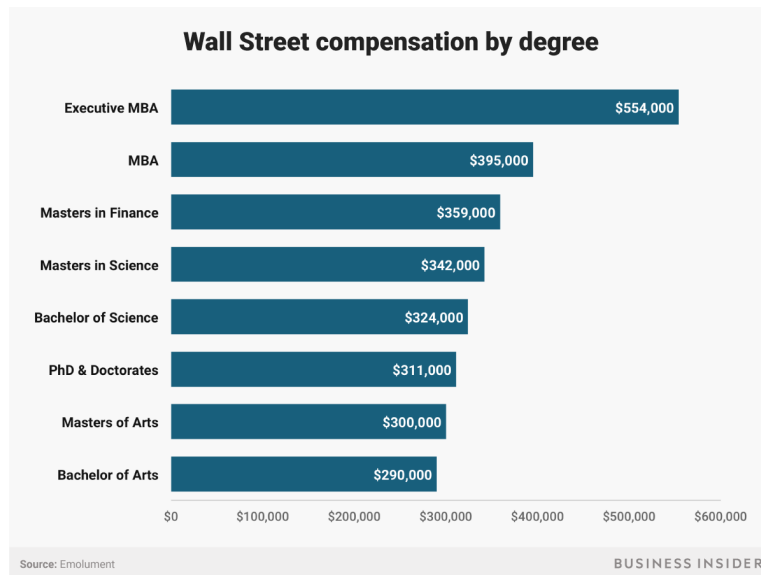
**Figure 2.1:** *Business Insider*/**Andy Kiersz, 2018 data from Emolument**(source:

https://www.businessinsider.com.au/highest-paid-degrees-on-wall-street-2018-

7?r=US&IR=T)

Despite the high pay grade for some MBA programs, intense criticism that MBA programs fail to prepare leaders and assist MBA candidates in developing an ethical 'mindset' has ensured a less favourable view of an MBA degree. These criticisms do not originate solely from academics or extensive scholarly research, but also from employers, students and some notable critics such as Dipak Jain (e.g. Jain & Golosinski 2011) and Henry Mintzberg (e.g. Mintzberg 2004, 2013, 2019). Harvard alumni Anderson and Escher (2010, pp.26–27) wrote:

> we understood the moment we received our diplomas, regardless of our
>
> good intentions and moral functions, we would be cast in the roles of
>
> the Darth Vader of the business world. This was not the professional
>
> reputation any of us wished to curry as we began our careers.

These different perceptions and ideas concerning an MBA education have added to confusion about the purpose of an MBA degree. Datar, Garvin and Cullen's (2011, pp.452-

453) data on MBA enrolment revealed a striking shift in program mix. They found that the 'traditional MBA degree – two years of full-time, in-residence training – is no longer the dominant model of graduate business education. Substitutes have grown, including one-year MBA programs, one-year specialized master's programs, part-time MBA programs, Executive MBA programs, online MBA programs, and corporate training and development programs. The traditional two-year program now accounts for only 40% of the MBA degrees conferred by AACSB accredited business schools'. However, although these different types of MBA programs exist, organisations seem inclined towards employees who possess an MBA. Their rationale for choosing MBAs over non-MBAs implies an assumption that MBAs have been educated in general management and are job-ready to perform all necessary roles and responsibilities from the outset (e.g. Ramlall & Ramlall 2016). Hence, MBAs must be better than other candidates in terms of the effectiveness of their communication skills, and their ability to foster a team environment and minimise competition between members of their teams (Elliott, Goodwin & Goodwin 1994). Although learning about these different facets of the work requirement is often seen as increasing MBA candidates' managerial competence (Gupta et al. 2007; Leavitt 1991; Sunoo 1999), the assumption that all MBAs are masters in these capabilities seems problematic. It equates the holding of an MBA with possession of these capabilities in every case (Mintzberg 2004).

Both Mintzberg and McCormack point to one problem when identifying MBAs; that is, employers quantifying their ability and placing them based on their 'advanced degree or high IQ scores' and automatically equating this to their business smartness (McCormack 1984, p.12). However, Mintzberg (2004, p.15) identifies this as just a pool of 'self-selected leaders' who are only proficient in their 'ability to give fast answers to little numerical and verbal problems'. Even though 'academic success and business achievement have relatively little

association with each other' (Bower 1966, p.171). There is no accepted or preferred way to measure student learning (Beale 1993), nor is there evidence that marks or scores correlate to employee selection. However, with respect to the pool of self-selected leaders, there is 'the implicit assumption that students who pass the entrance requirements […] bring an inherent or latent set of skills' (Nanus & Coffey 1973, p.30), 'which will be awakened, developed and honed by the various experiences undergone in the MBA program' (Herbert 1980, p.281). Besides, according to Kretovics and McCambridge (2002, p.2), at an MBA level, 'historically the most common assessment techniques included student evaluations, employer perceptions/opinions, objective tests and student exit interviews'. However, Mintzberg (2013, p.15) asks, 'do they measure managerial potential?' and McCormack (1984, p.12) cautions it is nothing more than 'an expensive error in judgement'. The holding of an MBA does not necessarily imply proficiency in learning attributes because what MBA programs 'teach can no longer be assumed to be consistent with management practices that improve business performance' (Currie, Knights & Starkey 2010, p.S2).

2.4 Different expectations—the tug-of-war

Often, MBA candidates expect their studies to improve their managerial competence and associate these expectations with a higher salary and career advancement, which would enable them to move up or out to seek different roles in different organisations (Gupta et al. 2007; Herrington 2010; Mintzberg 2004). Livingston (1971) calls this 'the myth of the well-educated manager'. According to Livingston (1971, p.79), 'academic achievement is not a valid yardstick to use in measuring managerial potential. Indeed, if academic achievement is equated with [economic] success in business, the well-educated manager is a myth'. It suggests that 'finding a competitive edge is an obsession for those looking to take an MBA […] It is not that the MBA has become any less rigorous. Rather, easier access to […] MBA programmes

has changed what the MBA means to employers' (CS-W, 2016, the Economist). Livingston (1971, p.84) argues that many people who 'aspire to high-level managerial positions … lack the will to manage' as they 'are not motivated to manage. They are motivated to earn high salaries and to attain high status' (also cited in Mintzberg 2004, p.16).

Further, findings such as those of Pfeffer and Fong (2002) contradict these student expectations. Pfeffer and Fong (2002, p.80) found 'little evidence that mastery of the knowledge acquired in business schools enhances people's careers, or that even attaining the MBA credential itself has many effects on graduates' salaries or career attainment'. Even though the business schools' 'best practice model is fundamentally flawed because we do not have the research knowledge to determine what is best practice' (Currie et al. 2010, p.S2). Nonetheless, businesses may rely heavily on this credential, identifying it as the grandest development stage (Mintzberg 2004, p.27). Although an MBA is often seen almost as an essential addition to undergraduate education 'in the face of prevalent discourses of "employability", individual responsibility and the need for the continual upgrading of skills' (Waters 2009, p.1865), *what* should be taught and *how* it should be taught to MBA candidates remain contentious. Mintzberg (2004) suggests management is a professional trade; a craft to be honed through practice and experience, not the traditional classroom.

This tug-of-war has ensured that MBA programs remain under constant scrutiny and review. No solution has emerged to suit all stakeholders (i.e. MBA candidates, working professionals and non-professionals, various employers, customers, business schools and government). Although researchers have long explored what *should* be taught to MBA candidates, often compounded as knowledge, skills, abilities and competencies (KSACs), many earlier studies were limited to how an MBA assists its students to secure higher salaries

(e.g. Cameron 2008; Simpson 2000), enhance their employability (quite broad), sustain current employment or support career advancement (e.g. Chen & Doherty 2013; Hay & Hodgkinson 2006; Mihail & Elefterie 2006). This is echoed in Einstein's (1949, cited by Calaprice 2005, p.68) observations of the broader education system, which, according to him, inculcates 'an exaggerated competitive attitude […] into the student, who is trained to worship material success as a preparation for his future career'.

Einstein's (1949) observation resonates with Mintzberg's (2004, p.54) famous condemnation of full-time MBA programs to aspirant managers as 'teaching the wrong things, in the wrong ways to the wrong people, or, at least, at the wrong time in their careers'. Both these arguments suggest that business schools are in error; however, MBA aspirants seem equally responsible. For example, there seem to be management graduates who are inclined and willing to learn management from the bottom up, while others, without much bottom-up learning, just increase their hopes 'to step in at the top positions from where they observe, analyse and advise' as soon as they graduate with an MBA (Mintzberg 2004). Although this has much to do with the sort of education system that business schools promote (Livingston 1971), Mintzberg (2004, p.53) argues that students require social skills and should not just be content with academic credentials. This requires a change in emphasis from short-term instrumental outcomes (e.g. salary, promotion) to a longer-term career process (e.g. developing better managers) (Wilkins et al. 2018).

Nevertheless, MBA programs continue to be seen mostly as 'specialised training in the functions of business, not general education in the practice of managing' (Mintzberg 2004, p.5). This is one reason why teaching ethics and leadership to MBA candidates becomes problematic in a classroom environment. It is, then, unclear what an MBA brings to the lives

of its students. This blurriness has misled both employees who are thinking of pursuing an MBA for a variety of reasons and employers who are yearning to increase their MBA candidate pool. This misdirected judgement often leads business organisations to select managerial candidates based on their quantitative records as individual performers. However, they usually end up picking the wrong people to develop as managers, which is arguably a perennial problem (Livingston 1971, cited in Mintzberg 2004, p.16).

Some blame educators for failing in their responsibility to shape students' attitudes towards responsible and ethical behaviour (Koljatic & Silva 2015). Others point out that as educators' academic careers are less relevant to this area of expertise, in general, they are disinclined to deal with essential discussion topics, such as ethics and corporate social responsibility (Crane et al. 2008). Although Koljatic and Silva's (2015) argument makes sense in that students' values, beliefs and attitudes play a crucial role in their learning (Bektas & Nalcaci 2012; Bisman 2004; Krishnan 2008), simply superficially 'including elements of societal, environmental and ethical concerns in a management course would achieve no purpose' (Arora 2018, p.202). As Mintzberg (2013, p.20) asserts, 'being superficial is an occupational hazard of managerial work'. This indicates why business schools are urged to develop their MBA curricula to satisfy calls to produce ethical leaders. However, 'divided along functional lines, MBA curricula fail to provide much opportunity for an integrative perspective' (Currie et al. 2011, p.S2).

2.5 MBA curricula

In general, higher levels of reflection are thought to be critical to effective learning (Hay, Peltier & Drago 2004, p.172). However, many argue that business schools are on the wrong track (Bennis & O'Toole 2005). In the wake of many corporate scandals (e.g. see Adler

2002; Carson 2003) and global economic tsunami (e.g. Currie et al. 2011), many question whether business schools have lost their way and forgotten how to contribute to civic life (Jain & Golosinski 2011). McCormack (1984, p.12) writes that he once heard someone say that 'if Thomas Edison had gone to business school we would all be reading by larger candles'. Ghoshal (2005, p.75) argues that the US 'corporate scandals have stimulated a frenzy of activities in business schools around the world. Deans are extolling how much their curricula focus on business ethics'. These sorts of scandals and global economic crises prompted Mintzberg to blame 'less than relevant' MBA curricula as the main culprit (Mintzberg 2004). Currie et al. (2011, p.S2) comment, 'what our current situation demonstrates is that we ignore the relationship between management, business and the good life [phronesis; Aristotelian philosophy], broadly defined, at our peril' (parenthesis in original text). Although phronesis means *practical wisdom*, it is not usually defined as the good life, but contributes to the good life.

Kurt Lewin (1945, p.129) argues that 'nothing is as practical as a good theory'. However, the business community often criticises MBA programs for over-emphasising theory rather than practice in communication, ethics and leadership (Klimoski & Amos 2012). Lewin's argument and this criticism from the business community raise doubts about the way theories are taught to MBA candidates. For example, Ghoshal (2005, p.79) argues:

> management theories at present are overwhelmingly causal or
> functional in their modes of explanation. Ethics, or morality, however,
> are mental phenomena. As a result, they have had to be excluded from
> our theory and from the practices that such theories have shaped.

This suggests that the underlying issue is more about teaching the wrong theories or teaching theory separated from values and philosophy rather than too much theory. Ghoshal (2005, p.88) also argues that 'a theory must illuminate and explain and, if it cannot do those things, it is not a theory'. This has increased academia's concerns with how MBA programs facilitate the application of knowledge and the link between education context and work setting, for which theory is quite necessary (Benjamin & O'Reilly 2011). This sort of concern is in line with Segon and Booth's (2010, p.157) argument that MBA programs 'are rarely holistic, with subjects taught in isolation with little integration across the entire degree'. For example, Anderson and Escher (2010, p.48), reflecting on their experiences as students from Harvard, write that 'another area of trouble in business education is the compartmentalisation of the curriculum'. Although the Harvard course offerings had a broad range in their MBA, 'ranging from economics to operations to finance', Anderson and Escher acknowledge that they were rarely 'encouraged to seek a unifying theme among our courses'. This highlights how 'the primacy of the economic commands the majority of attention and demeans other perspectives' (Currie et al. 2011, p.S2). It also suggests that MBA students can be left on their own to integrate different theories and models and concepts with given tasks (Gosling & Mintzberg 2004).

Gosling and Mintzberg (2004, p.19) observe that 'in MBA programs, for instance, students get the word on shareholder value in finance, on empowerment in organisational behaviour (OB), on customer service in marketing. Somehow, they are supposed to put this all together. They never do'. Thus, to foster deeper thinking, educational programs must be designed keeping in mind the goal of achieving 'reflective thinking status', which includes 'the role of the lecturer, student interaction and course design and content' (Hay et al. 2004, p.172). Even though most of the top business school websites

put leadership at the core of our[their] unique selling propositions […]

it does not help us to go much further in defining what business schools

have to offer in their programs or in order to prepare the graduates for

the challenges in the professional world (de Meyer 2011, p.44).

However, Bennis and O'Toole (2005, p.98) argue that 'the curriculum is the effect, not the cause, of what ails the modern business school'. Thus, rather than blaming curricula outright, they point towards the dramatic shift in business school culture. For example, Rubin and Dierdorff (2007) analysed the MBA curricula of 373 schools. They identified these curricula from three primary sources: '1) managerial competency information documented in a source article (Dierdorff & Rubin 2006); 2) MBA program administrators' perceptions of curricular alignment and design; and 3) MBA course requirement information from accredited programs'. They concluded that although MBA programs adequately cover the essential requirements for managerial competency (hard skills/technical), the most critical aspects, such as managing people and strategy and innovation (soft skills/interpersonal), remain the weakest (Mihail & Elefterie 2006; Rubin & Dierdorff 2007). Conversely, business schools claim that by imparting *hard* knowledge, they enhance their students' technical knowledge and competency to perform well in organisations. Yet, the business community continues to blame business schools for their inability to fulfil the *soft* requirement. However, it is doubtful that imparting hard knowledge could be seen objectively without considering the nature of knowledge. Perhaps this highlights how the business community is not disputing or displeased with business schools' claims about preparing professionals with an MBA credential. They are merely talking about human skills (soft requirement) that are not up to standard. Hay et al. (2004, p.173) argue that course design and content are quite crucial as they must 'spark imagination, encourage critical thought and analysis and not rely too heavily on technical

approaches which tend to encourage rote learning'. According to Kolb and Kolb (2009, pp.321–322), 'when teachers plan their courses, they may or may not explicitly consider the kinds of learning space they are creating and the appropriateness of these spaces for the students in their course and/or for the material being taught'. Thus, to foster in-depth thinking and help students learn human skills, an MBA curriculum requires an increased focus on 'applied issues, problem-solving tasks, integration activities and other assessment techniques that move beyond simple memorisation of material, followed by merely reporting what has been learned' (Hay et al. 2004, p.174).

This decades-old debate on how MBA programs are supposed to produce leaders with human skills and an ethical 'mindset' has brought to the surface the differences among various MBA programs concerning leadership and management. Because of these unclear curricula, 'leadership and management are […] often confused with each other' (de Meyer 2011, p. 44). To give this confusion some direction, Mintzberg (2004) uses the word *management* and *leadership* interchangeably. He argues that management should not be ceded to leadership as 'managers have to lead and leaders have to manage' (p.6), suggesting that the idea that leadership is supposed to be something more significant and critical seems problematic. Heifetz (2021) writes:

> To lead is to live with danger. Although it may be exciting to think of leadership as inspiration, decisive action, and powerful rewards, leading requires taking risks that can jeopardize your career and your personal life. It requires putting yourself on the line, disturbing the status quo, and working with organizational and political conflicts. Those who choose to lead take the risks and sometimes are neutralized for doing so.

In FoL, students explore how self-knowledge and self-discipline form the foundation for staying alive in leadership. FoL is about a transformative personal experience – to anchor yourself and generate the freedom and power to work with the plurality of your identities in the daily professional practice of leadership (Heifetz 2021). The subject is structured into small group discussions and draws on student cases and the shared cases of the current crises facing communities around the world. It is designed to help students to understand self, identity and the dynamics of major cultural, social, political and economic change (Heifetz 2021).

2.6 Ethics and leadership characteristics

Increasing concerns about teaching, research and ethics of business 'have provided grist for high-profile media features and scholarly journals' (Jain & Golosinski 2011, p.64). When an MBA education was going through a radical change, Drucker (1954) put management on the map by depicting it as a distinct function and being a manager as a distinct responsibility, but Mintzberg (2013) argues that leadership has since pushed it off the map. Mintzberg (2004) revisited the site of his doctoral research (Mintzberg 1968), spending a day with each of the 29 managers and observing them in different settings; he concluded 'Enough Leadership—Time for "Communityship"' (p.7). He states that 'we are now inundated with great stories about the grand successes and even grander failures of great leaders, but we have yet to come to grips with the realities of being a manager' (Mintzberg 2004, p.1). Navarro (2008) remarks that 'neither increased litigation nor government regulation is sufficient to police corporate malfeasance'. Wager (2018, p.2) argues that 'ethical frameworks that provide a way to go beyond existing legal frameworks can also provide an opportunity to ignore them'. Thus, business schools remain the only other entity that 'can—and should be a positive force in bringing about ethical change' (Adler 2002; Navarro 2008, p.110). However, Mintzberg (2004, p.32) argues that

Education cannot pour life experience into a vessel of native intelligence, not even into a vessel of leadership potential. But it can shape a vessel already brimming with the experiences of leadership and life.

Business ethics has gained increased attention from both business practitioners and academic researchers who are mostly interested in developing ethical values (Harris & Sutton 1995, p.805). Despite the significant literature on values and ethics (e.g., about 41,300 articles on Google Scholar) concerning work behaviour and professionalism, ethical leadership's relative importance remains low (Sama & Shoaf 2008). Mintzberg (2004) argues that 'without leadership management is sterile and without management, leadership is disconnected and encourages hubris', which requires 'having some insight into people' (McCormack 1984, p.21). Thus, as Sama and Shoaf (2008, p.40) assert:

it is useful to probe the extent to which ethics in the professions can contribute to a robust economy, legitimacy aims and improved moral fibre of the business represented in this ever-growing sector and how unethical professional norms tend to erode growth potential, consumer confidence and market stability.

However, when we discuss ethics, issues concerning what constitutes ethics become somewhat blurred. Instead, whether an MBA is designed to assist its candidate learn ethical norms and values becomes pertinent. McCormack (1984, p.9) concludes that even though an MBA is valuable, it has 'definite limitations when applied to the real world'. He identifies the best and the worst of MBA in a unique manner. In his words, 'An MBA […] as an *education*,

as part of an ongoing learning process, it is at best a foundation and at worst a naive form of arrogance' (p.9).

McCormack's argument of a naive form of arrogance fits with Gupta et al.'s (2007) criticism of MBA education, that it has developed MBAs into narcissists and self-publicists. Although both arguments indicate some stereotyping, they highlight how an MBA has not successfully created ethical leaders in a classroom environment. This suggests that an MBA lays a foundation to start learning, but cannot teach 'all the ins and outs of everyday business life' as those are largely a self-reflection process (McCormack 1984). This argument fits with Mintzberg's (2004) claim that managers can significantly improve their practice of managing from an ethical perspective, but only if an MBA classroom is engaging enough to allow students to make use of their own experiences. Livingston (1971) asserts that such engagement requires the *will to manage*, but according to Mintzberg, business schools have successfully taught MBA candidates to misinterpret that will as a *zest for business* (Mintzberg 2004). This whole idea of a zest for business being the most compelling and vital contribution that MBAs make to the economy not only misdirects MBAs to focus on 'getting the most out of resources' available at their disposal, but also derails them from learning how to tap into 'the energy of *people*' (Mintzberg 2004, p.16). Several studies support this argument (e.g., Evans & Robertson, 2003; Evans, Trevino & Weaver, 2006; Segon & Booth, 2010; Solberg, Strong & McGuire, 1995).

In their study of over 200 full-time MBA programs, Evans, Trevino and Weaver (2006, p.278) conclude that business schools' approach and the amount of attention they give to ethics varies widely. The authors argue that for business schools to be successful in attending to ethics and leadership, MBA programs must incorporate current factors that push business schools

both towards and away from attending to ethics. Keeping in mind that flexibility and adaptability are crucial attributes of MBA programs, 'there is a need for continuous review of content and structure to reflect the changing needs and demands of the business world' (Segon & Booth 2010, p.155). In another study of 323 business school deans, Solberg, Strong and McGuire (1995) found that less than a quarter of deans favoured teaching ethics as a separate course, while most favoured integrating the teaching of ethics into existing functional courses. However, the process of integrating ethics into different courses was not discussed. Eight years later, another study surveyed business school deans with the aim of understanding how business schools have integrated ethics into their MBA curricula (Evans & Robertson 2003). The survey results included that only a quarter of the MBA programs had a course devoted to ethics. For the rest, 40% of the deans believed that they should have both stand-alone and integrated ethics in their MBA courses, while 45% believed that integrated courses were sufficient to teach ethics to their MBA candidates. Evans, Trevino and Weaver (2006, p.279) argue that 'students can easily dismiss a stand-alone ethics course as being peripheral to their core business education, whereas an integrated approach places ethics in functional contexts that can, in theory, show the business relevance of ethics'. However, it is essential to note that there was no mention of how ethics was taught in those MBA programs. Ghoshal (2005, p.88) argues that if Deans

> intend to infuse a concern for ethics and for responsible management in the research and teaching that are carried out in their institutions, they have to acknowledge that the tokenism of [superficially] adding a course on ethics will not achieve their goals.

Here, the underlying issue is not about whether ethics is taught in MBA programs; it is a matter of whether deans consider ethics to be an inseparable part of their MBA content. MBA

programs can teach philosophical frameworks for assessing and understanding ethics, but that is not the same as teaching ethics. It largely depends on the experiences and habits that students have developed over time. Here, understanding Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus becomes essential. Bourdieu conceptualises habitus as more than a simple habitual state—a way of being (Gillespie 2019). To understand habitus, we need to move beyond *just* ethics to understand the social structures that produce or change it. Bourdieu (1977) discusses how habitus is formed very early in the family setting but evolves with education and workplace experience. The latter encourages changes in people's practices, and provides 'unlimited scope for the production of new ideas, views and approaches based on socio-historical, political, economic, cultural and technological context in which they are generated' (Costa & Murphy 2015, pp.7–8). However, to teach ethics, business schools must first understand that 'habitus encapsulates social action through dispositions and can be broadly explained as the evolving process through which individuals act, think, perceive and approach the world and their role in it' (Costa & Murphy 2015, p.7). These are a 'reflection of their lived trajectories [that] justify their approaches to practice' (Bourdieu 2000, p.138). Although business schools are not so much about instilling norms of behaviour in individuals, it is essential for them to understand the values and beliefs that drive them. For Lamaison and Bourdieu (1986, p.113), 'it is clear that the problem does not have to be posed in terms of spontaneity and constraint, of freedom and necessity, of the individual and the social. Habitus as a sense of the game is the social game incarnate, become nature'. It comes back to providing MBA candidates with the opportunity and encouragement to *reflect* on their values and ethics, and permitting them to recognise themselves and give weight to values and ethical standards that may have been buried or eroded by the *zest for business* (Mintzberg 2004).

It was only three years after Evans and Robertson (2003) that another study stated that most MBA programs do not have ethics course (Evans et al. 2006). That investigation revealed that the deans listed *a lack of faculty interest* as the top impediment to emphasising ethics. Although there is a difference between the lack of an ethics-related course and a lack of interest in ethics, this indicates that the general institutional environment places very few demands on MBA programs to impart required education in ethics, which 'may even serve to discourage schools from doing so' (Evans et al. 2006, p.290). All these studies explain why the business community calls out business schools for not producing ethical leaders. Mintzberg (2004, pp.28–29) argues that much of the success that MBAs enjoys is 'delusory'. It is the approach to educating MBA candidates that undermines leadership, which has both economic and social consequences. However, what constitutes 'success' is problematic; it cannot be generalised for all MBAs. Jain and Golosinski (2011, p.66) write:

> in the aftermath of this disruption, savvy business schools will renew themselves to stay relevant. They will think beyond conventional boundaries in three key ways. They will seek to look beyond business to find ways to make social contributions. They will also look beyond material success to find opportunities to cultivate significance. And they will look beyond the USA to take a global view.

However, Mintzberg (2019) argues that little has changed since he published his book *Managers not MBAs* (2004). This is where his argument on how MBA programs educate the right people in the wrong ways with the wrong consequences (Mintzberg 2004) becomes so important to investigate. This may create a dilemma in regard to choosing a multimethod approach to identify ethical problems or develop an overarching ethical perspective or framework to act on those issues (Evans at al. 2006). This raises the question of whether an

MBA education should continue to only focus on the business's functional side or develop different methods to facilitate learning in managing.

2.7 An MBA—an education in business or management

This section explores several ideas from Mintzberg's famous book *Managers not MBAs* (Mintzberg, 2004). Among many other issues surrounding what an MBA is all about, one of the most prominent is an ongoing debate about whether an MBA is a business education or a degree that teaches management. Mintzberg (2004, p.19; 2019) argues that 'the trouble with "management" education is that it is business education and leaves a distorted impression of management'. He identifies management as a practice that needs to 'blend a good deal of craft (experience) with a certain amount of art (insight) and some science (analysis)' (Mintzberg 2004, p.19). However, until MBA candidates ground the concepts that they learn from theory-based (such as leadership and strategy management) or technical courses (such as accounting, finance and economics) in their work experience, they will not be able to gain insights to resolve real-life problems (see Ghoshal 2005; McCormack 1984; Mintzberg 2004, 2013). This could result in a superficial analysis of the issues, which is quite common when adopting a case study view to introduce the blend that Mintzberg discusses (Mintzberg 2013, p.20). As Einstein (1921b, cited by Calaprice 2005, p.65) has said:

> It is not so very important for a person to learn facts. For that he does
>
> not really need college. He can learn them from books. The value of an
>
> education […] is not the learning of many facts, but the training of the
>
> mind to think something that cannot be learned from textbooks.

According to Ghoshal (2005, p.76), 'by propagating ideologically inspired amoral theories, business schools [some, if not all] have actively freed their students from any sense

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of moral responsibility'. This is evident from highly publicised corporate scandals and 'instances of management misconduct that have eroded public faith such as TEPCO, Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, Adelphia, and Arthur Andersen, and fuelled legislative reactions such as the Sarbanes-Oxley Act in the United States (Wankel & Stachowicz-Stanusch, 2011, p.3). Even though such scandals led management scholars and educators to question the assumptions underlying traditional management education (Ghoshal, 2005), it is 'incumbent on business schools not only to imbue students with a deep practical understanding of globalization, innovation, and the tools of the functional areas, but to develop their ability and inclination to think and act wisely and morally' (Wankel & Stachowicz-Stanusch, 2011, p.4). Although this sort of moral learning environment is what is called for, 'relatively little is known about how management education can prepare managers and professionals' to develop that moral compass (Wankel & Stachowicz-Stanusch, 2011, p.5). This raises two questions: how ethics can be integrated in the functional courses across MBA programs and how business school deans could play an active role in this integration. Although these questions have been asked time and again, this 'quest for integrity in business and education is focused not on microlevel wrongdoing, but rather on the larger edifice of global business that has proven a context within which ethics might be disregarded' (Wankel & Stachowicz-Stanusch, 2011, p.5).

Mintzberg (2013, p.22) argues that MBAs from prestigious universities, such as Harvard, tend to become 'good investment bankers, financial analysts, or consultants', which satisfies the assumption that an MBA is a key to success. Still, they taste failure in their hope to lead big corporations because 'the pressures of managing do not encourage the development of reflective planners' (p.22). This argument fits Schon's (1983) view that the ability to reflect is an essential prerequisite for making effective management decisions—especially in exclusive environments—and cannot provide a defined or prescriptive solution. Thus, until

MBA candidates are able to learn how to develop these reflective practices and moral responsibility 'to stand back and understand what is happening and why' (Hay et al. 2004, p.170), they will be left with 'unrealistic assumptions and invalid prescriptions—yet, the theory and the dictum it leads to remain absolute' (Ghoshal 2005, p.81). This view reflects Perkin's (1990, p.305) argument:

> management theory, the basis of the new professionalism was looked on with suspicion by many, if not most, practising business men, who regarded management as an art to be learned on the job rather than a science based on intellectual theory.

In Hermann's provocatively titled book, *Outsmart the MBA Clones* (2008), he asks the question: 'what's wrong with MBA–graduate managers who apply the professional knowledge and skills they have learned?' Mintzberg (2013, p.20) argues that 'no matter what they are doing, managers are plagued by what they might do and what they must do'. Hermann's example of Copernicus Marketing Consulting, an American company that more than a decade ago published an article, 'The Commoditization of Brands', is an excellent example of this. Hermann (2008, pp.2–3) argues that 'our brands have come to resemble one another for the same reasons our products began to resemble one another: because marketers themselves have become virtually indistinguishable'. This does not suggest that all MBAs are consulting each other before making decisions just because they belong to an *MBA cult*, but their similar results stem from their alike thinking (Hermann 2008). Paucar-Caceres (2008, p.189) notes that most MBAs demonstrate 'signs of being fairly similar across the huge range of business schools that are dominated by the traditional functional areas of marketing, accounting and corporate strategy' (Segon & Booth 2010, p.156). This sort of similar education environment inculcates

alike thinking, which results in MBAs all achieving similar results (Hermann 2008, p.3). This raises the question, 'where has all the judgement gone…?' (Mintzberg 2013, p.2).

Of course, not every MBA graduate will go on to become an MBA clone. Still, these sorts of issues point towards MBA candidates as an at-risk population caged in the box throughout their MBA journey. According to Mintzberg (2004, p.16), they are repeatedly misinformed that the end result matters most and they must take it as 'their most important contribution to the economy'. However, 'a surprising number of those who succeed in that hope fail in those positions' anyway (Mintzberg 2004, pp.15–16).

In another example, Mintzberg writes about his experience with a successful manager of a major airline who summarised what she saw in her MBA husband: 'He has the technique, thinks he knows the best. But he is frustrated because he doesn't understand the complexities and the politics. He thinks he has the answers but is frustrated by being unable to do anything about it'; in response to which, Mintzberg commented, 'he never learned management in the business school' (Mintzberg 2004, p.41)

This suggests that all who possess the tools required to build something do not necessarily produce. Arguably, these observations suggest that an MBA is an education in administering a business more than an education in managing it if the in-class environment does not encourage practising managers to apply concepts to their own experience and learn from them (Mintzberg 2004, 2013). This will make MBA students move away from reflecting on their jobs, which is 'as much about doing in order to think as thinking in order to do' (Mintzberg 2004, p.33), and suggests that 'business schools do not need to do a great deal *more* [emphasis added] to help prevent future Enrons; they need only to stop doing a lot they

currently do' (Ghoshal 2005, p.75). Unless this happens, we can neither discuss the practice of managing nor address the issues around business schools producing ethical leaders. Haskins (1959, p.1), one of the deans of Harvard, writes in his book, *The Rise of Universities* (1959):

> A great teacher like Socrates gave no diplomas; if a modern student sat
>
> at his feet for three months, he would demand a certificate, something
>
> tangible and external to show for it – an excellent theme, by the way,
>
> for a Socratic dialogue.

Arguably, this sort of pre-MBA expectation and belief might sway MBA candidates away from learning how to manage people and focus too much on business functions.

2.8 Taylorist *v*. Mintzbergian views and their impact on MBA education

> In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first.
>
> (Taylor 1911, p.2)

> Mozart is pulling the strings; everyone plays to his highly orchestrated
>
> score. We shall have professional management as soon as other
>
> organizations become as programmed as the symphony orchestra,
>
> playing their strategies like scores from Mozart, with all the obedient
>
> employees and customers sitting in neat rows responding on cue.
>
> (Mintzberg 2004, pp.12–13)

Mintzberg's metaphor suggests that most people are employed because they can cooperate and follow the lead (score and conductor), although soloists are still valued. There is significant literature on what a manager needs to do to manage people, which does not

necessarily mean that there is a right way, but it 'is a constant process of breaking out of systems and challenging conditioned reflexes, of rubbing against the grain' (McCormack 1984, p.12).

In the early stages, Taylor (1911) posed a question to business schools: 'should business schools embrace an academic model and focus on management science?' Although the answer at that time was to select from two available choices: first, the *Wharton view*, which included both scientific methods and theory, as well as the delivery of specialised skills in a management science context; and second, the *Harvard view*, which supported the MBA curriculum as a reflection of a professional model emphasising general management principles (Navarro 2008, p.109), Agafonow (2019, p.800) questions, "but is management science a model?" Mintzberg (2004, p.10) argues that 'science is about the development of systematic knowledge through research. That is hardly the purpose of management'. However, this could be due to an over-focus on natural philosophy with little or no consideration of the other two, moral philosophy and metaphysics. Although we can argue that management is a science in some ways—as managers have to gather information from all the sources they can find—without insight, vision or intuition, managing is not possible (Mintzberg 2004). Although Miner (1984, 2003) was optimistic about the future of management as a science, arguably, too much focus on learning the functions of business might ignore the fact that 'the practice of management is characterized by its ambiguity' (Mintzberg 2004, p.13). For example, Peters and Waterman Jr (1988, p.90) in their influential book, *In Search of Excellence*, write:

> Science is easier to understand when we can grasp principles through
> metaphors from the world we know—things we have touched, seen, or
> smelled […]. Similarly, the world of management seemed easier when
> we drew parallels with the military, most people's metaphor still for

management structure in the twentieth century. But again, the parallels broke down when we tried to understand anything more complex than, for instance, a regiment under fire.

This is consistent with Mintzberg's view that an organisation can program most of its work using specialists (people on whom managers can rely on getting a specific technical job done). Still, it leaves managers exposed to 'messy stuff—the intractable problems, the complicated connections' (Mintzberg 2004, p.13). This is where the concept of soft emerges; working on this messiness consisting of intractable problems and complex connections requires managers to have experience, intuition, judgement and wisdom—something that cannot be taught by just looking at *one best way* (Mintzberg 2004). However, 'over the last 50 years business school research has increasingly adopted the "scientific" model' (Ghoshal 2005, pp.76)—an approach that Hayek (1989) describes as the pretence of knowledge. This sort of facade has 'demanded theorizing based on partialization of analysis, the exclusion of any role for human intentionality or choice and the use of sharp assumptions and deductive reasoning' (Ghoshal 2005, p.77). However, Perkin (1990, p.306) argues that even though sceptics doubted 'management's pretensions to intellectual autonomy […] the professionalization of management and the bureaucratization of industry were the necessary concomitant of the corporate economy'. Perkin (1990, p.306) cites Gaitskell, in the context of his attempt to modernise Britain's labour party in 1957:

> As companies grow larger and their affairs more complex, management becomes increasingly important, increasingly hierarchical, increasing specialist […]. More and more it assumes a life of its own. In the large companies, it is the managers who now undertake the functions once performed by capitalist owners.

Ghoshal (2005, p.77) goes one step further regarding the ramifications of business as 'science', by arguing that 'since morality, or ethics, is inseparable from human intentionality, a precondition for making business studies a science has been the denial of any moral or ethical considerations in our theories and, therefore, in our prescriptions for management practice'. Thus, Mintzberg (2004) calls management neither wholly science, a profession, nor even applied science, but primarily a craft. He writes: 'put together a good deal of craft with the right touch of art alongside some use of science and you end up with a job that is above all a *practice*, learned through experience and rooted in context' (Mintzberg 2013, p.9). Thus, calling management a science is a fake separation of all the three philosophies.

However, the Taylorist *definition* of *art* is quite different from the Mintzbergian *description* of it. According to Taylor (2004, p.21), the art of management is 'knowing exactly what you want men to do and then seeing that they do it in the best and the cheapest way'. While Taylor writes from the scientific perspective and emphasises how to achieve the end result in the best possible and the most economical manner, Mintzberg's statement focuses on how 'managing is largely a facilitating activity' (Mintzberg 2004, p.12). This idea of facilitation is similar to Follet's description of management as 'the art of getting things done through people' (Follett's works cited in de Meyer 2011, p.45).

Follett was an early 20th-century social worker and management guru, *avant la lettre*, widely regarded as the *mother of management*. She argued that 'the most essential work of the leader is to create more leaders' and that 'leadership is not defined by the exercise of power but by the capacity to increase the sense of power among those led' (cited in Jain & Golosinski 2011, p.65). Russell (1938, p.4) described power as 'the fundamental concept in social

science…, in the same sense in which energy is the fundamental concept in physics.' Although 'power is certainly one of the major areas of study in management' (Rahim 1989, p.545), Follett, and Las Heras and Chinchilla (2011, p.242) argue that 'the goal is to have leaders who help to develop other leaders', which suggests that poor leaders will beget more poor leaders. Mintzberg (2013, p.18) argues that a manager 'can never be free to forget the work, never has the pleasure of knowing, even temporarily, that there is nothing left to do […] the work of managing is "one damm thing after another"'. In the words of Bennis and O'Toole (2005, p.99), 'When applied to business—where judgments are made with messy, incomplete data— statistical and methodological wizardry can blind rather than illuminate'.

The Taylorist view suggests that 'managers have to know a lot and they often have to make decisions based on that knowledge'. However, when it comes to working in 'large organizations and those concerned with "knowledge of work" managers have to lead better, so that others can know better and therefore act better' (Taylor 2004, p.12). However, Livingston (1971) opines that successful managing is not about a manager's success but about fostering success in others (cited in Mintzberg 2004, p.16). Managers are only as good as their ability to work things out thoughtfully in their way (Mintzberg 2013, p.12). Thus, it can be argued that the Taylorist view is relatively centralised where top officials decide the good and the best and the rest need to follow their decision. However, Mintzberg establishes a more decentralised view, where every individual needs to better themselves to achieve what is best in each context. As Mintzberg (2004, p.12) puts it:

> The idea that the chief does it all, coming up with the grand strategy
>
> and then driving its implementation by everyone else, is frequently a
>
> myth left over from the mass production of simple goods. Yet it is one
>
> of the impressions left by MBA education.

Ghoshal (2005) argues that we have rejected 'the "romanticism" of analysing corporate behaviors in terms of the choices, actions and achievements of individuals' and instead have 'adopted the "scientific" approach' to try 'to discover patterns and laws'. This sort of outlook has 'replaced all notions of human intentionality with a firm belief in causal determinism for explaining all aspects of corporate performance' (Ghoshal 2005, p.77). Arguably, leaving this sort of impression on employers (who employ MBAs) and employees (who pursue an MBA) for over a century has influenced how management *should be* taught in business schools. This generalised view identifies an MBA as *the* MBA and calls it 'the only truly global qualification, the only license to trade internationally' (Watts 1997 cited in Mintzberg 2004, p.11). It ignores the fact that management is deeply embedded in everyday living practices and endorses the notion that all MBAs are the same and should be recognised as a license to trade (Mintzberg 2004). Thus, if business schools want to 'make significant headway in improving the practice of managing', they need to bring 'this overt image in line with the covert reality' to understand the *soft* aspect of managing people (Mintzberg 2013, p.16). However, this requires 'a deep understanding of what "drives" people, what their aspirations, *their values* [italics added] and their principles in life are and how development is linked to the personal and collective potentials of people' (Hagmann et al. 2003, p.21). It raises two questions: what are values and how do people develop their principles in life?

2.9 What are values?

Rokeach (1973) states that the value concept has been employed in two distinct ways in human discourse. Although it is quite challenging to identify if a person holds *a single value*, to differentiate between the two concepts, Rokeach points out that 'we will often say that a

person holds "a value" but also that an object "has value"' (Rokeach 1973, p.4). Thus, for clarity, while writing *value or values*, I refer to the former, a person holding a value.

Values play a central role in an organisation's culture, strategy and behaviour (Ives & Kidwell 2019). However, when we discuss organisations and their behaviour, we are talking about the behaviour of their employees. Thus, it makes sense to discuss the concept of values at the individual level and work our way up to understand why people in organisations behave the way they do. Considering the concept of values from a social and psychological perspective, it seems that it 'has gone in and out of fashion within sociology' (Hitlin & Piliavin 2004, p.359). Hitlin and Piliavin (2004, p.359) write that 'it seems *de rigeur* in sociological writing to take on the phrase "norms and values" to explain human behavior to connote the taken-for-granted process through which social structures regulate the actions of individuals [and vice versa]'. Although this suggests that values are considered a source of influencing observed behaviour, they could also be identified as interpreting behaviour at a conceptual level, like norms. As discussed earlier:

> habitus has a collective nature as a product of collective, class-based
> practices, but at the same time, it could be observed at the individual
> level as a person's attitudes, expectations and dispositions. As
> individuals internalise collective cultural practices, these practices
> become 'embodied', in Bourdieu's terms (Bodovski 2015, p.42).

Still, values are often ignored as either too subjective or too challenging to understand because of a lack of tools to measure values (Hitlin & Piliavin 2004). Williams (1968, p.16) points out that when employed, 'the term "values" has been used variously to refer to interests, pleasure, likes, preferences, duties, moral obligations, desires, wants, goals, needs, aversions

and attractions and many other kinds of selective orientations'. However, these *other kinds of selective orientations* are manifold, depending on the culture of geography. Thus, to understand the concept of values, both Kluckholm's (1951) way of looking at the values concept from cultural imperatives and how *it leads to particular actions* and Rokeach's (1973) assertion that it *gives meaning to action* offer insightful and potentially complementary lenses for analysis. Kluckholm (1951, p.395) states that 'value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group [or individual within a group], of the *desirable* [and desired], which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of action'. Rokeach (1973, p.5) states that values are 'enduring beliefs that a specific mode of conduct is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence'. Hitlin and Piliavin (2004) argue that Kluckholm emphasises action and Rokeach identifies values as giving meaning to the action. However, these could also be discussed as Rokeach connecting values to *a specific mode of conduct*; that is, an action that has more to do with ethics, which considers how values find expression in a particular context—how they apply in action. For Kluckhohn, values are conceptual, distinct from specific actions, but they influence choices concerning actions; that is, they influence ethical choices.

Rokeach (1973, p.3) writes that 'any conception of the nature of human values, if it is to be scientifically fruitful […] should clearly distinguish the value concept from other concepts with which it might be confused – such concepts as attitude, social norm and need'. Hitlin and Piliavin (2004, p.360) add two items to Hetcher's (1993) four impediments to values: first, that values are often conflated with other social psychological phenomena; and second, that values have historical and cultural variability in their content (also see Rokeach 1973, p.3). This provides underlying support to Rokeach's (1973) statement. Rokeach (1973, p.7) identifies values as 'prescriptive or proscriptive beliefs, where in some means or end of action is judged

to be desirable or undesirable', according to which people choose to act (Allport 1961, p.454). This belief has a cognitive, affective and behavioural component. To explain these three, I use arguments from Rokeach's (1973), Morris's (1956) and Kluckhohn's (1951) work. From a cognitive perspective, values are cognition about an individual's desire, which Morris calls a 'conceived value' and Kluckhohn a 'conception of desirables'. Rokeach (1973, p.7) explains that 'to say that a person has a value[values] is to say that cognitively he knows the correct way to behave or the correct end-state to strive for'. However, this assertion could be debated. For example, a person can have very strong values (e.g. honesty and compassion) but still may be uncertain how to give them expression in circumstances where they seem to conflict—an ethical dilemma. In *Bhagavad Gita* (Yogananda 1999)[1], Arjuna had strong values but nonetheless was not sure what to do in the Battle of Kurukshetra[2]. The conflict arose from a dynastic succession struggle between two groups of cousins, the Kauravas and Pandavas, for the throne of Hastinapura, a city in India. Although Arjuna knew that Lord Krishna was showing him the right path of killing Kauravas due to their evil actions, Arjuna resisted acting on Lord Krishna's instructions. He faced a dilemma in dynastic conflict within his family. When given the opportunity to kill his cousins, although he knew he should act on the advice of Lord Krishna, he hesitated due to his relationship with his cousins. This shows that values are affective because people feel emotional about them. They are either in favour, or against them (disapprove of those who show negative examples). From a behavioural perspective, values have this component because they lead to action when activated (Rokeach 1973).

To summarise, values in general are 'a commonly shared system of symbols that provide the basis for the definition of self, others and for the organization and evaluation of

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[1] the Hindu holy book, dialogues between the Supreme God Lord Krishna and his disciple, Arjuna
[2] the Kurukshetra War, also called the Mahabharata War, is a war described in the Indian epic poem Mahābhārata.

courses of action' (Rabow & Manos 1980, p.31). These are 'conceptions of the desirable that guide the way social actors (e.g. organisational leaders, policy-makers, individual persons) select actions, evaluate people and events and explain their actions and evaluations' (Schwartz 1999, p.24). These values are organised into value systems whose antecedents can be traced to different cultures, societies and institutions.

2.9.1 How is an individual's value system organised?

Rokeach (1973, p.3) states that individual personality and consequence 'will be manifested in virtually all phenomena worth investigating and understanding'. According to the Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness Research Program (GLOBE), 'the expectations of leaders, what they may or may not do, the status and influence conferred on them depends and varies as per the cultural forces in the countries or regions they function' (House et al. 1999, p,4). For example, as per GLOBE, Americans seek empowerment from leaders who grant them autonomy, delegate authority to their subordinates and respect the bold, forceful, confident and risk-taking leader. Conversely, for the Dutch, terms like 'leader' and 'manager' carry a stigma; they emphasise egalitarianism instead (House et al. 1999, p.4). It is important to note how contemporary psychology treats values as a noun (Rohan 2000); less attention is paid to value as a verb (e.g. when someone values something) (Hitlin & Piliavin 2004). The latter argue that from an empirical research perspective, very little attention is paid to the process through which 'values, operate within and across interactions' (p.362). For example, when people state that they value (verb) a person, action or activity, they are expressing a *deeper meaning* associated with that entity. 'So, they do not simply like the entity: they feel that it is *good…* and relates to or somehow expresses their underlying values' (noun) (Graham et al. 2013, p.48; Rohan 2000, p.256).

Rokeach's (1973, p.6) analogy on the relationship between parents and their children helps with an understanding of these operating values within and across interactions. He writes:

> Parents [in general] tend to think they love each of their children in an absolute, unqualified manner. Yet, in a particular circumstance, a parent may nevertheless be forced to show a preference for one child over the others – for the one who is perhaps the most ill, or the most needful or frustrated, or the least able in school. Our values are like the children we love so dearly. When we think about, talk about, or try to teach one of our values to others, we typically do so without remembering the other values, thus regarding them as absolute. But when one value is actually activated along with others in a given situation, the behavioral outcome [in that situation] will be a result of the relative importance of all the competing values that the situation has activated.

Rokeach's analogy can be further unpicked as the pretence of not having favourites is often an example of something that is aspired to but not applied in practice. Nonetheless, it is quite helpful to understand how a value system is a storage facility where each value interacts with other values and how a few select values interact with other values more than usual in a given situation. Schwartz (1992) emphasises values as cognitive representations of (a) biologically based organism needs, (b) social interactional requirements for interpersonal coordination and (c) social, institutional demands for group welfare and survival. Schwartz (1994) reports that ten values, each defined in terms of its motivational goal, are recognised in approximately 70 cultures worldwide. He conducted an extensive study of 25,000 participants from 44 nations and found these ten value types present and related to each other in consistent ways across cultures (see Table 2.2).

**Table 2.2: The ten types of values identified by Schwartz (1994)**

| | |
|---|---|
| Hedonism | self-centred sensual gratification |
| Power | status and prestige, control people and resources |
| Achievement | Competitive, personal success |
| Stimulation | encourage risk taking and adventure |
| Self-direction | autonomous thought and action (the idea of agency) |
| Universalism | tolerance and concern for the welfare of all others |
| Benevolence | preserve and enhance the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact |
| Conformity | self-restraint and subordination of one's inclinations to the expectations of others |
| Tradition | traditional and religious activities |
| Security | stability, safety and harmony of society, relationships and self |

Hitlin and Piliavan (2004, p.364) argue that 'values do not act only as internalized schemata… [and] we do not choose value commitments for ourselves'; rather, these values take root in us and become the foundation for our goals (Joas 1996). Following germination, as we encounter the world (Mandler 1993), these values operate as a guiding mechanism, through which the individual values interact and are reprioritised as per the given situation (Rokeach 1973). Mandler (1993, p.229) argues:

> *social* conditions generate the content and meaning of value[s]
> structures and permeate all thought and action; values are not learned
> by a neutral organism, but the very conditions of living at a particular
> time and place—in a specific historical, social and biological milieu—
> determine what can and will be known and valued.

2.9.2 How does the concept of values relate to MBA education?

> There is no incentive for human beings to walk the extra mile, to make
> the extra commitment, to do the hard work of rethinking a strategy, of
> trying new things, of rebuilding. People won't do that just for the
> money. They will do it only if they believe that what their business does
> and can do matters. And it is this belief that is instilled by the right
> values.
>
> (Drucker 2005, p.55)

Both academic researchers and business practitioners have shown interest in discussing ethical value development (Harris & Sutton 1995). However, some studies examine ethical values in isolation, while others compare ethical value measures of business practitioners and business students (e.g. Arlow & Ulrich 1980; Goodman & Crawford 1974; Hawkins & Cocanougher 1972; Hollon & Ulrich 1979; Kreitner & Reif 1980). These studies identify some differences between business practitioners and business students in their tolerance of questionable business practices and how reality is perceived by both (Hunt & Vitell 1986). For example, Harris and Sutton (1995) argue that although the two might have been influenced by different environmental, experiential and situational factors, one of the main factors is the normative approach, a prescriptive outlook towards teaching business students to make ethical decisions. However, unlike professional education (e.g. engineering, medicine, law), which is bounded by a profession's code of ethics and practice, business education cannot be normative. Moosmayer et al. (2019) identify a normative paradox of responsible management education. They argue that 'business educators aim to promote social values and develop ethical habits and socially responsible 'mindsets' through education, but they attempt to do so with theories that have normative underpinnings and create actual normative effects that counteract their

intentions.' They further identify limited conceptualisation of freedom in 'economic theorizing as a cause of the paradox' (Moosmayer et al. 2019, p.913).

Murphy and Laczniak (1981) argue that almost all normative ethical theories in moral philosophy can be classified into two typologies: deontological theories, in line with Kant's categorical imperative and rule-based behaviour specifying righteousness of specific types of actions; and teleological theories, which are based on a judgement of good and bad behaviour concerning the consequences of an act (cited in Harris & Sutton 1995, p.805). They classify utilitarianism and egoism as two examples of the latter. Harris and Sutton's (1995) study reported a difference in MBA students' ethical frameworks and fortune500 executives. They found that MBA students were inclined towards teleological theories and noted a tendency for students to use the utilitarian framework to make their ethical judgements. This can be argued as a product of the 'recency effect of the instruction they receive in their graduate education' (Harris & Sutton 1995, p.814). They also found that individuals who were inclined towards the deontological perspective (i.e. reliant on rule-based frameworks) were significantly less tolerant towards fraudulent behaviour, coercive power and self-interest than were individuals reliant on the teleological framework. According to Rahim (1989, p.545) '*Coercive Power* is based on a subordinate's perception that a superior has the ability to punish him or her for failure to conform to the superior's influence attempt.' This provides insights into how the recency effect leaves students on their own to make their ethical judgements based on their utilitarian or egotist outlook, which indicates adoption of the teleological framework to teach ethical decision making to business students (Harris & Sutton 1995, p.815). This decision-making could be due to MBA students being left on their own to integrate different theories and models and concepts with given tasks (Mintzberg 2004). In Ghoshal's (2005, p.88) words, 'academics, we may have been guilty of overexploiting our freedom'.

In their book, *The MBA* Oath, Harvard alumni Anderson and Escher (2010, pp.15-17) wrote a preamble:

> As a manager, my purpose is to serve the greater good by bringing together people and resources to create value that no single individual can build alone. There I will seek a course that enhances the value my enterprise can create for society over the long-term. I recognize my decision [decisions that I take] can have far-reaching consequences that affect the well-being of individuals inside and outside my enterprise, today and in the future. As I reconcile the interests of different constituencies, I will face difficult choices.

The content of their oath is reproduced here in Table 2.3. In the book, they write how 'the pursuit of an MBA is viewed as an opportunity to improve one's career options'. Yet, six months after they graduated from Harvard, almost 10% of their classmates, 'supposedly near the top of the MBA food chain, still did not have jobs' (Anderson & Escher 2010, p.19). Reciting a biblical parable describing a wise man seeking the right foundation on which to build his house, they write: 'If you take the time to build in the right way, on solid ground, when the storm comes, the house will stand. The storm has come and apparently our financial house was built upon sand' (p.20).

Jain and Golosinski (2011, p.64) suggest that 'business schools are at a crossroads and business itself is suffering from an image problem. Or even a *vision* problem'. Although Anderson and Escher (2010) focus on the importance of personal values and assert how an MBA graduate must uphold this oath (see Table 2.3), Jain and Golosinski (2011) focus on

business schools' role in developing individuals with a value system. They compare the MBA with other qualifications such as law and medicine. Considering these professions have social obligations and arguably have a similar oath, the question arises: 'without an established professional code—a prospect discussed, fruitlessly, for decades—can business ever be considered a profession?' (Jain & Golosinski 2011, p.64). As business is not even a discipline, like, management, let alone a profession, Anderson and Escher agree that their 'stature and privileges as a professional stem from the respect and trust that the profession as a whole enjoys' and thus, they accept their 'responsibility for embodying, protecting and developing the standards of the management profession, so as to enhance that trust and respect' (Anderson & Escher, 2020, p.17). However, as management is not a profession, it is unclear how a standard could be developed.

**Table 2.3: The MBA Oath as written by Anderson and Escher 2010, pp.15–17.**

| Values and desired behaviour | |
|---|---|
| I will act with utmost integrity and pursue my work in an ethical manner | My personal behaviour will be an example of integrity, consistent with the values I publicly espouse |
| I will safeguard the interests of my shareholders, coworkers, customers and the society in which we operate | I will endeavor to protect the interests of those who may not have power but whose well-being is contingent on my decisions |
| I will manage my enterprise in good faith, guarding against decisions and behavior that advance my own narrow ambitions but harm the enterprise and the people it serves | The pursuit of self-interest is the vital engine of a capitalist economy, but unbridled greed can cause great harm. I will oppose corruption, unfair discrimination and exploitation |
| I will understand and uphold, both in letter and in spirit, the laws and contracts governing my own conduct and that of my enterprise | If I find laws that are unjust, antiquated, or unhelpful I will not brazenly break, ignore, or avoid them; I will seek civil and acceptable means of reforming them |

| | |
|---|---|
| I will take responsibility for my actions and I will represent the performance and risks of my enterprise accurately and honestly | My aim will not be to distort the truth but to transparently explain it and help people understand how decisions that affect them are made |
| I will develop both myself and other managers under my supervision so that the profession continues to grow and contribute to the **well-being** of society | I will consult colleagues and others who can help inform my judgement and will continually invest in staying abreast of the evolving knowledge in the field, always remaining open to innovation. I will mentor and look after the education of the next generation of leaders |
| I will strive to create sustainable economic, social and environmental prosperity worldwide | Sustainable prosperity is created when the enterprise produces an output in the long run that is greater than the opportunity cost of all the inputs it consumes |
| I will be accountable to my peers and they will be accountable to me for living by this oath | I recognize that my stature and privileges as a professional stem from the respect and trust that the profession as a whole enjoys and I accept my responsibility for embodying, protecting and developing the standards of the management profession, so as to enhance that trust and respect |

2.10 What do we understand by 'the professions'?

The word *profession* is derived from the Latin verb *profiteri*. It means to declare publicly, freely own, acknowledge, avow, confess or profess openly. Further to this, in around 400 BC, *professio* (a noun) was used to declare a business publicly 'and was applied to rhetoric, philology, philosophy, magic and medicine' (Wright 1951, p.749). Further, while investigating the works of Plato (Moore 2004, Norton 2018), it was clear that even Greeks grappled with the profession concept. According to Jowett's translation of Plato's work in *The Republic* (1921 cited in Wright 1951, p.749), Plato wrote:

when intemperance and diseases multiply in a State, halls of justice and

medicine are always being opened; and the arts of the doctor and the

lawyer give themselves airs, finding how keen is the interest which not

only the slaves but the freemen of a city take about them … Is it not

disgraceful and a great sign of the want of good breeding, that a man

should have to go abroad for his law and physic because he has none of

his own at home and must therefore surrender himself into the hands of

other men whom he makes lords and judges over him?

This translation suggests that an individual's professionalism is not only through the profession with which they are affiliated, but also the behaviour they exhibit in a society. If that is so, it is essential to understand different ideas that constitute a profession instead of identifying a profession as an occupation by which people earn their living, 'characterised by a body of knowledge and skills' (Downie 1990, p.147). However, according to Sama and Shoaf (2008), the principal characteristic of occupations identified as professions is an altruistic mode of providing services to their communities. It could also be about the consistency of expectation—protecting individual members as much as those they serve; about standards rather than social good. This may date back to as early as the 17th century (Airaksinen, cited in Chadwick 1994). Airaksinen (cited in Chadwick 1994, p.481) notes that the professions are defined by science, which justifies their professional authority and by the service idea, which 'provides a professional with the values specific to itself and special obligations'. These obligations come with specific criteria, such as a base of knowledge and resultant skills. For example:

When you walk into a doctor's office you are likely to see a medical

license and degree framed on the office wall. Although you probably

do not consciously think about it, those framed documents convey a

message: *You can trust this person* (Anderson & Escher 2010, p.39).

This trust is based on the premise that patients *assume* their 'problems are being handled by a person who is professionally committed to doing the right thing' (Anderson & Escher 2010, p.39). However, in addition to altruism, both regulation of the medical profession and competence of the doctor matter. For example, the human services is a collective form of a society's organised efforts to enhance the wellbeing of its members by meeting their needs concerning health, education, law and so on (Ben-Shem & Avi-Itzhak 1991). Occupations in the human services include education, medicine, vocational rehabilitation, physical and allied health professions, psychology, law and social work (Erikson 1977; Kahn 1973). The fundamental importance remains to promote and satisfy healthy living and community cohesiveness directly or indirectly (Ben-Shem & Avi-Itzhak 1991). Although healthy living and cohesiveness seem to be two of the many desirable outcomes from any work environment, some authors (e.g. Blau & Scott 1962; Erikson 1977) argue that people in need of help, in general, find themselves socially dependent, vulnerable and subject to exploitation by those from whom they seek help. Here, integrity plays a much more significant role. For example, John Lee (cited in Perkin 1990, p.304), director of the London Telegraph and Telephone Centre, in his pioneering book (1921), *Management: A study of Industrial Organization*, looked forward to university-based management education in a 'synthesis of the sciences' and ethics for 'a trained body of administrators, proud of their calling as professional men […], themselves, reasonably paid' with intentions to work for others. This fits Downie's (1990) argument that integrity is a sense of justice and honesty, which—when combined with beneficence—invokes a moral sense of attitude towards others, establishing trust with others. However, before associating such work behaviour and ethical code of conduct with

professionalism, it is imperative to differentiate between the profession's espoused values and an individual's value system to understand what constitutes professionalism.

As discussed earlier, there is significant literature on how critics repeatedly blame business schools for their inability to instil this feeling of trust, respect and ethics in their MBA students (Gupta et al. 2007). Therefore, no matter how appropriately these ideals (trust, respect, ethics) fit with Schwartz's (1992) values typology (see Table 2.2), business schools are held responsible for identifying themselves more like a business and 'not enough as education' (Khurana, cited in Broughton 2009). This indicates why MBAs have taken a 'greedy, asset-stripping, bubble-inflating approach to management' (Lynn 2009 cited in Anderson & Escher 2010, p.23)—something that creates a persona of MBAs as '**M**ediocre **B**ut **A**rrogant or **M**asters of the **B**usiness **A**pocalypse [bold added]' (Anderson & Escher 2010, p.23). Just before they were about to graduate as MBAs, Anderson and Escher (2010, pp.29-30) and a few of their colleagues began pondering on the values they held and behaviour elements they stood for, 'as individuals, as a class, as a school and as MBAs'. In this process of introspection, they grapple with the questions of whether the 'values stand the test of moral scrutiny and assessment'. This makes them question whether their values are 'the right values or the wrong ones' (Anderson & Escher 2010, pp.29–30). As Drucker (2005, p.55) asserts, 'in testing times, in the adverse times "that try a man's soul", values are a necessity'.

Well before *The MBA Oath* was published, Anderson and Escher (2010) note that the work undertaken by two Harvard Business School professors, Rakesh Khurana and Nitin Nohria, had already led to collaboration in the World Economic Forum along with the late Professor Ghoshal. They conclude that if their idea of this 'Hippocratic Oath' for managers is to gain real traction, it will have to be led by students (Anderson & Escher 2010, p.31).

However, it is unclear how managers could uphold this sort of oath in the absence or presence of a professional governing body. Anderson and Escher claim that nearly two-thirds of their graduating class at Harvard Business School signed the oath and considered, what if an MBA degree does make a graduate professional? They identify three what-if scenarios (Anderson & Escher 2010, pp.36-37):

- *What if* MBAs, upon their graduation, committed to holding themselves to a higher standard or self-regulation?

- *What if* business schools taught and advanced a code of conduct, a set of norms establishing standards of ethical competence among business managers and owners, the management equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath?

- *What if* MBAs actually lived up to our billing and became leaders who don't just make a difference *in* the world, but make a difference *for* the world?

Being the *equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath* is a helpful way of thinking about it, not least because the latter is really no more than a statement of medical ethics, with no compulsion associated with it. Berkowitz (2009, cited in Anderson & Escher 2010, p.90) argues:

the true test of the oath is not the moment of signing but in the thousands
of small decisions that signers will make after the fact. We think that
the oath itself can help in those decisions, as it creates a new meta-norm
and serves a trigger for professionalism, a frame for decision making
and a nudge toward right behavior.

Thus, it becomes necessary to investigate what values constitute *professionalism*.

2.11 How do values relate to professionalism?

There are several views on the concept of professionalism. Fournier (2000, p.83) identifies professionalism as flexible, performative and malleable, while Kuhlmann (2006, p.608) adds to the notion of professionalism as an 'embodied practice that is based on shared cultural values and embedded in societies' institutions'. In general, it is an ideology serving some superior value and asserting greater devotion to doing good work than to economic reward (Brante 1988, p.180). Cleveland (1973, p.16) asserts:

> The future environment I am describing – bigness, complexity, horizontalness, blurred lines between 'public and private'— paradoxically will put more moral responsibility on the executive as a sovereign individual human being. The future executive will shape his or her own values – and those private values will have to be related to the public interest.

Every professional occupation is 'grounded by values and guided by ethical codes' (Bisman 2004, p.115). These shared values convey 'conceptions of the common good between people and are formed, expressed and assigned through social interactions' (Kenter et al. 2016, p.358). These authors argue that focusing on individual values alone could evade 'the substantial collective and intersubjective meanings, significance and value[s] from ecosystems' (p.358). However, 'deliberation on shared values' can help make interactions more robust and enhance their legitimacy (Kenter et al. 2016, p.358; O'Neill 2007). Using the example of the human services, Ben-Shem and Avi-Itzhak (1991, p.370) suggest the conversation between client and professional can become quite emotional. They argue that professionals should be aware of their professional stance, obligations and limitations, and the extent of their emotional involvement with their clients. The concept of shared values relates to the sense of importance

transcending personal preferences (Kenter et al. 2015; 2016, p.358), becoming a guide to professional behaviour (e.g. 'respect for users and carers, empowerment, be honest, respect confidentiality, put users and carers first over self, maintain trust and confidence, be accountable'; General Social Care Council, 2004; Parrott 2014, pp. xi–xiii), maintaining a professional identity and protecting against malpractice (Parrott 2014, p.17). These shared values help determine how the values are evaluated across 'plural ontological and ethical dimensions of value[s]' (Kenter et al. 2016, p.358). These sets of behaviours delineate for the members of the profession acceptable values and work behaviours for their work-related activities and provide a common set of principles that human services professionals can use and develop as a means of working ethically (Parrott 2014, p.17). This practice of keeping skilled personnel at the centre of management and not peripheral to management arose after the Second World War; though it can be argued that 'much of this new approach may have been self-interested or manipulative, but that only underlined the need for professionalism in organizing their collective enlightened self-interest' (Perkin 1990, p.305).

Within the more traditional professions (law, medicine, teaching and so on), the role of values has long been explored. For example, in the teaching profession, teachers require cognitive (knowledge, skills, abilities [KSA]) and affective/attitudinal competencies (Bektas & Nalcaci 2012). To identify these competencies, teaching 'evaluators expect to see the teacher presenting a lesson so that they can observe the behaviors listed of the evaluation form' designed by the school administrators (Darling-Hammond, 2986, p.534). However, 'because the evaluator is not usually an expert in the teaching area, and the criteria are generalized so as to apply, at least superficially to all teaching areas, there is little capacity in the typical evaluation system for assessing the appropriateness of observed teaching behaviors' (Darling-Hammond, 1986, p.534). Thus, along with the knowledge needed within the teaching

profession, teachers are supposed to recognise and develop their value system to guide their teaching practice. Values such as discipline, responsibility, sharing and respect contribute to teachers' attitudes towards their profession and professional identity (Bektas & Nalcaci 2012). This argument supports Anderson and Escher's (2010, p.17) assertions that their 'stature and privileges as a professional stem from the respect and trust that the profession as a whole enjoys' and thus, they accept their 'responsibility for embodying, protecting and developing the standards of the management profession, so as to enhance that trust and respect'. Perkin (1990) discusses industrial harmony and rationalisation as two goals that dominate management thought. He points out that management spokespeople have argued that post-war industrial unrest was due to conflict between capital and labour, which could be resolved by 'the third factor in industry'—the 'dispassionately free' managers who 'hold the balance and see fair play' (p.304). However, citing Taylor's scientific management and Harvard's Human Relations School of Elton Mayo, Mary Parker Follett and T.N. Whitehead, Perkin remarks that 'it would be a mistake to think that most managers avidly read and imbibed such ideas, any more than most Victorian capitalists had read Ricardo, Samuel Smiles or Herbert Spencer' (p.305). However, it is still unclear whether this is the role of education or a professional body.

Professional practice 'deals with moral values and social norms, with conduct that is socially good, obligatory and normal, or that is bad, offensive and deviant' (Siporin 1975, p.64). However, some sociologists argue that the idea of *values* is too vague and *unquantifiable* to allow it to be crystallised and studied in a specific course (Rohan 2000). This can lead to the siloed conceptualisation of values, perhaps suggesting that offering one course on values within a program will be sufficient to satisfy stakeholders. Bisman (2004) argues that a profession's primary focus is caring and changing rather than merely defining and explaining. Thus, it is important to explore 'the process through which values operate within and across interactions'

(Hitlin & Piliavin 2004, p.362). Airaksinen (cited in Chadwick 1994, p.481) identifies a sense of professional ethics as wide and narrow: 'in the wide sense the professions are guided by general ethical rules and values; in the narrow [sense], professions have specific tasks'. This *narrow* perspective is more related to an individual's *self-interest* (Chadwick 1994). It consists of an individual's personal preferences, which they continuously work to maximise but 'with absolute disregard for other people's interests and welfare' (Rosanas 2011, p.150). Ghoshal (2005) argues that such self-interest models 'become manifest even in careful experiments devised by economists to test their theories under controlled conditions in which "aberrations" such as altruism or love are strictly excluded'. Thus, such a controlled experiment might be useful 'for analysing the economic systems as a whole [but], it is not a good guide to individual behaviour' (Rosanas 2011, p.150). Only an individual can decide whether to act in self-interest or when acting, keep in mind others' interests (Ghoshal 2005; Rosanas 2011).

2.12 Past studies on MBA candidates

2.12.1 To understand their expectations from an MBA

Several studies have examined the rationale behind students choosing to pursue an MBA and their expectations from an MBA (e.g. Luker, Bowers & Powers 1990). Several others have studied MBA candidates' career choices and their rationale for making those choices (e.g. Ozbilgin, Kusku & Erdogmus 2005). Fewer studies have considered MBA candidates' expectations of MBA programs (Rapert et al.2004) and the impact such programs have on their students' values (Krishnan 2008). In addition, few studies have investigated the values, value types and moral reasoning of MBA candidates (e.g. Lan et al. 2010). As Williams (1968, p.286) asserts:

Problems of values appear in all fields of the social sciences and value

elements are potentially important as variables to be analysed in all

major areas of investigation.

Luker et al. (1989) conducted a study to understand factors influencing the pursuit of

an MBA from both students' and employers' perspectives. They worked with a sample of 100

students at AACSB-accredited institutions who were in full-time employment. Their results

indicate that over 50% of their sample cited long-term career objectives and promotion

possibilities (63%), competitiveness and higher income (60%) and personal satisfaction (51%)

as the most important reasons for them pursuing an MBA; career change (36%), status symbol

(13%) and family pressure (4%) were the bottom three reasons. Ozbilgin et al. (2005) studied

MBA candidates from three countries (Britain, Israel and Turkey) to understand their career

choices. Their findings reveal that the MBA candidates in their sample considered their

capacity to make free choices significant in regard to which career they would choose.

However, what they identified as 'free choice' was unclear.

Another study by Rapert et al. (2004) investigated the meaning of quality through

candidates' expectations of pursuing an MBA. They examined a cohort of 38 students who

completed their graduate business program at the Southeastern Public University in Florida

during the 2002 academic year. They found that some students 'developed a true interest in a

particular subject or field and that they would have benefited from an opportunity to develop

that interest further by taking additional advanced courses in that area' (p.22). However, what

true interest meant to them and what made these students develop a true interest in a subject(s),

in the first place, was not discussed. They also found that if the MBA program 'failed to provide

them with […] exposure to business people and real-world business problems', they identified

it as inadequate, which 'adversely affected their overall satisfaction' (p.22). Rapert et al. (2004, p.22) conclude that such experiences are vital to students' 'overall development, intellectual growth and confidence'. These findings are similar to those of Panitz (1995), who sampled 114 MBA candidates from an AACSB-accredited private mid-western (US) university. His results show that the professors' knowledge and total experience were the two most important factors.

2.12.2 To identify an MBA degree's impact on student values

Krishnan (2008) undertook two longitudinal studies to understand the effect of MBA education on candidates' values. He collected data over 7 years from a business school in India. From a sample in the first study, which consisted of 229 MBA candidates, Krishnan found that 'self-oriented values like a comfortable life and pleasure become more important and others-oriented values like being helpful and polite become less important over 2 years' (p. 223). However, the reasons behind such changes were not discussed. Rokeach (1973) identifies these two—self-and other-centred values—as part of terminal values. He argues that an 'increase in one social value will lead to increases in other social values and decreases in personal values and, conversely, an increase in one personal value will lead to increases in other personal values and decreases in social values' (Rokeach 1973, p.8). For example, 'behaving honestly and responsibly leads one to feel that he is behaving morally, whereas behaving logically, intelligently or imaginatively leads one to feel that he is behaving competently. A person may experience conflict between two moral values (e.g., behaving honestly and lovingly), between two competent values (e.g., imaginatively and logically), or between a moral and a competence value (e.g., to act politely and to offer intellectual criticism)' (Rokeach, 1973, p.8). Rokeach (1973, p.8) using examples of salvation and peace of mind (intrapersonal) and world peace and brotherhood (interpersonal) states:

that persons may vary reliably from one another in the priorities they place on such social and personal values; that their attitudes and behavior will differ from one another depending on whether their personal or their social values have priority.

This description implies that MBA students will differ in their attitudes and behaviour according to whether their social or personal values have priority. However, how students prioritise one over the other remains unclear and may change throughout their MBA studies.

In another study, Lan et al. (2010) used Schwartz's values questionnaire to investigate values, value types and moral reasoning for 108 MBA candidates. Their goal was to understand differences in the level of moral reasoning attributed to gender. They found that both the male and female MBA candidates ranked 'family security' and 'being healthy' as their two most important values, and hedonism (*pleasure* - ancient Greek; Moore, 2004) as an essential value type. However, for male MBA candidates, achievement and self-direction remained most important, while for female MBA candidates, most important was benevolence and security (e.g. Schwartz 1994). Lan et al. (2010) concluded that these MBA candidates were less interested in control over others and self-protection and more concerned with personal growth and career enhancement. Although this represents a contract with the MBA Oath (Anderson & Escher 2010), Lan et al.'s (2010) findings echo those of Krishnan (2008) concerning self-centred values overtaking other-centred values over time. Krishnan (2008, p.245) comments that 'students need to be taken upward by enhancing their perception of oneness with others. Business schools seem to be doing the exact opposite'. Although these studies show the similar and differing expectations of MBA students regarding their MBA program, they do not clarify how an MBA program impacts its students' value systems and changes their work behaviour.

2.13 So, what is the problem?

> Most teachers waste their time by asking questions that are intended to
>
> discover what a pupil does not know, whereas the true art of questioning
>
> is to discover what the pupil does know or is capable of knowing.

(Einstein 1920 cited by Calaprice 2005, p.65)


Rubin and Dierdorff (2013, p.126) confidently assert that 'rightfully so—MBA programs are the flagship offering of business schools and for most institutions, are their raison d'etre'. However, at the same time, it cannot be denied that the kudos of achieving an MBA degree has declined somewhat (Goldgehn & Kane 1997). Fowler (1992) argues that this decline is often linked to an oversupply of MBAs from an exclusive perspective. Still, stakeholders also question the MBA's relevance to business needs and those of the candidates themselves. Explaining such a critique is not straightforward, although it may encourage some stakeholders to increasingly perceive business schools more like competitors in a marketplace than educational organisations (Trank & Rynes 2003, p.198).


There are many ideas about what the business community demands from MBA programs and MBAs. Some authors discuss the importance of general skills—the development of intellectual and reasoning abilities (Gupta et al. 2007; Rehder & Porter 1983)—while others argue in favour of specialising in a particular organisational function, rather than learning general skills alone (Hunt & Speck 1986). However, the latter would contradict the program name itself (Master of *Business Administration*). Such different expectations pose a considerable dilemma for business schools and show how MBA programs are too theory oriented and less industry related (Kane 1993). Even when considering specific possible

outcomes of MBA programs, it is often questionable exactly what is meant. For example, Buenviaje et al. (2016, p.20) explain:

> MBAs are expected to possess good leadership qualities. A good leader
> has the knack to deal with his coworkers in an amiable fashion. He is
> usually a good decision maker and handles important positions in a firm
> or organization.

However, 'good' is subjective and imprecise, making it challenging to argue what 'good' signifies and whether *good leadership qualities are* teachable or even linked to values. Pringle (2000, p.20) argues:

> our competitive environment demands the ability to see patterns, to
> discern the difference between [a] symptom and root cause and to
> navigate minefields of political and personal agendas. M.B.A.
> education provides both a body of knowledge in fields exploding onto
> the business scene and experience in viewing problems from multiple
> perspectives. Classes consider trade-offs between present and future
> and the hard and soft sciences. They can also hone team analysis and
> communication skills. While lifetime learning is a given, these
> competencies form a base for professional growth.

Such an ability to identify patterns and interpret problems implies a systems-based approach, recognising multiple *onion-like* layers and the implications of such layers. Besides, the hard and soft sciences concept indicates how both Knowledge, Skills, Attitude and Competencies [KSACs] (hard sciences) and an MBA candidate's value system (soft sciences) form a foundation of their professional growth. This 'mindset' requires a focus on what MBA

candidates learn and how they learn and apply their learning—first, during the in-class discussion and second, at their workplace. Thus, although we may consider it vital to *teach* MBA candidates KSACs, programs also need to incorporate (explore and reflect on) and focus on their value systems. Without focusing on the factors that connect KSACs with MBA candidates' value systems, merely claiming to educate ethical decision makers and adaptive managers and leaders may be unlikely to convince the MBA educator's audience.

To develop existing ethical and adaptive 'mindsets', MBA candidates perhaps can challenge and apply their deeply held beliefs; only then can 'legitimate yet competing perspectives [values] emerge' (Heifetz & Laurie 2001, p.2). Such values result from a person's experience, some of which may be shared with other people (such as fellow professionals), providing insight into how someone organises their activities and behaviour patterns (Reamer 1995). However, the value system requires critical reflection, allowing students to become aware of their thinking, perceptions and action(s). Hay et al. (2004, p.172) argue it is only then that 'a person nexus occurs, causing the learner to alter or even completely change firmly held beliefs and ways of thinking'. However, the notion of *completely changing firmly held beliefs* appears to be quite a stretch and of questionable ethics. Mezirow (1991) identifies this sort of reflection as *premise reflection,* something that does not happen overnight, instead occur 'in varying degrees across individuals and learning environments' (Hay et al. 2004, p.172). Thus both, an individual's thoughts on what *should* be done from an ethical standpoint and actions based on these thoughts are equally important (Timms 2018)—something that is now seen as the primary learning that the business community expects from MBAs (e.g. Gupta et al. 2007). As a result, like all programs of study in higher education, MBA programs have been under constant pressure to evolve, seeking a balance between factors such as basic job-related KSACs and more tacit attributes such as leadership, values and ethical decision making (Nesbit 2012).

However, the claim that MBA degrees often lack relevance in terms of employer needs (Gupta & Bennett 2014; Mihail & Kloutsiniotis 2014) has led to KSACs being over-emphasised. To an extent, it has marginalised and even ignored the link between taught KSACs and MBA candidates' value systems (e.g. Gupta et al. 2007; Krishnan 2008). I identify this undefined link as the 'X factor', the absence of which might be transforming business education into narrowly defined and short-term job training, something that MBA educators claim it is not (e.g. see Mintzberg 2004, 2013).

My rationale to use 'X' dates to the origins of Algebra. In the 17th century, the use of 'x' to represent an unknown variable came into being. Most mathematics historians now agree that Descartes (1637) was responsible for this particular development. It was first used in published form in his treatise called La Géométrie, published in 1637" (Math Tutor DVD 2017). In his landmark work, Descartes (1637) solidified the movement to symbolic notation by instituting the convention of using the lowercase letters at the beginning of the alphabet for known quantities (e.g., a, b and c) and using those at the end of the alphabet for unknown quantities (e.g., z, y and x) (Melissa 2014, Moore 2012). From the literature, as it is unclear what factors impact MBA students' learning, to move from the known (a,b,c) to the unknown (x), I have termed this undefined unknown as the' X' factor.

Research on the MBA has rarely explored students' learnt work behaviour and work ethics in any depth. Such an analysis could contribute to the debate involving academia and the business community concerning the lack of leadership and ethical decision making capabilities that the business community attributes to MBAs (Gupta et al. 2007). Thus, what constitutes the *ideal* MBA program is still a matter of discussion. There is a big difference between what the business community expects and what it gets from employing MBAs. Business schools have

developed their role and strategy focusing on competition, growth and return on investment, rather than on MBA students' learning and their role in the current business community (Pfeffer & Fong 2004). This is an example of what business schools generally focus on while imparting KSACs to their MBA candidates. Such types of 'inappropriate curriculum and ineffective implementation of curriculum' have contributed to a decline in the perceived value of an MBA education (Natarajan & Kumar 2014, p.1).

2.14 Gap in the literature

Although an MBA is considered a useful way to develop organisational skills and enhance students' career opportunities (Sturges, Simpson & Altman 2003), there are several challenges related to values and ethics that MBA educators and learners are yet to address (Ferraro, Pfeffer & Sutton 2005). There seems to be growing popular pressure on the corporate world to move beyond just profit maximisation (e.g. Friedman 1970) towards greater market sustainability (Haski-Leventhal 2014). Such a shift also requires a change in MBA programs, from teaching 'business fundamentals in a limited, shareholder dominated context' towards 'concepts such as responsible management education [towards MBA candidates and society as a whole] and academic social responsibility' (Haski-Leventhal 2014, p.29), providing current and future practitioners with an alternative educational approach, and grounding traditional business functions in ethics and accountability (Cornelius, Wallace & Tassabehji 2007). This changing notion suggests something more—something that can render MBAs different from non-MBAs. However, the literature is heavily focused on teaching KSACs to MBA candidates, judging students' competence based on their quantifiable achievements (McCormack 1984; Mintzberg 2004); but minimal when it comes to focusing on a cultivated value system driven by ethical, social values and work values, rather than just material self-interest (e.g. Rokeach

1973). The latter ignores and sidelines the role of an MBA candidate's value system in their learning.

2.15 Why does this gap in the literature exist?

As discussed earlier, an MBA tries to help students improve their managerial skills. However, employers often express dissatisfaction with such skills, tending to hold business schools responsible (Mihail & Kloutsinitois 2014). There is significant literature on how MBAs lack what employers require (Mihail & Elefterie 2006). This raises the question of what MBA candidates can expect from an MBA if employers are not satisfied with what MBAs bring to their organisations. Keeping in mind that 'an organization cannot in itself engender intellectual activity, but rather can only support what is already in existence' (Einstein 1919, cited by Calaprice 2005, p.65), this calls for an in-depth discussion on what is taught in MBA programs (e.g. KSACs), how MBA candidates learn (e.g. the influence of their value system on their learning) and how they put their education to practice in the workplace (e.g. how they apply the learnt KSACs). However, the literature on the concept of values in the MBA and their impact on an MBA candidate's learning and work behaviour remains superficial.

Although several authors have discussed how values are at the centre of the professions (Bartlett & Saunders 1970; Parsons 2000), when it comes to MBA education, not so much (Payne 2002), marginalising work on the concept of values (Rohan 2000). Even though it can be argued that there is increased attention to the professionalisation of the business community (emphasis on KSACs), there is a noticeable decrease in attention to social problems that, in general, exist within the business community. Bisman (2004, p.115) questions, 'without values and morality, what good is the knowledge attained and skills used?' This highlights a gap between academic learning (theoretical knowledge) and practical requirements (organisational

needs), which points towards how the KSACs relate poorly to the needs of the business community (Mihail & Kloutsinitois 2014).

Upon finishing their MBA degree, although MBAs' future (work) attitudes and behaviours largely depend on their inherent and developing value system, MBA faculties are often less concerned with the 'attitudes, beliefs and values their students are learning', and more with 'intellectual issues, about teaching "principles" and methods' (Demirel & Oner 2015, p.74). This is a persistent tension or problem—something that is 'obviously broken and needs to be fixed' (Kuechler & Stedham 2018, p.9), perhaps by finding a link between required KSACs and an MBA student's value system. The means of fixing this broken link brings us back to the undefined 'X factor' to bridge a gap between knowing what, knowing how and questioning how (i.e. 'knowing-doing'; Mihail & Kloutsiniotis 2014, p.215)—something that would add to the body of knowledge and capitalise on the potential holistic value of an MBA.

Business administrators (i.e. managers and leaders) are responsible for their organisations and the society they operate in (Worthy 1955). Customer-driven organisations will be interested in how their customers think and seek to identify their customers' attitudes and beliefs (Lundstrom 2011). From an individual-as-professional perspective, work values signify intrinsic, persistent viewpoints on aspects that an individual considers essential. Porter and McKibbin (1988, p.303) note in their study that people in the organisation they surveyed wanted management education to be 'more 'realistic', 'practical' and 'hands on'. However, Mintzberg (2004, p.249) argues otherwise. He argues that 'education is hands-*off*; otherwise, it is not education. It has to provide something different—conceptual ideas that are quite literally *un*realistic and *im*practical, at least seemingly so in conventional terms.' He also remarks that 'people learn when they *suspend their beliefs*, to entertain provocative ideas that

can reshape their thinking. This is what education is all about' (2004, p.249). Although this seems to be Mintzberg's opinion rather than a universal truth, this is where Rokeach's (1973) moral values (a sense of right and wrong) come into play. If we see management as more of an influencing activity, MBA candidates' value systems would encourage more careful reflection on and application of their managerial choices (Krishnan 2008).

2.16 Conceptual framework

MBA candidates expect that an MBA places them 'at a higher level in the pecking order for jobs' (Donnelly 1981, p.63) and qualifies them for other positions within and outside their organisations. This is one of the main reasons why an MBA is valued by working professionals. However, Brown, Brown and Sharma (2003) recall their own experiences as MBA candidates and suggest they involved two key elements: one half focusing on business theories, facts and practices and the other on business language and work culture. Although none of these three authors had any prior experience of this type of program, nor any idea of what to expect from it, they acknowledge that it was their belief and attitude towards learning that formed their initial opinion about pursuing an MBA, learning the taught content and applying their knowledge in their workplace; hence, their existing value systems acted as a catalyst in their learning process (Brown et al. 2003). This argument resonates with a statement from Sir Martin Sorrell, founder of the global advertising giant, WPP:

> it's not a question of what business schools offer that on-the-job training
>
> doesn't, it's more a question that someone has taken the time and
>
> trouble to think about their skills and goals in the context of their career
>
> and life. It says a lot about their character and determination and attitude
>
> and commitment, which is good (cited in Dearlove 2006, p.6).

This reveals a preconceived notion among employers that MBAs have (and need) character, determination, attitude and commitment, which is good for their organisation. However, an alternative argument about MBA candidates' value systems acting as a learning catalyst is suggested by Marcus (2007). As the (then) head for recruitment for Goldman Sachs, he advised graduates:

> while we care about your MBA degree, we care more about how you integrate yourself into the organisation, what responsibilities you take on and what value you add. Business school will give you entrée [entry] to a company, but what you do when you get there matters more (cited in Bledsoe & Oatsvall 2009, p.2).

Both Sorrell's and Marcus's statements offer insights into why an MBA education is valued so highly. However, Marcus's view highlights how training MBA candidates with skills and techniques alone do not suffice. Their value systems contribute more to the ethical 'mindset' that organisations demand from their employees (Krishnan 2008). Although it seems clear that MBA candidates' value systems are integral to how they learn and behave, little research has investigated how this value system is, or could be, integrated effectively into MBA programs. Although learning theories sit within conceptual frameworks that can help individuals make sense of their own and others' learning, it is essential to understand what influences a student's learning and, in the process, impacts their work behaviour and performance (Christensen, Nance & White 2012) (see Table 5.2; Section 5.6).

In the next section, I present Pringle's (2000) idea behind trade-offs between present and future; the hard (e.g. KSACs) and soft sciences (e.g. values, attitudes and beliefs); and Hay and Hodgkinson's (2008) argument about an individual's learning work behaviour.

2.17 Rationale for focusing on MBA candidates' value systems

Einstein (1936b, cited by Calaprice 2005, p.35) wrote, 'the aim [of education] must be the training of independently acting and thinking individuals who, however, see in the service to the community their highest life achievement'. In a work environment, an individual goes through numerous experiences and learning, which uniquely influences their way of thinking. Therefore, a one-size-fits-all ideology does not work in this context. Instead, it is an iterative process that builds on itself and continuously develops throughout one's life. Bisman (2004, p.116) argues that 'values not only affect what we do about what we know but also shape what we know'. Thus, it becomes essential to explore the mechanisms that an MBA could provide to its students, enabling them to recognise the benefit of engaging with their value system during their MBA journey. My aim is not to diminish the importance of the learnt KSACs, but to position the development of these KSACs within the context of an MBA's aims more holistically, emphasising the role of MBA candidates' values in their learning. Reflecting on the values they already have must 'serve to inspire, guide and motivate its practice, teaching and research' (Bisman 2004, p.120).

Although this highlights the difference between Einstein's (1936b) view of education as training and Mintzberg's (2004) assertion that business education must be something more than training, Rapert et al. (2004) argue that MBA candidates immersed in their programs are the only direct, daily observers of institutional quality. As a result, they are an invaluable source of judgement information on the expectations of quality and performance (see also Seldin 1990). Although one could argue that not all MBA candidates are likely to be qualified to make valid assessments, only after business schools are able to understand the expectations of MBA candidates will they be well placed to provide an MBA that is practice oriented and rich in

academic disciplines (Rapert et al. 2004, p.18). Even though researchers have long suggested shifting the focus from *what* MBA candidates should learn to *how* they learn and apply their learning in their work, human values continue to be ignored in management education (e.g. Bruce 2009; Bruce & Edgington 2008; Datar, Garvin & Cullen 2011). The emphasis continues to be on explicit knowledge transfer rather than nurturing values that are already present in the student but not necessarily fully apparent to them or articulated—something that influences how knowledge is acquired and practiced (Krishnan 2008). For example, Schein (1965, 1967) argues that even though organisational training and development programs for managers produce very little actual change, business schools have been pressured to fill the gap and take on a responsibility that goes beyond theoretical and ethical content, which they would see as their key role, to include KSACs, which should really be the employer's contribution to management development, stretching curricula to impact, strengthen and develop their MBA candidates' complete character (Silk 1964). Besides, this influences their choices, people they choose to trust and how they invest their time, effort and energy into a particular task (Posner & Schmidt 1992). Even though values, in general, are relatively challenging to modify, even if we wanted to, it becomes essential to acknowledge and give importance to their role in management education, because of the influence that MBA candidates' value systems have over their learning (Krishnan 2008). Only then might we gain the opportunity to address criticisms long directed at MBA education.

Such an ethos would begin to reconceptualise management practice in processual terms, embedding it in relationship building (Andersson 2010; Valantin 2008) and focusing on others rather than self when making (ethical) business decisions (see Rokeach 1973). Thus, MBA candidates who develop their value systems in relation to their social values (other-centred) rather than their self-centred values (Rokeach 1973) are arguably better positioned to develop

a sense of responsibility to the community, accepting the social, relational and political nature of management (Cunliffe 2014). This suggests that 'management is not just something one does, but is, more crucially, who one is [what they stand for as a manager] and how [they] relates to others' (Cunliffe 2014, p.11), representing a strong feeling of professional identity. However, researchers criticise business schools for 'too narrowly and analytically orienting future managers who will need to lead in a complex, socially and [the]ecologically fraught world, where simple answers just do not work' (Waddock & Lozano 2013, p.265); something that McCormack (1984) identifies as congenially naive.

Similarly, some studies (e.g. Brocklehurst et al. 2007; Clarke 2008; Kempster 2009) have found 'absolutely no evidence that taking a management course has any effect at all upon making people better managers' (Grey 2008, p.134), while others acknowledge 'a change in the perception of self over anything else' as the most substantial outcome of the MBA education (Sturdy et al. 2006, p.851). These contrasting views either criticise an MBA program as 'too abstract, impractical and too orthodox' (Gold, Hold & Thorpe 2007, p.51) or attach little weight to the 'importance of management education' (Armstrong & Fukami 2009, p.7). However, the latter reaffirms the lack of focus on MBA candidates' value systems, which they arguably develop during their MBA journeys and later incorporate into their careers (Leavitt 1991). This has a significant impact on how MBA candidates develop an ethical 'mindset' that directly influences their work behaviour.

The concept of values invites a more 'enthusiastic interdisciplinary collaboration' that would 'broaden the range of the social psychologist's traditional concern to include problems of education […] as well as problems of persuasion' (Rokeach 1968, p.159). It remains essential to educate students on what managers need to know to deal with these problems and

the skills they need to possess (O'Toole 2009). Any high-level business education requires consideration of the process of learning (Vidaillet & Vignon 2010). Hopefully, such a learning environment would enable MBA candidates to understand who they are and how they think, learn and apply their learning through critical reflexivity, which Warhurst (2008) argues is integral to MBA programs. Cunliffe (2009, p.93) describes its contribution:

> Critical-reflexivity draws from [but not limited to] critical theory, poststructural and postmodern commitments to unsettle the assumptions underlying textual, theoretical and ideological positions as a basis for thinking more critically about social and organizational policies and practice.

Hay et al. (2004, p.172) argue that 'critical reflection is at the highest level of the reflective learning hierarchy', which helps learners 'become aware of why they think, perceive or act as they do'. This sort of *structured critical thinking* would involve 'exposing learners to problem-solving skills, tools and concepts' (Jain & Golosinski 2011, p.69). While this sort of environment would help MBA candidates learn to reflect on 'their own and others' perspectives and decrease resistance to novel ways of seeing and doing things' (Kuechler & Stedham 2018, p.8), the question remains as to whether students can practice it in their MBA. If business schools can use both Taylor's (1911) and Mintzberg's (2004) views of management education (see Section 2.8), their MBA candidates *should* be able to develop the 'ability to see people and business challenges with clarity and depth' (Jain & Golosinski 2011, p.69). Ideally, this sort of learning *should* help them learn how to 'motivate others to advance organizational goals' and help them 'harness their own potential for excellence' (Jain & Golosinski 2011, p.69). Although this argument is similar to both Mintzberg's and Follett's ideas of collaborative learning, what remains conspicuous is *how* an MBA could enable its students to be 'both

*materially successful and broadly significant* in making the world a better place' (Jain & Golosinski 2011, p.69)- that is, adding the X factor.

The notion that an MBA is designed for managers to make the world a better place has long been contested. However, before starting to answer these sorts of questions on what an MBA is and is not designed to cultivate, it becomes essential to explore the ways MBA students learn the taught content (KSACs) and develop mechanisms, if any, to reflect on their experiences. Probing this in more depth will provide an understanding of how their value systems develop and how this influences their behaviour.

This chapter discusses the methods and approaches adopted to collect and analyse data in this study. To collect data, I used semi-structured interviews and conducted the Participant Observations (PO). Semi-structured interviews helped me explore the participants' opinions and perceptions and seek clarification on the responses they provided (Barriball & While 1994). PO allowed me to experience the in-class MBA environment, adding a layer of richness to my account of the participants' world. I undertook the role of an *observer as participant* to watch and take notes from a distance (Creswell & Poth 2016, p.168). To analyse the collected data, I adopted Smith's (1996) IPA approach and introduced a dialogical method to enrich the analysis and present findings to bring participants' individual worlds and the collective world to the readers. IPA is about the detailed analysis of participants' lived experiences, the meaning of those experiences to participants and how participants make sense of their experiences (Smith 2011; Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009). It is a qualitative research approach that involves the subjective exploration of participants' experiences from their own perspective and, thus, is phenomenological (Smith 1996).

This chapter begins by discussing the research aim, IPA's philosophical framework and its appropriateness for this research. After this, I explain my research design, data collection method and steps to analyse the collected data. I discuss the steps I took to be reflexive in analysing my data and developing a dialogical method, bringing my participants' individual worlds and their collective world to the surface. I also use a sample of three participants (from 14 participants) to demonstrate how I developed narratives from the interview transcripts and how themes emerged from those narratives. I then show how I constructed dialogue between

these three participants. The chapter ends with a section on the limitations of this research design and the ethical challenges that I found to be inseparable from my research.

## 3.1 Research aim and questions

This research explores MBA candidates' and graduates' perspectives concerning the value of an MBA, what they hoped to gain and what they gained from their MBA degree (in the case of graduates).

To help achieve this aim, I have investigated 14 participants' MBA journeys to understand why they chose to undertake an MBA, what they expected from it, whether their MBA was meeting or had met their expectations and their main learning from the MBA program. To explore these facets of their MBA experience, I looked deeper into the following four questions:

- What made an MBA the preferred degree for these participants?

- What were the implications of values, beliefs and attitudes for these MBA candidates' and graduates' learning and practice?

- What changes such as philosophical, axiological, emotional had the MBA candidates and graduates gone through during their MBA education?

- Whether and how the MBA participants apply their learning in their work?

## 3.2 Theoretical foundations and philosophical underpinnings of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA was first developed and introduced by Smith (1996) as a research approach to explore psychological phenomena by drawing on the philosophical influences of phenomenology. Phenomenology is both a philosophical discipline and a research method

(LeVasseur 2003). It is often considered central to the interpretive paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). IPA's epistemological position is deeply rooted in the assumption that idiosyncratic data can provide insight into individuals' understanding of their experiences (Snelgrove 2014). IPA has emerged as one of several approaches (along with narratives, stories, photographs, poetry) gaining popularity in qualitative psychology (Cunliffe 2002; Cuthbertson, Robb & Blair 2020; Rodham, Fox & Doran 2015; Sangeorzan, Driopoulou & Livanou 2019; Smith 2004, 2011; Smith et al. 2009; Tuffour 2017). Although IPA originated in qualitative psychology, its threefold methodological foundation (i.e. an *interpretative* lens for subjectivist *phenomenological analysis,* to *deconstruct* phenomena) has much to offer researchers from other disciplines, including health (Cassidy et al. 2011), education (Denovan & Macaskill 2013), organisational studies (Agarwal & Sandiford, 2021; de Miguel et al. 2015; Tomkins & Eatough 2014), humanities (Hefferon & Ollis 2016) and sports sciences (Smith 2016). IPA is particularly helpful when addressing research questions that cannot be investigated by conventional experimental or survey methodologies, such as 'the symbolic dimensions of organizational life' (Prasad & Prasad 2002, p.4).

IPA's emphasis on participants' 'meaning making' (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014, p.8), which resembles Weick's (1979) sense-making, offers an alternate approach for understanding organisational processes and exploring how individuals give meaning to events, rather than merely identifying organisational outcomes (Mills et al. 2020, p.182). This idiographic focus is IPA's key contribution to scholarship. An intersubjective interplay between participants' reflective accounts of their life experiences and researcher interpretations of these accounts represents a challenging double hermeneutic (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014). Thus, IPA draws from phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography, which feeds into how IPA research is presented to readers, emphasising richly individual experience and sense-making to challenge

scholarly conventions where 'truncated and compartmentalized quotation excises the subtlety, nuance and complexity of meaning that workers deliver through extended interviews' (Taylor et al. 2009, p.9). Thus, readers share each interviewee's experiences and perspective, while recognising the researcher's role in co-constructing those interviewees' worlds. After all, qualitative research is a reflexive process emphasising the mutual interaction between, and the influences of researcher and researched (Cutcliffe 2003)—as Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000, p.80) put it, 'the polarization between a thinking subject and an object is, therefore, a dubious secondary construction'.

In IPA, Smith (1996, p.261) presents a method that helps researchers capture qualitative and experiential elements of a phenomenon while offering a 'dialogue with mainstream psychology' (Shinebourne 2011, p.17). Interviewers interpret participants' subjective accounts, eliciting and analysing their responses (answers, narratives, language, metaphors etc.) to make sense of their world experience. This requires participant-led phenomena identification, rather than preselection of phenomena or hypothetical generalisations for investigation (Crist & Tanner 2003), embracing Shotter's (1997, p.345) observations about

> the very strange characteristics of our everyday lives together, of the
> conversational spaces we open up between us and of the equally strange
> dialogical realities they create—strange because we are very unused to
> trying to talk about the nature of our own practical doings, sayings and
> understandings from within the course of our own doing of them.

Although not a phenomenological psychologist, Shotter's remarks touch upon the fundamental principle of idiographic methods; that is, exploring participants' experience

through in-depth, individualised analysis rather than seeking any generalised statement or theory.

IPA's theoretical underpinnings stem from hermeneutic phenomenology's need 'to describe how the world is formed and experienced through consciousness' (Husserl 1962, cited by Eatough & Smith 2008, p.194), akin to *Dasein* and being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962). These suggest people interpret the world and their experiences as a whole; in turn influencing how they negotiate their worldly position(s) and role(s) individually and socially. Based on these philosophical underpinnings, IPA's three key elements (interpretation, phenomenon and analysis) provide an epistemological framework to orient IPA researchers.

3.2.1 Pillars of an interpretative phenomenological analysis

**Interpretative**: Qualitative researchers celebrate the richness and depth of their data, though this richness can be lost if participants' individuality is obscured by premature generalisation or superficial presentation. IPA's interpretative ethos emphasises the idiographic interpretation of each participant's story. There is no one *right* way to do this and guidelines are only broad suggestions for practice (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014). Accordingly, novice IPA researchers are encouraged to adopt creative approaches 'and what determines the quality of the outcome is the personal analytic work done at each stage' (Smith 2004, p.40). This requires data to be analysed initially on a case-by-case basis. As a result, IPA is incredibly time consuming and works with samples that other researchers may consider particularly small.

**Phenomenological:** IPA aims to make sense of specific phenomena. As both philosophy and method (Finlay & Ballinger 2006), phenomenology requires in-depth explorations 'of how phenomena appear to us in our consciousness and the nature and meaning

of such phenomena' (Clarke 2009, p.37). Researchers try to uncover the meaning of each participant's words. Describing their world helps to understand that world from their perspective, by 'reading from within the terms' of each participant's text (Smith et al. 2009, p.37). IPA seeks the story *behind* a participant's account, explored by probing, interpreting, analysing participants' words and reasoning behind those words.

**Analysis:** IPA researchers seek to balance convergence and divergence within a sample when exploring shared themes across individuals, analysing how these themes play out for each participant (Smith 2011, p.10). Thus, IPA is not about generating universal generalisations but seeks local understanding that is rich, thorough and contextual (Millward 2006). Researchers probe participants' thoughts, assumptions, commitments and feelings as they narrate their stories, uncovering experiential sense-making processes (Reid et al. 2005). Although interpretation and analysis can be seen as distinct elements, they effectively go hand in hand in a sort of inseparable duality. Researchers seek emerging themes, and continuously interpret and analyse participants' stories during and after interviews, engaging with emerging texts (verbatim and annotated; audio and transcribed). Thus, a phenomenon is a discovery that can, drawing from another disciplinary tradition, 'appear in colourful succession sense experiences, memory pictures of them, representations and feelings' (Einstein 1929, pp.349–350). This further emphasises the importance of individualised analysis of participants' accounts based on audio recordings, verbatim transcripts and the researcher's observation and notes (of the interview environment) before any broader, cross-case data coding or theme generation.

3.3 Rationale for using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The gap between what business schools teach their students in their MBA programs, student expectations from an MBA and employers' requirements from MBAs seem to increase.

To make sense of this gap, using an IPA approach, I have investigated two aspects of an MBA program: *taught* content (KSACs) and MBA students' value systems (values, beliefs, attitudes). IPA allowed me to gain insights into what an MBA is about from the participant perspective. I did this by focusing on their spoken words—language and delivery—and the meaning they ascribed to those words through their stories. This helped me interpret those words as they appeared to me by analysing what they meant to my participants and the contexts in which they used those words. I developed integrated narratives akin to Pietkiewicz and Smith's (2014) 'narrative notes', consisting of participants' spoken words and my interpretation of those words and their stories alongside (see section 3.7).

IPA's phenomenological element allowed me to understand the participants' experiences, their feelings and *their* view of *their* world; the interpretative element allowed me to contextualise claims made by the participants about their physical and cultural experiences; and the idiographic element enabled me to analyse the participants' experiences from their perspective and through their own words, making me aware of my assumptions about what they had said. There are two important benefits to using participants' own words to illustrate themes. First, 'it enables the reader to assess the pertinence of the interpretations' and second, 'it retains the voice of participants' personal experience, presenting the emic perspective' (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014, p.13). This emic perspective is central to IPA, where the researcher gains insight into a participant's world by attempting to be a part of that world and going on a journey with the participant while they narrate their story during the interview.

As IPA is strongly idiographic, it is flexible enough to allow unanticipated topics or themes to emerge at the data analysis stage (Smith 2004). However, interpreting participants' accounts of their world is never straightforward because recordings, transcripts and interviewer

notes can only provide a partial story. Therefore, I sought understanding of these imperfect data at an individual level before thematising broader similarities and differences among interviewees, doing justice to the data's idiographic nature and attempting to show the emic perspective explicitly. This required me to identify, explore, interpret and present phenomena 'from within the terms of the [interview] text' (Smith et al. 2009, p.37). In other words, IPA researchers seek to help readers understand what participants *say* they want. However, the reason(s) *why they want what they want* is often ignored (Agarwal & Sandiford 2020). Arguably, only after identifying the *why* behind participants' words are phenomena susceptible to identification and analysis. To analyse my MBA interviews, I adopted a dialogical method to further explore my interpretation of this *why* factor, contributing to both thematic analysis and presentation of the emic perspective in a novel manner. As Watson (1995, p.301) suggests, 'every writer is engaged in processes of persuasion, not only in their communicating with the reader but in the very processes of thinking out their ideas'.

3.4 Research design

At first, I analysed all the interview records separately and in depth. I then visited and revisited the patterns I had identified across the participants as a whole. After I finished analysing all the interviews, I first developed themes separately for each participant and then conducted a cross-case analysis to identify key shared themes. I demonstrate/explain this further in Section 3.7.5 (also see Appendix 8.1). This two-stage approach to data analysis, combined with IPA's ethos of participant-oriented interviewing, led me to focus on *what responses meant* to the participants who had made particular claims and expressed particular feelings and concerns based on a particular situation (Larkin, Watts & Clifton 2006). IPA's nature is that full and detailed analysis (e.g. of subtle differences or distinctions in expression and meaning) can only really be conducted on relatively small samples (Larkin et al. 2006;

Smith 2004). Clarke (2010) advises sampling between 4-10 participants for professional doctorates, while Alase (2017, p.15) stipulates 'an IPA research study should conduct semi-structured and unstructured interviews with as many as twenty five (25) participants, but as few as two (2)'. However, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014, p.9) state that 'there is no rule regarding how many participants should be included. It generally depends on: 1. the depth of analysis of a single case study; 2. the richness of the individual cases; 3. how the researcher wants to compare or contrast single cases; and 4. the pragmatic restrictions one is working under'. They further add that 'IPA studies have been published with, for example, one, four, nine, fifteen participants' and that 'larger sample sizes are possible but less common' (p.9). Smith (2004) has even argued that a single participant study could be justified, providing they can generate a particularly rich or compelling case. I was eager to draw upon a sample that was able to generate sufficient data as to allow me to conduct an in-depth investigation yet was also aware of the potential problems that would accompany data overload (Noon 2018, p.76). This suggestion is based on the premise that both undertaking a comprehensive and in-depth analysis about a particular participant's experience and presenting a more general account of a group or specific population is rarely possible (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014, p.9). With IPA, the aim is not to generate a theory to be generalised over the whole population. Thus, keeping this research's scope in mind, I interviewed 14 participants to do full justice to the data.

I conducted 12 of the 14 interviews on a university grounds and the remaining two in a café. Selecting participants in a way that all participants were comparable with regard to the research aim was essential (McCracken 1988). Thus, I chose a single university's MBA candidates and graduates as the research participants. All 14 participants were introduced to me through passive snowballing. The first 3 participants were introduced by my acquaintances at Adelaide university, and the remaining 11 were introduced to me by these research

participants. According to Noy (2008, p. 330), 'a sampling procedure may be defined as snowball sampling when the researcher accesses informants through [the] contact information that is provided by other informants'. Thus, I briefly explained the research's nature to my professional acquaintances and requested they provide my details to prospective participants. Following this, I received emails from a few participants interested in being involved in the research. Those participants then introduced other MBA students to my research, and they contacted me to participate.

The interview data consisted of audio recordings, interview notes, transcribed data and prepared transcripts for each participant individually. Given the nature of IPA, to understand the world of my participants, I decided to transcribe my data myself. It provided me with an opportunity to understand the words participants have spoken and, as Smith et al. (2009) point out, "immerse in the world" of my participants. Transcription is quite central in qualitative data collection, but Agar (1996, p.153) writes, "Transcription is a chore." However, I find transcription to be "a pivotal aspect of qualitative inquiry" (Oliver et al. 2005, p.1273). Oliver et al. (2005, pp.1273-1274) argue "transcription practices can be thought of in terms of a continuum with two dominant modes: naturalism, in which every utterance is transcribed in as much detail as possible, and denaturalism, in which idiosyncratic elements of speech (e.g., stutters, pauses, nonverbals, involuntary vocalisations) are removed." In the naturalised approach, language represents a real world and thus, a transcript reflects a verbatim depiction of speech (Schegloff 1997). On the other hand, denaturalised transcripts suggest that within discourse are meanings and perceptions that construct our reality (Cameron 2001, Oliver et al. 2005).

Oliver et al. (2005) suggest that a period of reflection allows researchers to examine transcription choices and assess how these choices affect both the participants and their research goals. From this perspective, I chose to focus on the embodied elements of participants – how they narrated certain parts of stories (e.g., clinching a fist, broadening of eyes, jumping up from the chair, stomping fist on the table, smirking and so on). It helped me understand the meaning behind their words and explore what the spoken words meant to the participants, not me. I have discussed this in more detail in section 3.6 below.

Although the interviews were the primary source of data used in this research for analysis, I also used PO to understand how MBA classes were conducted and make further sense of what the participants said about these classes. Although PO is not common in IPA studies, I opted for the approach for broad familiarisation with my participants' worlds. Experiencing how they interacted in the classroom environment with their peers and lecturers helped me better understand the stories they chose to narrate in their interviews.

3.5 Data collection

3.5.1 Conducting semi-structured interviews

An interview is a conversation between interviewer and interviewee and it is this interaction between the two from which knowledge is constructed for both (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). In qualitative research, semi-structured interviews are often organised around a set of predetermined open-ended interview questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006; Ryan, Coughlan & Cronin 2009). These are followed by other questions that emerge from the interaction between the researcher and the participants (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006). Thus, all the face-to-face interviews were semi-structured. This type of interaction allowed the participants to elaborate on their viewpoints and experiences (Ryan et al. 2009),

which helped me explore their 'experiences, opinions, attitudes, values and processes' (Rowley 2012, p.262), instead of just gathering a general understanding they held of their MBA.

Rubin and Rubin (2005, p. vii) use a 'night goggles' metaphor to explain the reason for using semi-structured interviews as a primary data collection method in qualitative research. They argue that semi-structured interviews allow researchers to hear or even 'see that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is looked at but seldom seen'. This fits Watson's (2000, p.58) assertion that 'none of it actually happened [only the researcher's experience/observation while interviewing a participant exist]. But it happens all the time [the fact that the researcher's experience exists]'.

To interpret how the participants saw their world, I adopted Myers and Newman's (2007, pp.16–17) guidelines for conducting semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The interviews were approximately 45 minutes to 2 hours long in duration.

1. **Setting the stage:** In the 12 interviews conducted on university grounds, I provided a quiet, neat and clean lecture room space to the participants. For the two interviews conducted in a café, I arrived at the venue well in advance and then shared a space with the participants—individually at different times. I thanked the participants (after each interview) for investing their valuable time in this research.

2. **Maintaining anonymity and confidentiality:** At the start of the interviews, I reminded the research participants that their names and organisations and those of people and organisations about which they spoke would be anonymised—something they agreed upon before the interview by giving signed consent. This helped me establish a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere and build a professional rapport with the participants.

3. **Exploring various 'voices':** In this research, I began the interview with a broad request: 'So, tell me about yourself'. I allowed the participants to share their side of the story and elaborate on it. To further assist the participants in elaborating on their accounts, I used questions, such as 'that is an extensive experience you carry! So, you were already interested in the MBA at the beginning?'. Also, when I needed more explanation, I asked questions such as 'would you explain what you mean when you say the MBA met/did not meet your expectations? Would you please give an example?' When the participants were vague in their responses, I asked questions, such as, 'OK, so what led you to pursue an MBA? Any examples that you may want to share that may shed light on the reasons behind your decision?' Such probing questions allowed me to dig deeper into the participants' responses and provided them with an opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and share those reflections with me.

4. **Flexibility:** Both Englander (2012) and Edwards and Holland (2013) argue that there is no set way of conducting a semi-structured face-to-face interview. Thus, I treated the interview schedule (see Appendix 8.2) only as a checklist to ensure that critical information about my research aim was discussed during the interviews.

5. **Using silent probes:** While interviewing the participants, I used body gestures to acknowledge their responses; maintaining eye contact, making a few notes while participants shared their stories with me, nodding slowly, smiling when appropriate and allowing ample time for the participants to think on their answers when needed.

6. **Using the words spoken by the participants:** To help them reflect, I asked questions, such as 'would you explain what you mean when you say, "interesting learning environment"?' I asked such questions to ensure that I understood what was interesting to them and what they meant by it, instead of interpreting 'interesting' as I understood it.

7. **Probing for clarity to understand the meaning behind the spoken words:** As the interview questions are a part of the phenomenological interview, I kept reminding myself that the experiences the participants chose to share may range from a few seconds to several years. Bearing in mind that 'meanings are context dependent' (Englander 2012, p.26), I kept myself aware of the need to probe for clarity, instead of taking spoken words on face value. Thus, in this phenomenological research, by continuously asking participants to explain the meaning of the words and phrases they used to describe their account, I attempted to explore the meaning of a phenomenon they experienced from their perspective, instead of trying to uncover some factual information or relating the narrated story to my experiences; that is, I was 'discovering' the world of participants through their eyes, in their own words—trying to see their world as they saw it.

I recorded all the interviews and transcribed the recordings manually. Making verbatim transcripts allowed me to gain insight into the interview data and familiarise myself with the context of each of the 14 interviews.

**Table 3.1: The research participants' background information**

| Participant Pseudonym | Position | Work Experience (years) | Area of Expertise |
|---|---|---|---|
| Karolina | Accountant | 10+ | Finance and accounting |
| Selina | Trainer | 4+ | Customer service |
| Kristine | Project manager | 10+ | Technologist |
| Salec | Manager | 14+ | Sales |
| Bowman | Manager | 10+ | Engineering |
| Vonnie | Consultant | 20+ | Self-employed |
| Karina | Scientist | 5+ | Customer service |
| Coleen | CEO | 25+ | Business development |
| Marina | Scientist | 5+ | Self employed |

| Maddie | Executive officer | 4+ | Gaming |
|--------|-------------------|-----|--------|
| Charing | Finance officer | 9+ | Finance |
| Melanie | Pharmacist | 10+ | Public health service |
| Graisam | Full-time MBA student | 8+ | Business development |
| Halim | Full-time MBA student | 6+ | Market research |

3.5.2 Conducting participant observation

PO is an important tool for collecting data in qualitative research (Creswell 2013). It has been used in several disciplines as 'a tool for collecting data about people, processes and cultures in qualitative research' (Kawulich 2005, p.1). While observing participants, researchers use their instincts to note a phenomenon in the field setting, gathering first-hand information often with an instrument and recording it for scientific purposes (Angrosino 2007). PO originated in anthropology in the 19th century to provide researchers with an opportunity to observe people's behaviour (individually or within a group(s)) and gain insight into their practices (Kawulich 2005; Polit & Beck 2010; Tedlock 2005). Atkinson and Hammersley (1998, p.249) describe PO as more than just a method to collect data, arguing:

> In a sense, all social research is a form of participant observation, because we cannot study the social world without being a part of it. From this point of view, participant observation is not a particular research technique but a mode of being-in-the-world characteristic of researchers.

I undertook the role of an *observer as participant sitting in MBA classes* 'watching and taking field notes from a distance, […] record[ing] data without direct involvement with activity or people' (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p.168). It allowed me to observe the MBA class as a whole and take field notes to write two main aspects: *what did I observe* and *what did I think*

(see Appendix 8.3). I followed Creswell's (2013, pp.167–168) suggestion to observe the MBA students in the class:

1. I chose that course to observe because it was suitable for my research schedule in all three trimesters in 2019. I obtained the permission required for observation from the lecturer in charge, who introduced me to the class. I then provided a summary of my research to the MBA students, requesting their permission for me to participate. Once all the students and the lecturer had agreed and signed the consent form, I assumed the observer's role as a participant.

2. I observed the MBA students; the class environment; the lecturer; and discussions, narrated stories, agreements and disagreements among students and between students and lecturers.

3. While observing the class, I wrote both descriptive (what did I observe?) and reflective observations (what did I think at that moment?) and marked each observation with a date and time. I noted the descriptive section chronologically, putting pen to paper on how events unfolded in the class as it progressed. The reflective section consisted of my immediate thoughts around when I was penning my observations of the class discussions and activities. Some of the observations were more pictorial and included pictures, tables, graphs and models, in line with Lofland and Lofland's (2006) suggestions for logging data.

4. Following each observation, I reflected on my observations as a whole and wrote a few main points that stood out. These reflections included events, activities, personal reflections, insights, ideas, confusions, initial reactions and altered perceptions, if any (see Appendix 8.3.1.1).

5. After the last observation, I thanked the MBA students and lecturers for allowing me to be an observer for their course duration.

3.6 Reflexive data analysis process

Qualitative analysis is multi-layered, with interviews providing an initial uncovering of a phenomenon by both the researcher and the participant—essentially a sort of co-construction process (Watson 2000, 1995). This requires researchers to go through transcription, data familiarisation and reflexive interpretation, analysing participants' elaborate explanations based on audio recordings and transcriptions into analytic summaries and narrative notes (Smith et al. 2009), as discussed later in this chapter. This allowed me to explore connections between emergent themes, describing and grouping those themes based on conceptual similarities (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014) shared by participants. I then attempted to make these connections evident and explicit to readers using the dialogical method. This process minimised possible concerns surrounding the implicit assumptions that I brought to my analytical approach and, eventually, findings.

3.6.1 Reflexivity and how the dialogical approach fits with it

Creswell (2013, p. 44) remarks:

> Qualitative research begins with the assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex

description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change.

Reflexivity has been conceptualised and defined in many ways (Cunliffe 2003; Mruck & Mey 2007). In general, it refers to a researcher's practice of being explicit to self and readers and question, engage with and react to the influence they have had on their research (Gentles et al. 2014). Hassard (1993, p.12) argues that to be reflexive in analysing research data, researchers need to develop an ability to be critical of their intellectual assumptions; to question their assumptions rather than accepting them as they arise. This could be quite unsettling for a researcher, and can cause insecurity about their assumptions, discourse and practices that led them to describe reality (Pollner 1991). Although such criticality provides an opportunity for qualitative researchers to be vigilant towards the ever-changing and challenging nature of human experiences (e.g. confusion, ambiguity, disturbance and so on), it also involves putting at risk one's own beliefs and assumptions (Warwick 2011).

Often, qualitative researchers attempt to quell preconceived notions, assumptions and values that describe their very existence, without realising the inseparability of those from their research (Agarwal & Sandiford, 2021). According to Giorgi (1994, p.195) 'the problem seems to be that there is a suspicion of data' that is based on a researcher's perceptions, intuition, and descriptions and 'the received wisdom deems to be that one has to submit raw data to all sorts of formal procedures in order to make them valid and reliable.' This remains a challenge, possibly for all researchers, especially in qualitative studies. Giorgi (1994, pp.196) further adds that 'one can feel here the tensions the researchers are experiencing between being faithful to the phenomena as they actually unfold on the site and to certain expected dictates of science, and yet being able to communicate meaningful results in an efficient way.' He claims that the

expectations concerning *scientific status* of the findings is where the problems are (Giorgi, 1994). Thus, researchers need to revisit their analysis to identify the so-called assumptions that foreground their research description and be explicit in embracing the process of identifying those assumptions, for which reflexivity is the key (Linstead 1994, p.1325). However, to assume that researchers would have a detailed, complete and accessible view of a participant's world in any sense would be an assumption in its own right. Thus, to establish a link between their fragments of thought and readers recognising those fragments explicitly, qualitative researchers need to apply reflexivity to practice (i.e. the process that led to a finding; how I did it), instead of *just* stating their research findings (what I did) (Linstead 1994). In the words of Wolcott (2010, p.36):

> Our readers have a right to know about us. And they do not want to know whether we played in the high school band. They want to know what prompts our interests in the topics we investigate, to whom we are reporting and what we personally stand to gain from our study.

Thus, to ensure that I am providing enough information to my readers, I have decided to make the process of practising reflexivity explicit; but before this, it is important to outline the challenges associated with reflexivity and assumptions in general.

3.6.2 Challenges associated with my assumptions

Cunliffe (2003, cited in Warwick 2011, p.7) highlights the importance of 'engaging in at least one self-referential loop by interrogating the impact of one's own assumptions'. This concept helped me understand the inseparable duality of mine and my participants' worlds. Dewey (2007, cited in Warwick 2011, p.8) writes, 'Experience, in short, is not a combination

of mind and world, subject and object, method and subject matter, but a single continuous interaction of a great diversity of energies'.

Reflexivity is concerned with understanding the foundation on which a researcher's thoughts are based, which may be achieved by being flexible towards the *hidden nature of truth* (Cunliffe & Jun 2005). As truth is elusive, flexibility is not about describing reality in a precise manner. Instead, it is about exercising the freedom to seek other possibilities, which requires not following an orthodox way of thinking. This requires researchers to pay attention to uncovering how micro-processes of social interactions led to the development of the shared *social everyday world*, and rules and general assumptions that underpin the development of that thought process (Alvesson & Skoldberg 2009, pp.78–82). My participants and I continuously influenced each other (Warwick 2011, p.12). To explain this further, in the following section, I discuss how I documented my awareness and reflexivity while analysing the data.

### 3.6.3 Practising reflexivity

Researchers can practice reflexivity by focusing on analysing discursive choices to establish possible moral groundings (Deetz 1996, p.195). Moral debates are neither common nor explicit. Thus, to make these debates coherent to readers, I recognised my research as a set of interactive processes that produce traceable social dialogues (Brauer 1996; Deetz 1996). To make this set of interactive processes explicit to the readers and me, I practised reflexivity. This enabled me to co-construct participants' views of their world, using their words along with my interpretation of those words. This helped me to uncover what participants meant by the words they used to narrate their stories (Smith 2005, p.21), in the process being explicit to readers on how participants saw their world and how I played a part in co-constructing that world. I did

this to show readers that this is an effective way—perhaps the only legitimate way—to present the meaning behind the words participants used to describe their world to me. I write this because 'analysis is rooted in a broad social constructionist set of assumptions in which human life is seen as involving a struggle to create a sense of order out of potential chaos' (Watson 1998, pp.286–287).

Thus, while discussing this approach's intricacies, I paid attention to everyday existence rather than abstracting this detail into 'organisational recipes and systems' (Warwick 2011). I connected individual participants collectively to themes, highlighting the conceptual similarities these participants shared and how they played out in a given environment (Stacey & Griffin 2005, pp.8–9). However, the closer I got, the more challenging it became to take *me* out of the equation as I was a part of an ongoing process and the environment where the interactions took place (Warwick 2011, p.6). Thus, I understood that reflexivity is not about what discoveries researchers make through such exploration; it is about how they make the journey that led to those discoveries, a sort of co-constructing of the participant world along the way (Watson 1995, 2000). Stacey and Griffin (2005, p.9) conclude that 'the research method is subjective, or rather a paradox of detached involvement'.

### 3.6.4 Complexity and my influence: validity and rigour

Like most, I considered validity quite challenging in bringing together relevance with rigour (Aram & Salipante 2003). Linstead (1994, p.1326) argues that 'to present the intertextual realities of doubt and confusion which characterize the researcher's world would almost certainly violate the reader's or evaluator's expectations'. At least, this is what I assume happens when a reader attempts to understand a qualitative researcher's approach to phenomenon discovery.

While it was impossible to remove my assumptions and values instilled in my personality from my analysis, I had to provide a detailed analysis of the influence of my assumptions and values on my analysis and research findings (Jackson & Willmont 1987, p.363). Thus, I developed a non-traditional method—an integrated dialogical method informed by interview transcripts and integrated narratives—to present my research findings, acknowledging my assumptions and values (Agarwal & Sandiford 2021). As I was mindful about using language and discourse to construct experiences, I used the participants' vocabulary alongside what I understood by those spoken words to keep this intact. This allowed me to show my inseparability from my participants' worlds and what this meant by reflecting on their worlds through their eyes using their own words and from their perspective. However, as the assumptions, internal values and personal ideologies that underlie the whole research process are continuously evolving, it was quite challenging for me to understand me, let alone explain what I wanted to write for my readers (Payne 2000, p.313). So, to maintain a balance between 'the personal and the universal' (Berger 2015, p.1), I attempted to understand my role in creating knowledge. I did this by focusing on internal knowledge and sensitivity (e.g. keeping a reflexive journal, observing participants). I exercised caution in monitoring the impact my assumptions may have had on my research/analytical process (e.g. by continuously referring to the reflexive journal).

In the next section, I discuss how I did IPA and the challenges that I encountered in presenting the worlds of all 14 participants, individually and collectively.

3.7 *Doing* an interpretative phenomenological analysis

Watson, C. (2006a, p.367) asserts that 'a potentially problematic aspect of the qualitative interview is the propensity towards tensions that emerge—ambiguities, inconsistencies, contradictions etc.—especially when transcripts are analysed.' To help researchers with it, Smith (2004, p.44) suggests using IPA, which 'operates at a level which is clearly grounded in the text' that interviewees produce and that 'different levels of interpretation are possible … part of what makes qualitative psychology distinctive and creative'. This involves two stages: discovery and interpretation of a phenomenon:

1. While interviewing, researchers continuously interpret participants' words and story(ies), simultaneously analysing what they say, how they say it, probing for clarification, recapitulating ideas and keeping interview notes.

2. The researcher then reads and re-reads interview transcripts and interview notes *while* listening and re-listening to recordings, seeking insight into each participant's world, elaboration and clarification of participants' vocabulary, interview context and the story's meaning (Bell 2002).

This represents a discovery journey, involving a re/co-construction of each participant's story, based on reflexive journaling. This reinforces Alvesson's (2010, p.71) metaphor of interviewer as traveller, viewing IPA interviews as 'partly formed and transformed by the interviewer–researcher'. Alvesson (2010, p.71) also cites Kvale's (1996) observation that 'the potentialities of meanings in the original stories are differentiated and unfolded through the traveller's interpretations; the tales are remoulded into new narratives, which are convincing in their aesthetic form and are validated through their impact upon the listeners'. This co-construction is apparent in Pietkiewicz and Smith's (2014) championing of researcher-constructed narrative notes, discussed next.

3.7.1 Analysing an IPA narrative

Boje (1991, p.107) observes:

> we all tell stories, and during the better performances we feel the
> adrenaline pump as word pictures dance in our intellect and we begin
> to live the episode vicariously or recall similar life events … As
> listeners [and retellers (IPA researcher)], we are co-producers with the
> teller of the story performance. It is an embedded and fragmented
> process in which we fill the blanks and gaps between the lines with our
> own experience.

According to Watson, C. (2011, p.305), 'the use of narrative has become widespread in social and educational research, as both the phenomenon under study and as a method of analysis'. IPA researchers construct interpretive *narratives notes* to contextualise each interviewee's story (Agarwal & Sandiford 2020; Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014). These contain a researcher's reflections on what and how participants share during interviews, translating participant *narratives* in *note* form. This is an essential step in exploring the concepts and terminology that interviewees use, to interpret their subjective sense-making of specific phenomena.

IPA emphasises narrative, whether analysing interviewees' stories or reconstructing them in researcher-constructed narrative notes. Participants' stories help explore and reinforce their self-perception. An interviewee does not just 'make things up', but rather, 'inventively, judiciously, purposefully fashions a story that is "true to life"' (Holstein & Gubrium 1995, p.28). Thus, the way participants tell their story reveals clues about their assumptions and influences. As Watson, C. (2006b, p.511) writes, 'the story is thus a powerful metaphor for a

life and the telling of stories a universal human activity'. This contributes to researchers' data familiarisation and reflexive interpretation when de/co/reconstructing participants' explanations into narrative notes, or analytic summaries. Reflexive researchers recount and critique their practice *to* themselves and *their readers, making sense of their role within and influencing* their research (Hibbert et al. 2014). According to Sergi and Hallin (2011, p.191), this becomes crucial:

> when grounding qualitative research in a process ontology, research is the fruit of the researcher's performance … doing research is performing it and performing it cannot happen without feeling a wide range of emotions, without appealing to who we are or without questioning what we are doing.

Arguably, the rationale(s) for an interviewee's story is as important as its literal truth, or otherwise; after all, 'the arousing of prejudice, pity, anger, and similar emotions has nothing to do with the essential facts, but is merely a personal appeal to the man who is judging the case' (Aristotle, cited in Norton 2018, p.377). Watson, C. (2011, p.395) states that just because there is this 'deeply felt need for research to be grounded in an empirical reality of something that *really* happened' without considering this personal appeal, there is no general acceptance of narrative or 'the use of fictional narratives and related genres such as semi-fiction and creative non-fiction.' This flags the reservations that some have about fictional narratives and related genres such as semi-fiction and creative non-fiction. Bell (2002, p.209) concurs that 'no matter how fictionalized, all stories … provide a window into people's beliefs and experiences'. The concern is that as participant stories are likely equivocal, with varying layers of perspectives (Peshkin 1998), scholars need to be mindful of how they engage with data and the 'possible impact of their reading of talk-as-text' (Butler 2015, p.73). Butler (2015, p.168)

describes communication as 'a complex and ever-changing product of the interaction between the mode; content and context; sender and audience; form and function; medium; and fluency of the message... [and as] notoriously disrupted'. This resonates with Smith et al.'s (2009, p.37) guidance for reading 'from within the terms of the text' and supports the idea that short interview quotations can only be illustrative of analysis rather than individually evidential in their own right. Using such references, although portrayed as a 'template for good scholarship … gives rise to significant problems in management and organization studies', representing 'boxed-in research' that can curb novel and influential ideas (Alvesson & Sandberg 2014, p.967). This is where IPA contributes to qualitative research more broadly, enhancing interpretive analysis with its richly idiographic orientation.

3.7.2 Challenges in discovering and presenting *a phenomenon*

Writing up *completed* research represents yet another level of narrative. Thus, I invite readers to follow my analysis and interpretation of each participant's story, in which I have combined participant voice with my reconstruction of phenomena. Although the IPA literature stresses the importance of rigorous communication of phenomenological findings (analytic themes, phenomena, interpretations etc.), the processes of discovering and presenting a phenomenon remain blurred. Even the IPA literature can sometimes seem preoccupied in two ways – first and foremost with the comparative analysis of participants' data (Crist & Tanner 2003; Millward 2006; Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014; Shinebourne 2011; Smith 2004, 2011), which may distract attention, albeit unintentionally, from the key issue of how IPA researchers discover and present a specific phenomenon.

Alvesson and Sandberg (2014, p.972) argue formulaic scholarly writing conventions reduce 'variation, surprises, novelty, rich experiences, originality, creativity and personal

touch'; thus, alternative dissemination techniques may be necessary for 'more interesting, imaginative and influential research'. The fictionalised dialogical approach to phenomenon discovery and presentation is one such technique. As 'mere description is so difficult' (Wittgenstein 1980, p.257), scholars have adopted creative forms of writing (poetry, drama, interpretive dance) when presenting research findings (Rhodes & Brown 2005; Stinson et al. 1990; van Maanen 1990; Watson 1995, 2000, 2011). Such creative approaches add richness to the presentation of findings. In this research, I explored the challenge of doing phenomenological justice to data, both in analysis and presentation. It is a psychologist's conceptualisation of phenomena. Rather than name phenomena, more in keeping with a psychologist's conceptualisation, I developed an integrated dialogue approach to make this conceptualisation clearer to my readers and me. Eventually, I was convinced that IPA's ideography could be served by imagining multi-voice, fictionalised dialogues that incorporate individual narratives within a cross-case analysis. In effect, individuality is explored and presented in relation to, rather than subsumed in, *otherness*; exploring how individuals *could* interact with and react to other individuals, phenomena and thematic generalisations. However, Watson, C. (2011, p.396), highlighting an issue with the scholarly world, cautions:

> To declare one's work 'social science' is to make certain assurances that what one has written is true and deserves to be taken seriously. But by declaring one's work simultaneously fiction and social science, the researcher runs the risk, through disturbing the pact between author and reader, of not having their work read as social science (or indeed at all) and therefore dismissed.

Watson (2000) sees a dialogical approach as fostering learning in which interviewee and interviewer jointly, if fictionally, explore and co-construct a specific research problem,

arguing that fiction's logic and practice has a quality that invites the construction of this *bridge*.
Although Watson is a sociologist, not a phenomenologist, his argument is similar to Cunliffe's
(2002, p.143) idea that

> intersubjective constitution of meaning may be a complex ebb and flow
> of connecting/disconnecting, dialogue with self/others, listening, and
> feeling—a responsive process of meaning-making that is not solely
> within you or me but in our relationally engaged embodied activity.

Thus, in a 'narrowing of the officially sanctioned methodological spectrum' (Barone
2007, p.454), 'particularly in educational research […] in which "evidence-based practice" has
become a mantra' (Watson, C. 2011, p.396), the resultant dialogue's design and direction create
a discursive process to generate insights, conceptions and assumptions about a problem (van
de Kerkhof 2006). This approach contributes to both phenomenon discovery and presentation
by retaining each participant's voice within an imagined social context. The following sections
engage with this study and how I interpreted and analysed my data to demonstrate what I did.

3.7.3 Dialogical method: one step more than just a narrative account of participants' worlds
In educational research, fictional forms of representation are widespread (Watson 2011, p.401).
In this study, in addition to the primarily descriptive (albeit reflexive) narrative notes, I drew
from Watson's (1995, 2000, 2004, 2012) use of dialogue, especially concerning *ethnographic
fiction science* (Watson 2004). This involved the re-interpretation and recontextualising
(recalling the interview environment, referring to interview notes plus observed data and
reflexive journaling) of the jointly generated and co-constructed (by participants and me, the
researcher) interview data and the more mono-voiced narrative notes, to develop a dialogical
method that incorporates the voices from a series of 14 interviews. This form of dialogical

storytelling seeks to summarise and contextualise participants' accounts of their experiences. It provided me with an opportunity to present my work in semi-fiction form to increase reader engagement (Watson, C. 2011, p.402). Watson, C. (2011, p.396), reiterating Rhodes and Brown (2005), suggests 'the act of openly declaring one's work fiction (or semi-fiction) actually demonstrates an ethical position since it explicitly acknowledges the "textuality, aesthetics and constructedness" of the text, aspects that are frequently masked in "conventional" social science writing'. Thus, the dialogue construction contributed to my understanding of the events and actions within a particular narrative, effectively representing the phenomena, actions, attitudes and emotions discussed, experienced and identified during the interviews (Sagae et al. 2013), contextually and analytically rather than comparatively, something that took me closer to seeing the world of my research participants as they saw it. According to Corley (2015, p.602), even though the knowledge gained through understanding of participant worlds 'may not be replicable by others who did not directly experience it, 'it provides novel and theoretically interesting insight to organizational life beyond what we gain from other, more positivistic forms of data collection and analysis'.

This imagined dialogue summarises and contextualises participants' narratives in a more social setting. Although imaginary, these dialogues are not necessarily *untrue,* if based on meaningful interpretations of context. Instead, the semi-fictional dimension can 'increase reader response and help challenge pre-existing assumptions in a creative and subversive way' (Watson 2011; Whiteman & Phillips 2006, p.16). For example, Mark Twain (1918 cited in Knowles & Cole 2008, p.156) critiques James Fenimore Cooper's 'splendidly inaccurate' eye for 'poor research concerning shapes of streams, the size of an ark, the behavior of Indians, the visibility of a nail head, even the sounds of conversations' in his novel *Deerslayer (1841). He

suggests Cooper's fiction would have offered a rich and meaningful interpretation if it had been based on sound research.

Similarly, my imagined dialogue characterises a rich and meaningful construction based on my research (interviews and contextual interpretation), representing the phenomena, actions, attitudes, emotions discussed, experienced and identified by participants, contextually and analytically rather than comparatively. Arguably, this takes the narrative note approach one stage further in the quest for phenomenological understanding. Rather than moving directly on to data coding and theme analysis or analysis of similarities and differences, a dialogical method seeks to understand better and communicate an individual's story concerning others. This fits with IPA's theoretical underpinnings and rationale. It also provides a medium for communicating and illustrating thematic findings from the interpretative analysis, introducing methodological developments and techniques from other disciplines to qualitative research.

3.7.4 Dialogical method: a process

Reason and Rowan (1981, p.241) argue that 'we have to learn to think dialectically, to view reality as a process, always emerging through a self-contradictory development, always becoming; knowing this reality is neither subjectivity nor objective, it is both wholly independent of me and wholly dependent on me.' From this notion, the dialogical method helped me explore and present both the observed similar and conflicting perspectives shared by participants and individual assumptions that played an essential role in a participant's specific reasoning. This approach served three purposes; first, it was a key part of making sense of the data; second, it enables readers to engage with this research; and third, it helps with the often-challenging task of facilitating participant anonymisation, especially in small sample studies

(Watson 2000). I found Watson's work quite useful for explaining the fundamentals behind developing the dialogical method for data analysis and findings presentation.

Watson's work explores the expectations and prejudices regarding scholarly social and rhetorical writing. He argues that 'rhetoric is inevitably an integral part of research work and research writing. All social science writing involves the creation of an artful product' (Watson 1995, p.301). Aristotle wrote that rhetoric

> is as universal as dialectic; it is clear, also, that it is useful … Its function
>
> is not simply to succeed in persuading, but rather to discover the means
>
> of coming as near such success as the circumstances of each particular
>
> case allow (cited in Norton 2018, p.380).

While discussing his fictionalised research with his colleague, Tom, Watson (1995, pp.301–302) acknowledges that it is challenging to remove himself from his analysis, ignoring experiences with, conversations with and empathy towards participants. Although Tom questions Watson—'Well, that's very different from the way I was trained: you do an experiment or whatever and then write it up as accurately as you can so that people know exactly what you did'—Watson continues:

> Fair enough, Tom. But don't you see that would be utterly impossible
>
> given that my 'experiment' involves me … talking, arguing, listening,
>
> watching and working with people. Whatever I write is going to be
>
> selective, shaped and … subjective, biased.

In my IPA application of Watson's ideas, I recognise that my dialogical method is limited by my own (and my participants') vocabulary and that it is inevitably selective, shaped

and subjective. But as Watson explains: 'I am going to have to tell this story—my own story in large part I admit—in such a way that when people like you read it, you will accept the validity of the basic story, the value of the main theories I put across'.

Weick (1979, p.29, citing Steinbeck 1951) highlights this merit in his retelling of Steinbeck's story about coming to understand the nature of the Mexican Sierra fish:

> To sit in a laboratory, open an evil-smelling jar, remove a stiff colorless
> fish from the formalin solution, count the spines and write the truth …
> There you have recorded a reality which cannot be assailed—probably
> the least important reality concerning either the fish or yourself … The
> fish is not that color, that texture, that dead, nor does he smell that way.

A social science writer intertwines narratives, descriptions, examples, characters and interpretive commentary to allow readers to identify the foundation on which the story is constructed (Watson 1995). Freire (1982, p.30) expresses the ontological position of all participative approaches to inquiry:

> The concrete reality for many social scientists is a list of particular facts
> that they would like to capture; for example, the presence or absence of
> water, problems concerning erosion in the area. For me, the concrete
> reality is something more than isolated facts. In my view, thinking
> dialectically, the concrete reality consists not only of concrete facts and
> (physical) things, but also includes the ways in which the people
> involved with these facts perceive them. Thus in the last analysis, for
> me, concrete reality is the connection between subjectivity and

objectivity, never objectivity isolated from subjectivity (also cited in

Denzin & Lincoln 1994, p.332).

Thus, presenting findings using a dialogical method provided a rigorous, scholarly alternative, in so far as any narrative is constructed and shaped by an author drawing from data, experience and/or abstraction informed by interview notes and PO. To achieve this, researchers must look inward to identify and be responsible for their role in their research (Berger 2015). Watson, C. (2011, pp.402–403) states:

> in education and possibly in other areas of professional practice too,
> there is a tendency these days, when presenting research for
> consumption by practitioners, for findings to be simplified, made easily
> digestible; complexity is violated in the reductive pursuit of simple
> messages and closure.

Thus, keeping in mind that semi-fiction is still seen as presenting empirical content in a 'partial (or total) make-believe form for dramatic communicative effect' (Whiteman & Phillips 2006, p.6), I have presented my research findings in Chapter 4 more explicitly; writing the process that was adopted to produce knowledge from the collected data (e.g. verbatim and observed notes), *without* omitting its complex meanings and my contributions (e.g. how observed actions guided the narrated story) that led me to understand a social phenomenon. Watson, C. (2011, p.402), recalling an experience from one of her presentations, writes:

> At the seminar I presented this as a series of satirical 'Hogarthian'
> scenes documenting the family's progress and called on members of the
> audience to take the various (scripted) roles. The analysis of this
> mother's narrative was itself a narrative in which I quoted her at length,

added my own interpretations and fictionalized some parts to present scenes based on her experiences. Here the aim of fictionalization was to satirize these events in order to point up the absurd that always lurks beneath what hegemonic discourse claims as the rational, since it is precisely this claim that produces 'madness' through what it excludes.

Thus, to capture the complexity and my influence on my analysis, I developed a five-step data analysis process to demonstrate my reflexive approach and in the process presented the validity and rigour of my research process. This five-step data analysis process provided me with an opportunity to make the process for data collection, data analysis and research findings quite evident and explicit—first to me and, I hope, to my readers as well. The following section discusses these five steps in detail, including how fictionalising such dialogue contributes to the more established IPA technique of narrative note construction (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014), further bridging the gap between what my participants said and the meanings behind those words.

3.7.5 A five-step data analysis process

All I want to emphasize is that what one brings out of a field study largely depends on what one brings to it (Evans-Pritchard 1976, pp.240–241).

Who am I to say what is right,

As I am not the one who decides.

I do know that someone does.

Whether it is you or whether you want me to do,

Doesn't matter.

What matters is, how are we doing it?

We all like to live freely,

Freedom is what we enjoy; slavery is what we shun.

But then, is the question about being a master or a slave?

Well, that is something I cannot answer for you.

But then I do want to help you and, in the process, help my instrumental self.

I like freedom and it motivates me to do what I do.

If I can't breathe, I need to break free.

If I can't break free, my research suffers. My work cries. My heart feels lonely,

What more can I do? I just want to break free.

I ask, 'why?' And I get, you are a slave, slave of your own doing.

I ask again, why? And I get because it is the freedom you set out to enjoy,

But what remained of you is the suffocated heart.

You are not free, you are breathless.

You are not living; you just want to get it over with.

Don't lose your freedom, breathe.

Remember this feeling; till the time you are able to breathe,

You are enjoying the happiness' seed.

The enjoyment will bring in the motivation in you,

To produce the result of the freedom that you seek.

I dare you to dive underwater and remain there until you cannot further,

Gasping for breath, you come out because you have not given yourself enough freedom to

breathe.

This research is not so different from this experience.

We dive in, but then we have to breathe.

If you stay aboard a boat, the whole ocean is yours

If you jump in, you have only a few seconds to hold.

Decide what you want.

Do you want to jump in, or do you want to stay out?

If you jump in, you experience the ocean firsthand; you must interact with it.

If you stay out, you are trying to understand the ocean without interaction with it.

I have dived into my research ocean.

I realise that I cannot interact with all of it, but only the part I swim in, I experience.

It doesn't make the ocean any less,

It's just I want to experience it first-hand.

I shall come out and tell you how cold the water is,

You may also feel how cold the water is from outside,

How is it different from what I have felt?

The only difference is you are trying to gauge how cold the water would be,

While I have experienced it first-hand,

No matter how we do it, I shall remain much informed

about how cold the ocean I have dived in really is … until you jump in.

(Agarwal, the author)


It was essential for me to analyse each participant's data individually and separately. Although this sounds relatively straightforward, the process of making this qualitative analysis is not so simple. To make the analytical process explicit for the reader, I developed a five-step data analysis process—keeping in mind the challenges that qualitative researchers encounter to show that the findings of their research are credible—to understand and be familiar with my thought processes and be explicit in writing the process of my research findings. This

explicitness in acknowledging how I have co-constructed my research findings with my research participants (individually and collectively) enabled me (and I hope it will do the same for readers) to identify my assumptions, which I found to be inseparable from the analytical process. However, this reflexive writing has a prerequisite—conducting a case-by-case analysis and leaving a time gap between analysing different participants' data. This was necessary as I needed to focus on one participant at a time and reflect on my relationship with that participant, rather than attempting to bring in relationships that emerged from earlier analyses of other participants' data. This ties in quite nicely with the IPA foundations and Smith et al.'s (2009) suggestion to explore collected data on a case-by-case basis, individually and in isolation from other participants' data.

Below, I identify the five steps and discuss the processes that I have followed. I sought to give a full explanation of what and how regarding my analysis and interpretation. The analysis is not constrained by pre-planned procedures, instead, it evolved. Therefore, the chapter (chapter 4: Findings) is a story of what I did as clearly as possible. It represents an evolving research design. The central point is that clarity of description is not the rigidity of process or design, but the clarity is central to my contribution. The design is an extension of my original idea, which I used in my Master in Business Research thesis (Agarwal 2016).

**Step 1: Reading and re-reading the verbatim and developed interview transcript, and listening to the audio recordings multiple times.**

Reading developed interview transcripts and listening to audio recordings multiple times allowed me to consider an image that a participant sketched of their world, using spoken words. This process led me to immerse myself in my participants' worlds (e.g. Smith et al. 2009). This immersion exposed me to the participants' communication styles and specific

words they used to convey their ideas and narrate their stories. Here, I broke down each participant's (individually) elaborate and complex explanations into various summarised events. For example, going through Kristine's interview transcript and audio recording, I explored the changes between her pre-MBA and during-MBA 'mindsets'. This helped me identify several themes (e.g. Horns effect; focusing on symptoms to treat problems; happy to be unsafe) that emerged from my analysis. Following this, I made connections between these summarised events by revisiting the interview transcripts and audio recordings (for each participant) multiple times. This allowed me to share the journey with Kristine, understand her world—how she saw it—and uncover how events had unfolded for her. This sort of analysis helped me discover why she had experienced a change in her 'mindset' from pre-MBA (e.g. focusing on symptoms) to during-MBA (e.g. treating problems). Going on a similar journey with each of the 14 participants enabled me to uncover their phenomena through their eyes, using their words and from their perspective. The process of co-construction (of a story) began with this step.

**Step 2: Using the words spoken by different participants to elaborate on their ideas (individually).**

I found myself closer to my participants' selves by following Step 1. I was able to identify my participants' lived experiences from their perspectives using their spoken words (e.g. Smith et al. 2009). This helped me gather their views of themselves as individuals and how they saw themselves as part of a community, something that resonated quite well with Berger's (2015, p.1) argument as discussed earlier in this chapter, maintaining 'a balance between the personal and the universal'. First, I prepared a draft of my interpretation, which was a product of my reflection on what I understood from reading an interview transcript and listening to an audio recording of one participant multiple times. According to Smith et al.

(2009), rules for taking notes or writing an interpretation of a participant's explanation are not stringent. However, while writing a draft, I needed to note each participant's spoken words—especially the phrases, quotes and description of certain events on which participants elaborated during their respective interviews.

To achieve this, I used narrative notes to bring forth the world my participants shared with me (Bruce) (using direct quotes from the interview transcripts) and my interpretations of the participants' worlds to readers (integrated narratives). In doing this, I understood what they said, why they said it, what it meant to them and how I present to readers their world through their eyes using their words. The following *integrated narrative* from Kristine's 'Happy to be unsafe' theme, shows how I have used her spoken words (in *italics*) and my interpretation of her story to present to the reader Kristine's world the way she saw it:

> Kristine's decision to leave work and pursue full-time MBA seemed completely out of character (risk taker from being risk averse). Her suggestion that she was *a good working Italian* and that her parents had expressed shock at her decision indicates that according to her, people from Italy are risk averse and prefer stability rather than going *through the roller coaster* ride in their careers. Although this might be the case for Italy's general population, for Kristine, this had not become a barrier. Instead, she had given herself *the kick in the butt that she needed.* Kristine's optimistic attitude and the change in her behaviour allowed her *to keep focusing on the positive.* For example, just before she left her job, Kristine looked for different projects and only when she found a few coming her way, did she realise *there is enough to keep that confidence going by being, OK something will work out*. This sort

of 'mindset' of leaving a job without permanent salary and with *a young family and a partner at Uni* is very different from how she was previously *pretty risk averse in that respect* pre-MBA. Her ideology changed from *how that's going to happen*, to *something will work out*, which shows development in her value system; trust, hope and faith in herself. This sort of 'mindset' made Kristine enjoy the *unsafety*.

The above example explicitly shows how Bruce (I, the researcher), was actively involved in bringing Kristine's world to the reader and how I co-constructed her world using her spoken words. I found this essential to establish explicitly Kristine's view of her world and my interpretation of how she saw her world. Thus, an integrated personal narrative fits in quite well here. An integrated personal narrative is a form of storytelling. Understanding a narrated story is, in general, linked with knowledge of the events that take place within the story that participants narrate (a participant's world). Putting together Kristine's words and my understanding of her words highlights what Smith et al. (2009, p.37) means by focusing on 'the terms of the text' (what it meant to Kristine), rather than the text itself (what the words meant, in general, to me) that Kristine produced. This allowed me to interpret the text and uncover a phenomenon (unsafety and why Kristine enjoys it), bringing Kristine's world to the reader through her narrated story. I found this segment essential to make the connection explicit, considering the discovered events were influenced by, or influenced, my subjective assumptions and thus are different from others' reading. By simply reading my interpretation without a connection between Kristine's spoken words and my understanding of those, readers may not so explicitly identify why she was 'happy to be unsafe', unlike how she was in her pre-MBA life: 'risk averse'.

After identifying Kristine's themes, I followed the same approach for all remaining 13 participants. This process enabled me to understand each participant's information; identify how I made sense of that information; and write down the *sense* (how I interpreted; co-construction) rather than an *interpretation* alone (what I found; just the interpretation of the spoken words). This became a part of the integrated narrative and enabled me to construct an integrated narrative dialogue to present the findings of this research, making apparent both a phenomenon and the process of discovering it (**see Step 4**).

**Step 3: Discovering the collective themes emerging from earlier steps (1 and 2) and identifying the connections between these.**

I read the final integrated narratives prepared at the end of Step 2. After this, I followed the below sub-steps in a sequential manner. This enabled me to identify and discover themes from what participants explained to me without seeking any particular piece of information elsewhere. An example of how I developed integrated narratives from the interview transcript is provided below. This time, I have used another participant, Karolina.

*Participant: Karolina*

1. Excerpt from Karolina's interview

> **Bruce:** Think of a time when you decided to go back to the educational life by pursuing an MBA. How would you describe the situation then?

> **Karolina:** *Just really recognising that I would not get to the next level without another load of study to improve my skills. And the idea that I could have settled for just being an accountant and finance manager staying at the same level but feeling like I am capable of more but at the*

*same time, unsure about what to do to get to the next level. And then*

*realising, well Master of Accounting is pointless. Should I go and study*

*human resources or something? But then the MBA* [paused to think -

looking at the ceiling] *I guess just is an umbrella qualification that*

*would hopefully represent enough to get me to the next level [...] I*

*always thought OK that's it for study, I have done enough. I finished*

*my degree; got my first job but then realised that I have to study for*

*chartership. I got my chartership in 2012. I worked in accounting*

*practice and then moved jobs and got the finance manager level in a*

*law firm and then I was a finance manager for a government agency,*

*and now I am a finance manager in a school. It's OK, it's good. But*

*once I got my job at school, I knew quite quickly that the job was not*

*really high level enough for me and I understood that I would have to*

*go do some more study to get to the next level; whatever that may be.*

*So I always sort of wondered about an MBA. So that's the basics of that.*

2. Developing integrated narrative from the above excerpt; discovering a theme

The Expectations of an MBA: An Umbrella Qualification

Karolina came to Australia as an international student and pursued her undergraduate degree in accounting. She became a chartered accountant after *she got her chartership in 2012.* Following this, she moved through many jobs from private to government to non-profit, all in the finance sector. After working in so many different firms, she found herself in a spot where she could proclaim, *she had done enough*; but then after a while, she found herself stuck in the finance domain

longer than she expected. She realised that she was bored and *to go to the next level*, which she was so determined to, *she will need to study more*. She realised that she had hit the *upper limit* in every job in which she had worked and there was not much she could do in that job unless she pursued further education. She found her work too simple and not very challenging—something that made her feel as if she was not utilising her full potential. This realisation made her think what degree could be useful for her. Being in the finance and accounting industry from the start, she found herself cornered. Being cornered, she realised there was nothing more she could achieve in this area. Thus, she thought of doing something that she always thought was beyond her—returning to academia. This is where she started to investigate and thought to herself that a *Master of Accounting is pointless*. So, *should I go and study human resources or something* instead, but then she always had *sort of wondered about an MBA*. She believed an MBA to be *an umbrella qualification that would hopefully be enough to get her to the next level*.

This sort of integrated narrative helped me identify what Karolina said (narrated stories), why she said it (the context of the story she chose to narrate) and how the stories she narrated provided me with insight into her world (the way events in Karolina's life had unfolded and why she decided to pursue an MBA). Following these three steps, I went on a journey with all the participants, individually, which enabled me to identify my assumptions about MBAs and focus on participants' worlds. This made me realise that without integrated narratives from the interview notes and audio recordings, I might have ended up colouring their world with mine,

making my views theirs, muddying the discoveries with my assumptions about the context of their stories. Using both participants' words alongside my interpretation of those words and their meaning helped me minimise this muddiness. Below is the third sub-step continuing from the above two sub-steps:

3. Discovering themes from the above (sub-step 1 and 2)

    Parent Theme: Expectations from an MBA

    Child Theme 1: Career growth

    *The job that I have is nice, but I realised pretty quickly that it wouldn't be challenging enough for me. The work is too simple and not very challenging. So, I knew I wasn't going to learn enough. I wouldn't be able to grow. It would just be like day-to-day ticking over; not really developing or progressing.*

    Child Theme 2: Diverse Knowledge Base

    *The idea that I could have settled for just being an accountant and finance manager staying at the same level but feeling like I am capable of more but also unsure about what to do to get to the next level.*

4. Developing integrated narrative from the above excerpt

    Karolina's words reflect how she had developed this notion of securing a piece of paper and learning from an MBA. Her reflections made her recognise that she *was capable of more* and that she could achieve much more than just being an expert in her work domain. But she wouldn't go *to the next level without another load of study, to improve her skills.*

**Step 4: Analysing the remaining interviews.**

I followed the first three steps to analyse all the interviews separately. I analysed all the remaining interviews in line with the first three steps and the three sub-steps in Step 3. In line with Smith et al.'s (2009) suggestion to analyse the interviews separately, I deliberately left a gap of 2-3 days between the end of one analysis and starting the next. I found this gap between analyses essential to focus on themes emerging from one participant's data without looking for similarity in themes discovered from the earlier analysis of other participants' data. This also helped me to not focus on the child theme when analysing subsequent interviews.

Examples from two more participants (Selina and Salec) are provided below to demonstrate the three sub-steps. (Later, in Step 5, all three participants—Karolina, Selina and Salec—are situated in a dialogue):

*Participant: Selina*

1. Excerpts from Selina's interview

    a. **Bruce:** So how do you see the value of something? Like in one of the MBA courses you did not have a very good experience, but in another, you had a great experience and they were all a part of an MBA?

    **Selina:** *I think you do an MBA because you want to. Obviously, it's an academic pursuit, but you want to be able to apply the things to the real world and I think that's where value has to be. It's translating theory into reality and making it practical and useable in everyday life and working life. Obviously, predominantly that's where the value is, but that's not what I got in an MBA.*

b. **Bruce:** This is very interesting. So, when you are in class, you can apply learning at group level. What kind of hurdles did you experience when you were actually at your work?

**Selina:** *Where I have been working, it has been challenging. So, it's like psychological safety definitely hasn't been there. I worked with a colleague who would wullify [talk down to] you for anything you did that was wrong in his mind. So that's probably why I don't feel confident and I certainly didn't feel confident to test things out at work. The MBA has such a safe environment, but at work, I am disengaged. At the moment, the company is not a good place to work and I still think it's just not where I am supposed to be. In the MBA, all I am studying is theory, but nothing practical. I want that stability of having a job. I mean that's obviously not all bearing on the MBA, that's just work.*

2. Developed integrated narrative from the above excerpts

Selina *wanted to do an MBA to be able to apply the things she learnt to the real world*. However, she found it more of an *academic pursuit*. She thought her MBA experience would enable her to *translate theory into reality and make it practical and useable in everyday life and working life*. P*redominantly that's where* she thought *the value is*. She carried the opinion that an MBA was all about the connection between theoretical learning and its application outside the education environment. She distinguished between an MBA and other degrees and suggested *where the value has to be*. But at work, Selina was *thoroughly disengaged* and knew *it's a problem*. Even though Selina *wants that stability of having*

*a job*, she was talking about having a career and not just a job. That is why Selina felt that *it's just not where she is supposed to be*. The combination of groupthink, absence of autonomy and political environment made her *current company not a good place to work. It's like psychological safety definitely hasn't been there* for her. Selina had worked in this company for 5 years, but she *doesn't want to be there anymore*. Selina found the *MBA has such a safe environment that at work, she feels disengaged*. This is why, even after knowing where *the value is*, that is *not the value she got in her MBA*.

3. Discovered themes from the above

   Child Theme 1: To make sense of life

   Selina *wanted to do an MBA to be able to apply the things she learnt to the real world*. However, she found this more of an *academic pursuit*. She thought her MBA experience would enable her to *translate theory into reality and make it practical and useable in everyday life and working life*. For Selina, *predominantly, that's where the value was*. Selina believed that an MBA was all about the connection between theoretical learning and its application outside the education environment. This was where she distinguished between an MBA and other degrees and suggested *where value has to be*.

   Child Theme 2: Confidence

   Her recent experiences at work, especially *with a colleague who would wullify [talk down to] her for anything that she did that was*

*wrong in his mind*, might be why she was looking for a safe environment. This sort of experience had made Selina second guess her actions. This further created an impression in her mind that she *might not be right in applying a particular concept in a specific circumstance*. This fits with what she said earlier: *she has learnt things but hasn't grown*, which suggests that even though she possessed the required knowledge, she did not trust herself enough to execute it. This is why Selina only partially blamed her MBA and suggested *that's obviously not all bearing on the MBA, that's just work.*

Child Theme 3: Expectation from MBA—Advanced Degree

Holding a Bachelor of Business already, Selina hoped *that an MBA would be more significantly advanced than that*.

*Participant: Salec*

1. Excerpts from Salec's interview

    a. **Bruce:** Yeah and I think that impacts quite a lot on the work environment as well.

    **Salec:** *Yeah, absolutely. My previous employer, which I had to get away from, we are the complete opposite. I identified that I was struggling dealing with like a hellscape at home and asked for help, and the business owner responded to me via email. I'm glad that I'm forgetting it. We all have problems that we have to deal with and that was the day that I knew that I had to get out. It took me a while longer to get out, but from this point, I can never work with that person again. He doesn't even know he's done it, but he has just caused an enormous amount of*

*trauma to a family relationship. And he's somebody who before that point I'd respected in the business, in the community, within our network.*

**Bruce:** Did you address this with him?

**Salec:** *No, no, no, no. Not the kind of person to do that. Very technical, very low social skills. Absolutely toxic manager to work for, really. He's got an exceptional understanding of some of the concepts, but no ability to cross that when dealing with people. And he's surrounded himself by other people with no people skills. So, it's just a terrible place to work and they have an extremely high turnover. I mean, they're a small business and they're looking at turnover rates of 30–35% and that's per year.*

b. **Bruce:** It's very strange sometimes to see people who can actually contribute to the company more positively. They are just signing the paper.

**Salec:** *There's one guy, one of the partners there. We would move heaven and earth to get him into our company. But they treat him like crap, but we know that his weight is measured in gold and many people recognise that. And so, we would, if we could, but he doesn't want to work within a big business again because he just got fed up with bureaucracy. He seems very technical and he has enormous emotional intelligence and patience. He's worked for 20 years. His ability to train people is fantastic. So, he's got such patience with graduates that he can just step through things, doesn't get frustrated, doesn't get flustered and can tell when they're struggling and reach out when necessary. Doesn't*

*necessarily have the most amazing skills to do that, but he's probably highly introverted, but when he does reach out it's very targeted. He knows what he's doing and he gets it right. So, I had to get out of that job. It was toxic and disgusting and I was just looking for any way to get out. I found another job at a terrible organisation, like bar options here. Pretty limited. I need to actually do something to change my career path. I'd been thinking about doing an MBA for a very long time and that was when I finally bit the bullet and went, yep, I'm gonna apply. And within a month and a half, I was doing FOL [Fundamentals of Leadership] and fell in love with it.*

2. Developed integrated narrative from the above excerpts

Salec found his boss's reply via email insensitive. Citing the gravity of his situation with his wife and child and his own experience in *dealing with like a hellscape at home*, Salec found another reason for not working for this organisation. Salec was unable to fulfil his priorities because of his boss's outlook. He realised he *had to get out*. He blamed his boss for the *enormous amount of trauma* he had caused *to his family relationship*. This is why Salec was so passionate about taking care of his team members and advocating for *mental health in organisations*. Before this experience, Salec had *respected his boss in the business, within his network, in the community*. However, his boss's outlook when Salec could not meet his priorities put his boss in Salec's bad books. It took Salec *a while to get to that point, but once he got to that point and realised that he didn't need to work to gain his respect*, he did

not think twice. Salec found his boss his *complete opposite* and condemned his boss's attitude towards his personal issues *at the time of his first child's birth*. However, he neither criticised nor blamed his boss at that point; instead, he could see both positives and drawbacks of his boss's personality, although he identified his boss's inability to *deal with people*, the main ingredient for toxicity that he had experienced in his workplace. As a result, Salec considered his boss to be *very technical but with very low social skills*. This affected the whole company, which Salec reported as *their turnover rates of 30–35% and that was per year*. This made Salec see how his organisation was *just a terrible, pretty toxic and pretty disgusting place to work* and that he *was just looking for any way to get out* of there. This was the moment when Salec decided to *bite the bullet finally* and juggle his already challenging personal life with the academic journey; and he *applied for an MBA*.

3. Discovering themes from the above

   Parent Theme: Why MBA?

   Child Theme 1: Change Careers

   Although his current field was relatively niche and only a handful of people worked in this sector in Adelaide, Salec enjoyed doing *the stuff he was working on*, which was to *turn their soft skills*. However, when he did not find this enjoyment at his then-current job in Australia, he *started thinking that he had to get out of that job*. This shows that Salec enjoyed freedom, which he achieved by leading teams, *turning teams*

*around, engaging teams, developing strategy, implementing strategy, engaging people and helping people with professional development.* However, as Salec found the company's culture to be *pretty toxic and pretty disgusting*, he was unable to experience the joy he wanted from his work, which prompted him to *just look for any way to get out* of there. As Salec was looking for a way out, doing an MBA sounded a perfect escape from his current organisation. This was *that something* that Salec *needed to actually do to change his career path*; something that he had been *thinking about doing for a very long time*.

Child Theme 2: Managing toxicity of workplaces

Although Salec found his boss his *complete opposite* and condemned his boss's attitude towards his personal issues *at the time of his first child's birth*, he did not carry a grudge against his boss. Salec neither criticised nor blamed his boss; instead, he could see both positives and drawbacks of his boss's personality. Salec *respected his boss in the business, in the community, within his network* but not so much when he realised how useless he was with people. He identified his boss's inability to *deal with people* as the main ingredient for the toxicity he experienced in his workplace. As a result, Salec considered his boss to be *very technical but with very low social skills*. This work environment, primarily stemming from his boss's attitude, made him recognise his work culture as toxic, evident in *their turnover rates of 30–35%* annually. For Salec, these qualities determined whether an individual was people oriented or not and as this effort *doesn't*

*necessarily require the most amazing skills*, Salec considered his boss

and other executives as using a *shotgun approach*. This made Salec *fed*

*up with bureaucracy* so in order to learn how to manage the workplace

bureaucracy, he decided to start his MBA journey.

**Step 5: Identifying common patterns and themes across all 14 participants' data analysis and constructing the integrated dialogue—a story.**

During the final analysis stage, I revisited all the drafts: interview transcripts; integrated narratives; and individual themes for all 14 participants. Following this, I developed an 'integrated dialogue', which involved the required participants and Bruce directed in a fictional setting depending on the themes that emerged and the themes that participants conceptually shared. The dialogue's fictionality is limited to putting all the participants within a theme as the script for each participant is informed by the data from their interview transcript and developed integrated narratives. The dialogical approach and the themes are informed by experiences my participants shared concerning how they saw themselves before their MBA, what expectations they brought to their MBA, what they found and learnt in their MBA and how they changed their 'mindsets' and overall work behaviour during and after their MBA. All the participants are actors in this script. In creating it, I have positioned my research findings, how Bruce is an inseparable part of my research findings, being in the centre of it through the dialogical approach and how I played a part in co-constructing my participants' worlds, individually and collectively with the participants. This approach helped me bring forth the relationships between people and between people and ideas, which provided me with a way to show my readers explicitly what phenomena I discovered and how.

A sample of integrated dialogue between the three participants (Karolina, Selina and Salec) concerning the theme Expectations from an MBA, is provided below. In this integrated dialogue, I was able to discover a phenomenon (why working people start thinking of doing an MBA) through participants' exact words (in *italics*), my interpretation of the meaning of their world (normal text) and the fictional elements (inside [ ]). This dialogue consists of three individual worlds (Karolina, Selina and Salec); how each participant saw their world, which, when directed in a dialogical setting, shows how an unfavourable work environment prompts people to leave work, and becomes one of the reasons for pursuing an MBA. Together this helped me understand what these three participants expected from their MBA degree and what led them to think about it in the first place.

Theme: Expectations from an MBA

**Karolina:** Look, Bruce, to be very honest, *I didn't know what the next level was*. I just knew that *I would not get to the next level without another load of study*. Even though I had already done a lot of study, Bachelor of Business and Chartership, I somehow *did not get jobs that were really high enough for me.* So that was really the start of *thinking of doing an MBA and investigating whatever it involves and might take me to finish.*

Selina: Hmm…

Selina appeared to reflect on her experience, looking at the ceiling, crossing her arms, trying to figure out what her MBA was like.

**Selina:** Quite similar, but *I wanted to do an MBA to be able to apply things to the real world.* Considering that *I had a colleague who would wullify me for anything that I did that was wrong in his mind, I sort of…*

Salec interrupted…

Salec: You know that's not even a word.

Selina: Well, it means that he talked down to me all the time, alright [pausing for a moment, looking at Salec]. *I was looking to gain confidence* that what I do is right. And *as the company was not a good place to work at that moment, I wanted that stability of having a job and not some short-term work*. I absolutely love learning—don't get me wrong there—and *observing new things and taking new things around* and I wanted to apply them to real life. So, being a Bachelor of Business already, *I hoped that an MBA would be significantly more advanced* than that. And that's why I decided to do an MBA. Is that OK Salec…?

Selina was annoyed [rolling her eyes, ignoring looking at Salec] at Salec for making fun of her.

Salec: All your *bosses seem to be arses* like this guy I was telling you about. *He has surrounded himself by other people with no people skills, it's huge and these people control the dynamic.* Working with such very technical but very low social skills people *looking at the turnover rate of 30, 35% a year,* oh it's just a terrible place to work. *I was just fed up with this bureaucratic shotgun approach, treating people like crap. So, I finally bit the bullet and went, yep, I will apply for an MBA. At least I will be able to change my career trajectory* and be on a path where I could change our lives in a way. So, that's how it all got started.

Bruce: What's a shotgun approach Salec?

**Salec:** Oh, it just means indiscriminate and haphazard.

**Bruce:** Wow. Three people, three reasons but all caused by an unfavourable work environment.

This approach has two critical foundations. First, it attempts to engage and build a relationship between all 14 research participants based on their conceptual similarities. Second, it is an attempt to connect with readers' minds. Through this approach, I show how readers (reading my findings) and I, the researcher, are engaged in understanding the participants' worlds (individually and collectively). In the process, I make a clear distinction between what participants said and how I have interpreted it.

Finally, the approach distinguishes between how my subjectivity shapes this research; co-constructing the story with the participants—using the participants' spoken words to make sense of their world. This inquiry process must 'always involve the personal development of the co-inquirers as they move from being relatively unreflexively subjective toward a position of critical subjectivity' (Denzin & Lincoln 1994, p.333). Thus, this exercise attempts to take the reader on a journey that the participants once took (bringing the participants' worlds to the reader as they saw it) and show how I tagged along (co-construction). I am the bridge between my participants' worlds and my readers knowing those worlds. How can I just narrate my participants' stories without actively playing a role in this co-construction process? This is what I have come to understand by reading from 'within the terms of the text' that the participants produce (Smith et al. 2009, p. 37).

Finally, I developed this integrated dialogue between all the participants and me from the themes that emerged from the analysis of the participants' interviews and their conceptual

similarities. After this, I placed all the participants in a story to show the readers how themes appeared to me one by one and how the stories that participants narrated informed me of the deeper stories behind their spoken words. Through this approach, I was able to show readers my explicit role in bringing these 15 worlds individually; in the process (hopefully) making the discovered connections (that I first made only in my mind) between these individual worlds evident to the readers, in response to which I am sure, Watson (1995, pp. 301–302) would say:

> I am going to have to tell this story—my own story in large part I admit—in such a way that when people like you read it, you will accept the validity of the basic story, the value of the main theories I put across.

This section was about what I did and why it was important for me to do it the way I did it (verbatim text leading to the development of integrated narratives, leading to the discovery of themes, leading to the construction of integrated dialogues to discover phenomena). The following two sections highlight the limitations and ethics concerning my research project.

3.8 Limitations of this research

My personality, experiences and confidence that I have gained from reading the literature, discussing my ideas with my supervisors and with other scholars, influenced the interpretation of the collected data and the research finding presentation. I am not a trained psychologist; my subjectivity is an important limitation in the kind of analysis I have presented here. Some of the limitations of this research are outlined below:

1. This research uses IPA to analyse data collected via semi-structured interviews and observations of three different MBA classes. The interpretation of phenomena behind participants' thought processes results from my in-depth view of the collected data.

Consequently, the findings presented in this research are not empirically generalisable. My interpretation is influenced by my own set of assumptions and beliefs, which may differ from that of other researchers trying to replicate this study's findings. However, one can apply the reflexive steps (see Section 3.4) and use the dialogical method to compare other research findings with those I have presented here in this research.

2. I adopted the IPA approach to interpret and make sense of the participants' worlds from their perspective, using their spoken words. However, simultaneously, a participant is also interpreting and trying to make sense of their world (Smith & Osborn 2003). Thus, my interpretation of my research participants' world is limited by my knowledge and experience, and information I have gathered from different sources (e.g. journals and books).

3. In this research, I have explored the value of an MBA by investigating MBA candidates' and graduates' perspectives, with a particular focus on what they hoped to gain and what they gained from an MBA degree. My interpretation reflects the information the participants shared in their interview or what I observed during PO. It also includes phenomena behind their narrated stories (the discoveries that I made on the way). My interpretation is limited to my cognitive ability and conceptual thinking, which is hopefully clarified for my readers by the dialogical method.

4. All but one of the participants I interviewed only once. It is possible that the participants did not reveal some information that may or may not have played an influential role in discovering themes and presenting the research findings.

3.9 Ethical practice

I obtained ethical approval from the Adelaide University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC; H-2018-176) on 21 August 2018. I conducted this study as per HREC

ethical guidelines. It was reviewed by the Adelaide University's Low-Risk Human Research Ethics Review Group (Faculty of Arts and Faculty of the Professions). It was deemed to be consistent with *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007) requirements involving no more than low risk for the research participants.

When recruiting participants for this research, I duly informed them about this study and my expectations via a Participant Information Sheet. After all participants confirmed that they had read the information in the Participant Information Sheet and signed the consent form, interviews began. In each interview, I followed the five steps outlined in Section 3.7.5. Before the commencement of each interview, I attempted to make the participant feel relaxed and comfortable. I anonymised their names and respective company names, and the names of people and organisations they mentioned during interview. Only I, the researcher knows the identity of the participants and the organisations for which they worked. I have made use of pseudonyms to hide the real identity of each of the 14 participants. I have omitted the names of their organisations, both from the findings and the discussion of the findings. I have also replaced the name of their organisations with 'organisation' (generic). I followed the steps from setting the stage, reaffirming anonymity and confidentiality, asking open-ended questions and using probes to assist them in elaborating on their experiences. This enabled me to ensure participants did not feel apprehensive about sharing their stories (see Section 3.5.1). This interviewing approach helped me minimise leading the interviewees and limited my role to that of a facilitator, rather than steering their stories in a particular direction.

Although my sample size might be considered small (14 participants), I have followed Smith's (2011) advice to not give in to demands about generating universal generalisations, instead seeking local understanding that is rich, thorough and contextual (Millward 2006). As

IPA can only really be conducted on relatively small samples (maximum 15) (Larkin et al. 2006; Smith 2004), using 14 participants fits the requirement of conducting an IPA.

The original interview transcripts were considered too lengthy to be included in this study. Keeping this in mind, I have elaborated on my data analysis process (see Section 3.7) and shown the steps that I took to analyse the data (see Section 3.4). I have included the interview schedule, participant recruitment documents and participant themes that I had created for this research (see Appendix 8). I am thus confident that readers will be able to understand the approach I adopted and my rationale for analysing the data in the way that I did, and thus find the context of my research and its findings informative and worthwhile to understand what the MBA meant to the research participants and how they saw it from their perspective.

This chapter presents my findings from interviewing a mix of 14 MBA candidates and graduates. Although these participants were taught a range of subjects (see section 1.3), they focused on relatively few key courses in their interviews, i.e. Fundamentals of Leadership (FoL), Managing Contemporary Organisations (MCO), Systems Thinking, Strategic Management, Marketing, Accounting, Finance and Economics, which I have used in my analysis ideographically. Out of this list FoL was the most discussed subject among participants. The participants reported that their MBA started with FoL leading to MCO and Systems Thinking. However, they did not share the chronological order in which the other subjects were taught.

This chapter has divided the findings into two Acts - Act 1 has five and Act 2 has two scenes. Act 1 Scene 1 starts with four candidates and an MBA enthusiast (Me, Bruce, the author) in a café setting discussing their MBA experiences. Scene 2 introduces two MBA graduates who are long-time friends and know Bruce from their earlier interactions. They enter the scene for a coffee in the same café to re-live their past MBA journey. Scene 3 involve Bruce inviting Scene 2 participants to his table to discuss the MBA journey with four participants from scene 1. Scene 4 involve Bruce recapping a story of 4 other MBA candidates he observed in one of the MBA classes. Scene 5 involve Salec interrupting Bruce's recap. Act 2 Scene 1 involves Bruce attending an MBA conference where an MBA graduate and three MBA candidates are invited as guest speakers to share their MBA experiences. Scene 2 opens up with the four guest speakers having a debate and taking questions from the audience.

I have used participants' exact words in *italics*, my interpretation of the meaning of their world as normal text and the fictional elements inside [ ].

**Act 1 Scene 1: The Lounge Cafe**

Four MBA students—Karolina and Selina at the end of their MBA journey, Salec in his second year and an alumnus, Kristine—met at the café 'The Lounge' to relive their MBA moments. They were accompanied by an MBA enthusiast, Bruce, who was researching the experiences of MBAs during and after their MBA education.

It was early in the day. The sun was bright, the café was half empty and the five walked in, ordered their coffee and sat on a couch at the far end of the café. It was not a big café, but it was clean, with a few magazines and newspapers stacked on small round tables on both sides of the couch. There were only two people behind the counter. All five ordered their beverages: Karolina and Salec flat whites; Selina a cappuccino; Kristine a latte; and Bruce a mocha.

Bruce felt the need to start the conversation; he looked around:

> Bruce: *Well, we are finally here, away from the uni. Not something this MBA would allow us to do often.*

Everyone felt precisely like him. They all burst into laughter.

> Selina: Often? *I think never is a better word.*

Kristine, sitting opposite Selina, smiled at this point, sensing that Selina might have something not so good to say about the MBA; she leant back with both arms at the back of her head:

Kristine: *The MBA is a great degree. It changes your perceptions about self, about others*. It even makes you think about what you could've done instead of just focusing on what you would do. I mean, at least that's what happened in my MBA.

Karolina: [leaning forward] I actually would have questioned that 2 years back—'my MBA'. But now I realise how an *MBA is not the same for everyone studying it*. So, yeah, it's like my MBA and your MBA.

Bruce: This is interesting!

Karolina: It's not so much about the subjects that you study. *It's about meeting your fellow students*, being able to have proper debates and discussions. *That's where a lot of your learning will come from.* I never thought this about an MBA, or my MBA, I should say.

Sitting on a single section of sofa, looking at Kristine and Karolina admitting how wonderful their MBA was, Selina could not control herself and felt a dire need to say something:

Selina: I don't know what you guys mean by 'my MBA'. I just think it gives you some sort of higher position among your colleagues in your organisations. *But that's it. It's just that, a sort of a résumé builder*. [tilting head on the left, lifting up both her shoulder, raising eyebrows] Nothing new in that.

Kristine: Look, the different things you cover and *you don't know what you don't know until you start doing it*. It resonated with me.

Karolina: Oh, absolutely Kristine. It has so many subjects from Accounting to Finance to Organisational Behaviour to Systems Thinking and whatnot. There are so many different lecturers teaching those subjects. Of course, experiences wouldn't be the same for all.

Selina: Well, of course, they wouldn't be. What do you think?

It appeared as if Selina was already exhausted listening to what they both had to say about their MBA. Selina sat up at the edge of the sofa:

Selina: Lecturers who are teaching MBA subjects have a wealth of knowledge, but they don't understand the real organisational issues; they are there just to teach. *Some work in different companies; they are practitioners and bring their cases to discuss in class and share.* So, you sit in their classes and *you get a different feel.* It's like [momentary pause] it's different learning altogether. *Some are like theory, theory, theory, and others, not so many theories* and more examples and ways of doing things. So, I don't know what you both are on about.

Bruce: So, it's like a mixed bag of cookies. Some put their hands in the jar and get sweet ones and some get sour ones.

Salec: That does not mean sour ones are necessarily bad or not good for that matter.

Bruce: huh?

Salec getting impatient:

Salec: Well, I mean *learning so many different ideas* in so many subjects taught by so many lecturers around so many organisational problems, *you tend to start evading this difference of what's good and bad.*

Bruce: Evading?

Salec: Yeah. I mean, *you start figuring out that there's no right or wrong answer. It's just about encouraging that thinking.* This is my MBA.

Karoline: Yeah and when you talk about those issues with so many peers from so many different areas of work with so many other ideas to deal with all those problems, it just shows you why an MBA is such a significant degree. As I said, *it's not only about an MBA as a degree, but also the way it's structured around organisational issues and you get to meet people with so many years of experience.* I've done so many degrees, but I've not felt what I felt in this MBA.

Bruce felt excited to see these similar and different views about an MBA:

Bruce: So, when do you all graduate?

Selina: *I just have one trimester to go* and I'm very excited - *just the social enterprise project and then I finish. This is only my second degree* and I don't intend to go much further.

Bruce: You mean the final year project?

Before Selina could respond:

Salec: Bruce, it's a group project in which we collaborate with community stakeholders and explore the practical applications of what we've learnt in our MBA.

Kristine: [looking at Selina] I can understand this apprehension to go on studying. *I graduated 5 years back* from a uni and now *I just want to apply my skills in managing stakeholders*, working through problems and opportunities. But I think now *I may look into doing the Company Secretary course*.

Karolina: Wow, you still want to study more. Good on you. I thought of doing an MBA because it appeared as if there was *no upper limit to progress to the next level*, not for

me at least. Now that I'm going to finish my MBA soon, I think that's it for me now. I can reach where I want.

Salec again jumped into the conversation:

Salec: Well, I'm quite different from you guys. What can I say? *I am dealing with a hellscape at home.* I mean *we all have our problems that we have to deal with, but it's just that my wife's been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.* So, for now, *it's just my family, my kids, my wife and they are my number one priority.*

Bruce: That must be so challenging Salec.

Salec: [sat upright] Challenging? You wouldn't know. She has struggled with anxiety as well as depression over the last few years. So that's where a lot of energy goes and so that's my priority.

Bruce couldn't contain his admiration for Salec.

Bruce: Wow, you are juggling so much.

Salec: *I'm a very to-the-point guy.* It helps in this juggle. I've been upfront with my employer. I've told them "*if the shit hits the fan, this will be my priority, not you.*" *I mean it's not like I'll quit on my work, of course not, I'll get to that and do it, but sometimes we may miss deadlines*, you know.

It was like everyone paused and looked at Salec, puzzled at how he was juggling his MBA and family and work and still had time to talk about it; sensing that this might become a private conversation:

Bruce: Oh, sorry, everyone, I just wanted to check if you wouldn't mind me asking some questions, would you?

Salec: [*opening his laptop and looking at the screen*] *I'm a zombie right now, OK. I haven't slept properly in 7 days.* So, count me out. If I've something, I'll jump in.

## 4.1 Rationale for returning to academia

Bruce: Of course! So, Karolina, you were saying something about this upper limit; that's interesting. What's that all about, the upper limit I mean?

Karolina: Well, *I always thought, "OK, that's it for study. I have done enough"*, but then *in my first job I realised I would have to study for chartership*, but when I got my chartership, I worked in accounting, so I had to move jobs then and work in the finance industry. But *working as a finance manager in* public, semi-private and private sector, *I've realised quite quickly that these jobs aren't really high enough for me, and to go to the next level, whatever that may be, I'm going to have to do some more study.*

Kristine: I can relate to your point, Karolina. I completed my 2-year MBA 5 years back, but before it started, I can distinctly remember feeling like *I had pigeon-holed myself into* one particular domain of work. *I was in a job in that narrow field and I felt I needed to do something to broaden my perspective and show potential employers that I've that broader perspective*; not just that food safety perspective.

Bruce: Kristine, it sounds as if your work environment didn't provide you with that growth opportunity.

Kristine: Exactly. That's why *I felt like I had pigeon-holed myself.*

Selina: It's interesting to listen to you both as I wasn't far away from what you both just said. So, *I finished my Bachelor of Business and worked in my own business at that time* and I think I was a little bit stagnant and maybe for a couple of years, *I thought there's not much changing*, you know.

Bruce: It just feels like all three of you wanted to grow, but your jobs prevented you from it. Why's that though?

4.2 Work environment and its effect on an individual's growth

Karolina: Look, my job is nice so don't get me wrong there but what I mean by not challenging enough for me is that it would just be like, you know, *day-to-day ticking over, not doing* [momentary pause] *not really developing or progressing*.

Kristine: Well, I wasn't as lucky as you with my job Karolina. *I really hit a very low point working with them*, [holding her face from both sides with both hands] just a very toxic environment.

Bruce: That must be distressing.

Kristine: It's just [pausing for a brief moment, looking at the floor, swaying her head left to right] I couldn't get anything done.

Kristine's body language and tone of her voice suggested she wasn't very happy reflecting on her pre-MBA work life.

Kristine: It was in my mind that we could've been more proactive in our work *to help the industry better comply with what they needed to do, rather than being a police agent and coming out from a negative*. But oh my God [swaying head left to right] *the bureaucracy and the headspaces of my colleagues and bosses, it was just awful, lots and lots of complacent people, people who've been there for many decades* and who can get away with doing what they want.

Bruce: Did you do something about it?

Kristine: Look, Bruce, I'm a forward-looking person and *I'm empathetic to people's needs*. I enjoy bouncing ideas off colleagues *but when people who had been there for 40 plus years and they come in and take their shoes off and lean back in their chair, put their feet on the table and read the newspaper for the first hour of the day advising me not to do things well or they will give me more work,* I don't even want a mention among these people.

Salec: *Those people are idiots.* That's how I would describe them, idiots. *I mean empathy is one thing, I'm an empathetic person too but dealing with shitty people, that's completely different*, you know. I'll tell you something - *the previous employer that I had to escape from, we were opposite.* That's the first thing, but *when I was struggling and asked for help and the business owner responded to me via email*, I told him that I am dealing with a hellscape at home and that guy [momentary pause – closing eyes, breathing in] I'm glad I'm forgetting it. *That was the day that I knew that I had to get out.* It wasn't easy. Even when there was too much responsibility on my shoulders, I knew I can never work with that person again. *We had to deal with an enormous amount of trauma to the relationship because of that insensitive idiot.* That guy has no regard for mental health at work.

Selina: I can see why you're both so angry. *I work in a telecom company and basically my job is to get people, like our employees, to care about the customers* and it's really hard to do. But the agonising part isn't my role, *it's the back-end team who lacks experience with customers and is really good at making decisions that completely ignore the customers.* And it makes me feel that *it's all about the commercial need* or bottom line—something that's completely different to what my role is about.

Kristine: Exactly. This is what I call just negative, just toxic. And I tell you, *if you stay around these people long enough, they'll influence your thinking around theirs*. I mean now it's no secret, like you guys, I've told you how I was before my MBA and how *I felt like I was trapped on this hamster wheel with some of my colleagues who felt the same. I'm certainly not a ladder climber, nor can I accept big push backs* but experiencing this again and again at work, I sort of decided to study again. It's just *I really wanted to do behavioural science or social science, so kind of had that little thing ticking away*, but I didn't do it because the idea of studying, the commitment and all of that, *I just wasn't in the right headspace*.

Bruce: So, that's why you all decided that an MBA might be an answer to these issues at work? Was it?

4.3 Rationale for doing an MBA

Karolina: Look, Bruce, to be very honest, *I didn't know what the next level was*. I just knew that *I would not get to the next level without another load of study*. Even though I had Bachelor of Business and Chartership, I somehow *did not get jobs that were really high enough for me*. So that was really the start of *thinking of doing an MBA and investigating whatever it involves and might take me to finish*.

Selina: Hmm…

Selina appeared to reflect on her experience, looking at the ceiling, crossing her arms, trying to figure out what her MBA was like.

Selina: Quite similar, but *I wanted to do an MBA to be able to apply things to the real world*. Considering that *I had a colleague who would wullify me for anything that I did that was wrong in his mind, I sort of…*

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Salec interrupted"

Salec: You know that's not even a word.

Selina: Well, it means that he talked down to me all the time, alright [pausing for a moment, looking at Salec]. *I was looking to gain confidence* that what I do is right. And *as the company was not a good place to work at that moment, I wanted that stability of having a job and not some short-term work.* I absolutely love learning—don't get me wrong there—and *observing new things and taking new things around* and I wanted to apply them to real life. So, being a Bachelor of Business already, *I hoped that an MBA would be significantly more advanced* than that. And that's why I decided to do an MBA. Is that OK Salec?

Selina was annoyed [rolling her eyes] at Salec for making fun of her.

Salec: All your *bosses seem to be arses* like this guy I was telling you about. *He has surrounded himself by other people with no people skills. It's huge and these people control the dynamic.* Working with such very technical but very low social skills people *looking at the turnover rate of 30, 35% a year,* oh it's just a terrible place to work. *I was just fed up with this bureaucratic shotgun approach, treating people like crap. So, I finally bit the bullet and went, "yep, I will apply for an MBA." At least I will be able to change my career trajectory* and be on a path where I could change our lives in a way. So, that's how it all got started.

Bruce: What's a shotgun approach?

Salec: Oh, it just means indiscriminate and haphazard and all that.

Kristine: That's terrible. I think even *when I was in Canberra, certain things were inspiring me to think about doing further study.* Like, in the few years while I was there,

*they started to build a social science team and working with those guys, the whole behavioural science*, I just thought was fascinating. *I was able to connect this new experience to the work* I was then involved in doing. At that time, *having come from working in a food factory, trying to keep the products safe by influencing the behaviour of the factory floor staff who didn't wanna bar of it*, that whole coupling the two together, I thought, "oh damm, I'll do some more study."

Bruce: That's so interesting. So, you all thought that an MBA would be more advanced than any other degree that you have done? How did you get this idea?

4.4 Expectations of an MBA

4.4.1 Open new doors

Selina: To be honest, I didn't really know what an MBA would give me exactly, but *I was sure that doing an MBA would open new doors*—hopefully. Like, the networking thing and *learning new things*, those kinds of things.

Karolina: Yeah these are important things Selina, but even though I knew the MBA existed, *I always questioned myself, "is it beyond me?"* I somehow doubted myself and asked questions like, you know "*am I good enough to do it? Will it be too hard? What it's really going to give me? What's that actually going to equip me to do? Is it just going to be scratching the surface of different things? Will there be a lot of stuff that would be irrelevant to what I might do?*" All these sorts of questions kinda held me back a bit but then *getting nowhere at work looking at the day tick away slowly everyday* like Kristine, I said to myself "well, you know what, I can do all that stuff and all will be valuable, yup."

Kristine: True, but I don't think I doubted myself. *I went into it with such an open mind that I didn't know what would come of it.* You all will laugh when I say this, but *I did it for the purpose of not having a purpose, at least not having a defined purpose.* [Turning her head towards Selina] Unlike you, I didn't do an MBA because I wanted something to happen. I was more like "*I'm going to do this because I don't know what will happen.*" From this 'mindset', irrespective of what *might happen, positive or negative, I'll be like, "oh ok cool that happened.*" That's it.

Debating whether her experience was precisely like that of Kristine, Karolina thought about Selina's experience:

Karolina: [looking at Kristine] I know what you mean, but I can relate to Selina's thinking on why an MBA should open new doors. *I can see myself thinking along the same lines, but I was more on the lines of the door might not be closed than that a new door would open.* However, like you [looking at Kristine], whether I could get through it was another question. So, yeah, *I wouldn't say that I was ok or cool with whatever happened, but I was sure that the door wouldn't be closed for me.*

Salec: I can see what you're saying. I knew that *doing an MBA would be like I might have to accept more stress and more responsibility, but I'd also be bringing in some more money. We've been struggling financially for quite some time.* It was a way to help change that situation. I just knew that I would make it all fit at the end of the day.

Bruce: I'm quite intrigued by your mindsets and how you thought about an MBA to be your next qualification; be it to be financially secure or for growth or promotions or changing careers. Of course, you had these expectations from an MBA, but I have to ask you this, why an MBA? Why not some other degree? Why can't other degrees open

the doors for you all? After all, you're all experienced in your fields, given the years of experience.

### 4.4.2 MBA, an umbrella qualification

Karolina: That's a good question, Bruce. *I already had a chartership*, so I sort of thought, well, "*Master of Accounting is pointless. I already had vast experience in finance, so that wouldn't be good either.*" So, I started thinking, "*should I go and study human resources or something?*". But now that you've asked this question, I remember how I struggled with the choice of area of study I wanted to enrol myself in. I just knew that *I wanted to develop my skills in a variety of areas*. This was the main reason that I decided to do an MBA. *I guess it was just an umbrella qualification that I thought would hopefully represent enough, enough to get me to the next level.* But the level [momentary pause] I had no idea what it was.

Selina: But Karolina, for me, I think I knew what I wanted to get. I know what you're saying, but *I've always felt like I had an entrepreneurial need to fulfil. Something that would allow me to make my own decisions. And I can only do this if I work for myself.* That's why I just loved owning my own business. *And I thought an MBA would provide me with that knowledge in a much more advanced way than my Bachelor.*

Karolina: I can see what you mean by advanced. And listening to what you just said about the need aspect of it, *I also wanted to do an MBA* like, 2 years ago *to look good on the résumé. I mean we all can agree that an MBA is a stamp of quality* and it's a globally understood qualification, right?

Kristine: I don't know if I agree entirely with you, Karolina.

Kristine disagreed that an MBA is a stamp of quality or a global qualification. She didn't want to simply agree with what Karolina said.

> Kristine: It's interesting your last few points, especially about I don't know where I will end up. But *thinking that you've got an MBA, you're so employable, I just find that fascinating. I mean I've always been told by my father to invest in the future*, be it time, money or effort, which I did by doing an MBA, but at the end of the day, they're just *referring to something on my résumé as opposed to what value I can bring.*

> Karolina: [momentary pause] I guess, coming to the end of my MBA journey, I can see your point Kristine, but 2 years back, that's not what I thought about an MBA degree. *At work, my boss had an MBA, the last organisation I worked at, the CEO had an MBA, the senior managers who were senior to me had an MBA and I could see how many different jobs they did. Even when I had a year in a company where I reported to a CEO, he had an MBA, again, he was doing so many different things.* So, in my mind it was like, I have only worked in the finance job and *always reported to the finance manager or the CFO.* I was always involved with doing the same thing.

> Bruce: So, you kind of knew that an MBA would give you something specific, something different from what you were always involved with?

Salec couldn't hold back any longer. Although he appeared engrossed in his work on his laptop, he was listening to every word of the conversation. Without even letting Bruce finish his question:

> Salec: [pushing the laptop screen down] Sorry, I am cutting in. For me, I just thought it will be a good fit. *When working in the northern hemisphere, I loved working with people, their motivations and their soft skills. That's what I enjoyed doing. But when I*

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*returned to Australia to be close to family, I just found this toxic work culture with people in it with a shotgun approach. And I am an engineer*, so to grow my skills as a manager of people, sort of the soft skills side was a perfect fit for what *I was looking for to be a leader.* That's what I thought my next level would be.

Karolina: Look, I too want to learn more. I was and *I am committed to learning* and I also wanted to broaden my knowledge. I knew that *I had been a very finance-oriented person and if I would get to the next level of* [momentary pause] *I don't know, like chief operating officer or something like that, I had to tick off human resources, marketing*, all the different broader sort of more management style of study, rather than just narrow finance.

Salec: Same, exactly the same. *I knew where I had some weaknesses - in finance, economics* like I'd no real background in those areas, *or accounting* either.

Karolina: Yes. That was my motivator as well. *Looking at my bosses, it just made me think, "yeah that's what I would like to do."* It was always about getting that taste of a much broader range of tasks and skills that would be more challenging to understand more about the world *than this narrow professional focus.*

4.4.3 Stereotype

Kristine: That makes sense. But I was just concerned when I left my job after I became an MBA. *People were like, "oh you'll be fine, you've got an MBA, you're so employable."* And I found this observation quite interesting at that time. *I always thought that when all the people that come through are so different, it is important to know who I am, how that makes me stand out.* And not so much whether I have an MBA on my résumé or not. I mean, you tell me—am I the only one thinking like this?

Karolina: Of course not. I didn't do an MBA just because of this stereotype and *certainly not just to get a bit of paper.*

Bruce noticed earlier that Selina only shares when asked.

Bruce: What about you, Selina? What do you think?

Selina: Nothing specific. I just had this assumption that an MBA would be significantly more advanced than the Bachelor program and so *I was under the impression that I would probably leave being a different person* if that makes sense. But I can't really define <u>different</u>.

Kristine: That's interesting. *I wanted to show the employers my broadened perspective*, not just having a stamp on my résumé. *I* genuinely *thought that an MBA would help me learn different facets of my work domain.*

Bruce: This is getting <u>really</u> interesting now. Going into your MBAs with this expectation, what thoughts did you all carry on your MBA journeys?

4.5 'mindset' of different MBA students: open *v*. closed mind

Kristine: You know what Katrina and Selina said about how doors would remain open if you had an MBA on your résumé? *I remember the time when it was all about this, but then I was like, "I don't know what I don't know."* So, it was really like I didn't know what I would get out of it. I just knew I would learn things that would get me thinking in different ways about different areas of work. *So, I had this sort of obvious curiosity that resonated with me at that time.*

Karolina: [leaning forward] Good that you brought up this point. I like thinking quite deeply about things. Now, *I don't want to say that I thought that I was better than other*

*people or I had better opinions than those others had,* but just getting that process of climbing into an MBA, kind of at the ground floor and saying, "*OK maybe I am good, but why is there still such a way to go and so much that I am lacking, I am going to get that from this course*." This was my level of curiosity but more from myself.

Bruce: Were you curious, Selina?

Selina: I don't have much to add to what you both have already said, but I know *I am a massive procrastinator and leave things to the very end.* This is the reason *I just toyed with the idea* of doing an MBA *on and off,* kept pushing the decision forward *before actually deciding to go for it.*

Kristine: Listening to you all, I realised what I enjoyed doing before starting my MBA. [smiling] *Starting a new job, initially to know where these food safety regulations come from, I realised what I really enjoyed and was good at - that much broader stakeholder management.* Not only dealing with people in my area of work but also finding out how I can assist people from other areas of work and how our areas of work are connected. I found that even in this narrow field, I enjoyed working across different groups. This new realisation and *this newfound inclination to really assist people solve their problems made me see that I learn by doing.*

Salec: And that's where you get the growth.

It was like Salec was waiting for an opportunity to speak. He had remained silent for most of the conversation and then with no warning, he jumped into the conversation:

Salec: *If you just want to tick a box off on getting your masters, just to get a piece of paper at the end of it, I mean those people definitely will not get the personal growth.* And I'm here to grow and not just tick a box.

Kristine: I think because I *had people that I was working with, really inspiring*, I liked learning from them. *I saw them as my unofficial mentors, which was great. It's just having these sorts of three or four colleagues in that toxic environment - I learnt from them, bounced ideas, shaped my thinking, improved and so forth.* I could see that keeping an open mind to learn from others' perspectives *created a collegial fun environment between a few of us.* And I think that's why I was like, "*I am OK and cool with whatever happens, be it negative or positive. I am just there to learn.*"

Karolina: I think I was quite the opposite of what you just described Kristine. Six months before I started my MBA, I can recall *how resistant I was to others' opinions and perspectives. I saw myself as a destination person.* I was always focused on the end result.

Selina: I don't know whether I'm opposite or not, but *I certainly didn't feel confident to test things out, be it at work or an MBA*. I knew that I wanted a positive end result, which was customer satisfaction at work, but *I was also of the opinion that if you look after your people they will look after the customer*. Perhaps I was focused on both the processes and the outcome.

Salec: But you can't look after your people if you have a very rigid management structure. Like, your boss wullified you. *In my company, there was very low autonomy*, very high control level. *It's not so much about you but more how things are done.*

Bruce: So, did you guys find what you were looking for? Or maybe something that you weren't looking for? Perhaps, something new, in your MBA?

4.6 An MBA experience: what 'I' found

4.6.1 Broadening of 'mindset'

What is this MBA? What did I get in this MBA? Why an MBA? All these questions rushed through their minds. It was like Bruce had just asked them to summarise their life in a few sentences. After a momentary pause:

> Karolina: It's not easy to answer. For me, this MBA experience is quite different from what I expected.

> Bruce: [frowning] Different?

> Karolina: Yeah. I mean *going in with this idea that if you try something a bit different, it will shape the vulnerability*, so I should only focus on the end result, I realised very early in my MBA that *there are so many different angles and perspectives,* that the MBA is obviously a lot deeper than other programs, *but then you're still only scratching the surface really.*

> Selina: Exactly, Karolina, exactly.

All Selina's previous hesitation seemed to have vanished. It was like she found someone who might just agree with what she experienced in her MBA. Suddenly, she wasn't the only one who thought her MBA wasn't that great. Finally, she had a companion.

> Selina: [sitting in straight posture] This didn't help me in my learning, not at all.

> Bruce: [frowning] Meaning?

> Selina: [excited—high pitched voice, turning towards Bruce] why are you so confused, Bruce? As Karolina said, an MBA is obviously a lot deeper than other learning. But again, an *MBA is so broad like you do Finance, Economics, Marketing, you do some,*

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*like leadership, Strategic Management. It's such a broad basket* and some of these subjects I've done in my undergrad.

Kristine: It's tedious to even think that you're just repeating subjects you did earlier in your undergrad. *But then for me, Economics again in an MBA context was really built on having all those other pieces. In the same way, doing Strategy, it obviously challenges your thinking.* And that's what resonated with me in my MBA.

Selina: I don't know. If I wear your shoes, it might have in some ways, but in other ways, it hasn't. I mean *yes in certain areas but not so much in other areas.*

Bruce: What do you mean by certain and other areas? Was your MBA so divided?

Selina: [swaying head from left to right] I don't know how to put it. Like Kristine said *Economics, for example. Obviously, you do that in an undergraduate, or Finance and Accounting for that matter, more applied subjects.* So, I don't think I've had as much in other subjects probably because *I had grounding in these from my undergrad.*

Bruce: So, unlike Kristine, you were not able to build on your prior knowledge?

Selina: I don't know, maybe. I don't know.

Selina was so confused. She didn't know how to explain her experience.

Selina: I'm trying to say that *when I went into Economics, I understood a lot of what we did but we did it extremely quickly as I was doing that as an intensive.* So, I'm just saying that I was fortunate that I had grounding. Otherwise, I would've struggled. But *I didn't necessarily build on it.*

It started to appear that Selina was unable to explain her experience. It was as if she knew what she wanted to say but did not have proper words to connect her scattered thoughts. She was

either confused or was trying to convince others of her experience. This provided Salec with another opportunity to imply to Selina that she did not know what she was talking about:

> Salec: Look, *I was always able to rationalise things, take a lot of things and break it into small parts* and just work on that and not be overwhelmed by the big picture. But this MBA, [looking at Selina] the one you say is a broad basket, *it just made me deal with what's in front of me and that I still can, I still have the ability to step back and see the whole picture.* And I know that's not something that a lot of people can do. They are either one or the other.

4.6.2 Dilemma

> Selina: [annoyed] I can see the whole picture. I can see this broad basket and *it didn't give me the chance to really hone in on anything. I only have two elective subjects, so there is not really that much of an opportunity to specialise in any way.* I mean, I can't think of any two subjects in my MBA to specialise in. [turning toward Salec] I hope you understand what I mean.

> Kristine: [hurriedly] Sorry to say Selina, but it all sounds too strange to me. I mean this broadness that makes an MBA different, *it's a way of learning all the different facets of business and management. It's a holistic degree and* it provided me with this broad learning.

> Selina: I really don't think you guys understand what I'm saying. You keep poking fun at me. I don't know how I can make you understand. *I tried to get as much information into my head as possible*, but do you seriously believe that *having 10–11 weeks to learn stuff is enough?* Enough to learn everything about it?

Kristine: Don't get us wrong. We're not making fun of you Selina. We're just trying to make sense of what you're telling us. Of course, that's not enough and that's not what I.m saying. I'm just saying that an *MBA is not about learning as much as you can. It's about understanding broadly across all those different facets enough*, so you as a manager are much better equipped to have different types of conversations with people and join the dots but …

Karolina interrupted.

Karolina: Guys, guys, this is getting nowhere.

This heated discussion led Karolina to step in, but Salec wasn't ready to let it go:

Salec: No, no, I think it's going somewhere. Look, *I would happily say that in almost all of my courses, I've been really happy with the personal growth that I've got out of them and how they're continuing to set me up in a position where I want to be able to turn my career into that.* [turning toward Selina] But you know why? Because I didn't focus on learning just one thing. *I am an engineer for God's sake and I started to make that transition from my engineering position where it's still very technical.*

Karolina: Look, Selina, I can understand what you're saying and yes, there is not enough time but as Salec said, *an MBA is not about honing in on a particular subject, it's just understanding that there's so much that we don't know* and it's really equipping yourself with the tools that help you learn and the willingness to learn and *to accept different perspectives*, and I think that's what they [slightly turning her head towards Salec and Kristine] are pointing out.

Selina: [frustrated—slamming both her hands on the sofa] Guys, how can you not see this? I… am… not denying what you both are saying. I'm just saying that *there needs*

*to be longevity of the learning.* Come on guys, *we forget what we've learnt if we just do it for a brief time.*

Karolina: I know what you mean, but an *MBA is not about remembering what you forget. It's really about understanding the language that marketers are using or economists or, you know, strategists, or whoever are using. And until I can speak that language*, understand like an accountant, until I feel that I've a good knowledge of Economics or Finance or Marketing and things like that, *I may not be able to show that I'm a well-rounded person.*

4.7 An MBA: learning to join dots and have conversations

4.7.1 'mindset' *v*. learning

Bruce: So many expectations from one MBA. There has to be something special about it.

Kristine: Yes, Bruce, there are expectations but being a manager, I know what I need. *I need to equip myself better to have different conversations with people and join the dots*, which I couldn't before the MBA. As Karolina said, an MBA is not about just listening and learning and doing activities in class. Look *I'm an advocate for doing and learning.* I've always believed that the MBA learning must be applied in practice. *I saw how a single concept is applied to different industries, jobs and experiences in my MBA.*

Karolina: It's just understanding *there's so much that we don't know.*

Bruce: But how would that help, not knowing what we don't know? How do we learn?

Karolina: There's still such a long way to go and *there's so much that I'm lacking that I'm going to get from that course.* At least that's what I thought. So, I knew [momentary pause] but then I didn't. Do you know what I mean?

Salec: Yeah, we all do Karolina. But *sometimes you mess up. Not knowing doesn't mean that you cannot do better.* I mean I continued to keep it this way, but I think that's not necessarily a bad thing to think that you can do better here. Well done, Karolina!

Kristine: *It's a journey and that shapes the way we work.* Like, even before I started my MBA, *now I'm talking about 8–10 years back.* It's often that you get multiple people with different perspectives and *you have to take the time to understand what makes them all tick but also to influence their thinking*, to start to bring them to a common point hopefully.

Selina: I have no idea what you all are talking about. I came in with this idea that *it's the thing that'll open doors for me slightly.* Slightly advanced education kind of gives you a high level of thinking but honestly, *I really don't think there is enough benefit for a business student to go and do a generalist MBA.* I know I sound very negative, but it's just that *I honestly don't feel I've had the learning.* I don't know what you think, but if *I would have chosen to do a Master of Management*, I think it might have been a very different experience.

Karolina: I think we both have used this analogy of doors more than a few times now, but I can't help noticing that we come from a very different 'mindset'. I see this 'mindset' to open doors as *something that grows on you throughout the MBA process.* It's not hard to see that the door is already opened, so *it's not about close or open per se, it's about if you want to walk through it.* This is quite an active choice for people and this can only happen when you say, "*actually, I'm going to really open myself up*

*to this."* It's like some expect doors to open for them, while others feel they're able to open the doors themselves.

Bruce: That's so interesting, Karolina.

Although mesmerised listening to Karolina's summary of what an MBA is about, Bruce got stuck on Selina's assertion that doing a Master of Management [MoM] would be better than an MBA. He couldn't believe what he had just heard:

Bruce: Selina, did I hear this correctly that a MoM would be better?

Kristine: Ditto. Do you honestly think that doing a specific degree would give you enough?

Without letting Selina reply:

Kristine: I'm telling you *if you want to influence people's thinking*, you want to work out what's doable for them, *what they can do with the resources they've got* and want to bring all of them together to work as a team, *you need to go on a journey with them, you need to get them to appreciate if they don't manage their tasks there would be a whole lot of risks* not only for themselves but in extreme cases *it could absolutely shut their entire industry down.* I mean you can't get this sort of broad, diverse 'mindset' by doing a specific degree. Can you?

Selina: I don't know what I can or can't get. I just know that I'm not a manager. I don't even have a team to manage. *I am a trainer. My job is to get our employees to care about the customers. That's it.* So, I'm not sure what you mean by going on a journey with them. Maybe you can think like this or learn like this, *for me,* [momentary pause] maybe because there are soft skills, *it's really hard to determine whether you've got them.*

Salec: You know what the problem is? I can see these soft skills or maybe Kristine and Karolina can as well because *we have people to manage, we can grow our skills as a manager of people* and I think that's why it was a perfect fit for what I was looking for.

Bruce: [turning towards Selina] But what else can you do?

Selina: *Maybe there is someone else who has to see it for me and go "oh wow, yeah you actually, you handled that situation really different than the last time*." I don't know. It's just that *I can't recognise my soft skills while I'm at work and engaged with people*. That's what makes me quite sure that the MBA didn't provide me enough. Maybe because I'm not managing anyone, [extending arms sideways, palms facing upwards] I've no one to report to me, maybe that's why. Anyways, leave it. Perhaps *I'm not introspective enough to recognise* that I've learnt something.

## 4.7.2 Tacit and explicit learning

Karolina: *It's all about making yourself vulnerable. I studied emotional intelligence in my strategic management class and* I can see now how *you have to approach an MBA as if you know nothing.* You've got to be completely open to learning and changing yourself.

Kristine: I probably say I'm just not as disciplined as I could be. *I promise I have all the good intentions, but then it just drops off.* But then *[looking towards Selina]*, I wouldn't say it didn't help me. But then *I agree I didn't make as much of it as I could have.* [pulling right cheek upward] I didn't utilise it as much as I could have.

Selina: *It's the content. It drives your learning.* Like, you remember, *Fundamentals of Leadership? [momentarily pause] It was very abstract.* It had theories and concepts and whatnot and we had to just reflect on our lives. Well, it didn't help me learn much.

Karolina, Kristine and Salec: [with a surprising look—arched eyebrows and eyes opened wide] <u>what?</u>

Karolina: I can understand when you say FOL was abstract and *we kind of jumped in with both feet. But isn't that the beauty of it?* It helps you reflect on your thinking and what you do at work. I told you how I was resistant to others' opinions and perspectives. Well, *this is where my thinking, my approach transformed.* I was always of an opinion that *I'm 99% right* but somewhere during my MBA, I learnt to develop a starting point of *asking people what they think, what is our process going to be to do this assignment? What or how do we want to approach the actual work? How do we want to approach deadlines? [talking without pausing] What are all group norms going to be? How are we going to treat each other and what is acceptable and what isn't acceptable? If somebody misses a deadline, then how are we going to approach that?* And all that. [inhaling air slowly and exhaling it quickly] I mean FOL just helped me with at least having this shared understanding of how we'll do things.

Salec: Absolutely.

This time Salec was not picking on Selina. He was genuinely concerned with what Selina had said:

Salec: How was it abstract for you, Selina? I mean *when I hadn't even done any real adaptive leadership, I hadn't even sort of thought about it.* I could not listen to, or I should say, *I wasn't listening to the song beneath the words.* And now, *when I think about where I was 10 years ago and where I'm now, it's opposite* in terms of what I do, but I love it and this adaptive stuff certainly accelerated a lot of changes in me, it did.

Selina: *[with a smirk on her face - sarcastically]* Well, you all are intelligent and I'm not. In fact, I just have a completely opposite feeling to this. *I have probably gone backwards in my confidence.*

Bruce: Backwards? How's that?

Selina: I don't know. It's probably not completely related to my MBA and *work is a factor in that, but I think I'm less confident in my knowledge of applying* what I've learnt *to a situation.* I mean, I can understand Karolina's views on shared understanding, maybe not so much what Salec said about the song and the words and whatnot. I'm sure I know things. It's just I'm unsure of how to apply things.

Kristine: *['ooking towards Selina]* I sympathise with you and I know this experience you have just described is challenging and painful. But like I said *even when I did short courses in different things, I've never been great at taking a tool and applying it.* Even though I think it's excellent in practice, *I probably had more success in running my team or more the team's operational management because that's where you need some more tactile systems or processes.* So, there are some aspects from what I've learnt that I remember and many that I don't.

Selina: But that's not what I'm saying. That's not a problem. [mumbling words] I mean how to explain to you. [momentary pause – taking a deep breath] What I'm saying is that *I don't manage people*, so *I don't know what to and how to apply things from my MBA. At work or in this society or even in my personal situations, discussing how a theory might not fit and diverting from that is my biggest concern.*

Salec: Look … *I'm a fairly high achiever and I'm very capable of being analytical. But when I was managing in Canada, a lot of it was just innate.* Do you know what I mean?

Selina: No.

Salec: Like you'd do something and you don't know if it works and when it does, you're not sure why it worked. So, you do it again—that sort of thing. *At both places, Northern Hemisphere and here in Australia, my experience has certainly been that. Systems are complex, let me tell you that. You can do the same thing again and it won't work* and so what you do is try something different and see if that works, then try something again and keep doing that. That thinking actually lines up very well with what all the theory is about. *It's not something you can carry in your mind like straightforwardly, you have to do it, you have to get to the bottom of the problem* and unfortunately, you don't have people with whom you can do all this, that probably doesn't help you, I get that.

Karolina: *I think I will quote Einstein here* and that's not to show off or something but to tell you guys that this is how FOL made me think. It says something like, "*if I had an hour to solve the problem on which my life depended, I would spend the first 59 minutes working out what questions to ask*" because then the answer would present itself. This wasn't me before. *I always considered myself a destination person focused on the end result* and now, I don't know how, but I'm more into the process and the method, both.

Bruce: It seems like your focus has shifted from the end result to processes, methods, problems. I read somewhere that we must first understand the problem and to do so, we must incubate and then illuminate and then verify to see if our solution works. This is interesting.

Karolina: *I don't mean to sound like it's the law* and that there is nothing else that we can do. That's not what I'm saying. *But just like I'd like to have all of that at least*

*mapped out, not written in stone.* At least have a shared understanding of how we're going to do something.

Kristine: Well coming back to what Bruce said, that's a great point, actually. One of the subjects I did in the MBA was Systems Thinking, which really [momentary pause - looking at the ceiling] *now that I'm thinking about it that really resonated at the time. It made me understand how important it is not to assume the problem but to look at the root cause and work backwards to identify the problem—something that I can now apply in a bigger realm, such as Australian politics with health industries and the environment in general.* I think Systems Thinking is definitely one tool to learn how not to go about your work  in a stepwise motion, rather work my way through different perspectives than just my own, specific to my work alone.

Bruce: [asking Kristine] So did you develop the questions like Karolina?

Kristine: Funny you say that. I actually did. At work, *I probably had developed some questions that I would ask myself of a situation, or when we were told to do something that I didn't necessarily agree with.* It was like, *how was this even going to benefit the industry? What's the problem that this is going to solve? So, those types of questions.* I just don't take anything at face value now. That's what I learnt the most in my MBA.

Salec: Oh yeah. Me too.

Bruce: At work? How?

Salec: What do you mean, how's that? I do it. I know it.

Too many questions bothered Salec. He didn't think it required explanation, but then in a calmer tone:

Salec: OK, particularly *in meetings where you get like executives coming to tell you about new strategies and say things. I can read between the lines.*

Bruce: Oh OK.

Salec: So, let's say they might be saying "*this is the process we are rolling out to do this and we want to improve results*" and I would be like, "oh no, you don't want to improve results. *What you are actually saying is that we had shipped results for cash flow last year and we need to fix that.* And we need to fix that because if we don't, *our debts will hit us on our reporting next quarter.*" So, it's like I can now unpack what they say and understand the bottom level rather than just take what they say at face value. So, that's what I meant. *It's like I've a better knowledge of when someone's talking waffle.*

Bruce: Waffle?

Salec: You're not good with slangs are you? I mean something that doesn't make sense. *It's like being on the dance floor listening to what they say and then going to the balcony and really knowing what they have said* if you know what I mean.

Selina: [moving her head sideways with closed eyes] Naah. Not me, nope. I don't see myself doing that. I mean, *I know it's important to look at the broader picture but not me*, nope.

Bruce: So, there's nothing that you can recall from your MBA that you would have applied at work or anywhere else? Nothing at all?

### 4.7.3 A change in approach: balcony and the dance floor

Selina: I mean we learnt quite a bit by being on the dance floor and the balcony and all those kinds of things and I guess in some way, *we were able to apply that in a small way in class, but I don't recognise that or recognise myself doing that*. I just can't.

Bruce: Then how do you know that you have learnt this if you can't apply it?

Selina: I mean, I remember. *I can tell people what I've learnt in my MBA, but it's just out of my mind*. I just don't know how to apply this learning at work. What can I do if I can't?

Karolina: OK, I can give you an example of what I mean by applying these in my life. So, *like in my FOL course, the in-class activities, over time, made me realise that I jump in too quickly*, I make judgements too quickly. *There is no harm in just pausing and waiting and reflecting*. I know I'm a very task-oriented, achievement-driven person. That's why I see myself as a destination person. I keep saying that again and again, but here, *I saw how a destination isn't about the end result at all, it's as Kristine said earlier, it's a journey*. That's what FOL was all about.

Kristine: It is and *if I think back, I just didn't have that breadth and probably maturity of thinking*. [looking towards Karolina] I'm not saying Selina feels the same, but *it's common to feel* how Selina feels about *not knowing what to do with the MBA learning* if you don't have a proper work environment to apply that learning in.

Selina: [looking at Karolina] And we are different people. Like, you used to jump in too quickly, *I always saw myself as a thinker and always took time to absorb things rather than jumping in*. I think both my MBA and work environment were pretty similar and it's kind of hard when everybody is just ready to jump in. I think *seeing the same*

*workplace kind of thing in MBA, I sort of developed a coping mechanism, if I can call it that.*

Bruce: Coping mechanism, that's interesting!

Selina: Yeah. So, *in my MBA classes, there were always some dominant personalities. I usually used to feel very strange around these people and at work, I would struggle in the corporate environment and feel like I might just kill myself if I'm still here in 20 years.* So, now what I do, I just sit back and kind of see what's going on and wait to interject myself later in the conversation. That's probably who I am anyway.

Salec: [laughing out loud – swaying front and back] so, you already do that?

Selina just stared at Salec.

Salec: I mean I concur a hundred percent, but I thought you didn't know what you learnt from your MBA and now you just described your balcony and dance floor methodlgy.

Selina: [frowning- confused] What?

Salec: *When I was starting in Australia after returning from Northern Hemisphere, I was a bit pushier, I knew what's right or wrong,* well, I thought I knew at least. *But now I like to observe things more before trying to jump in and do something.* So, now I can actually see that it doesn't necessarily mean that I'm more analytical, no, no, no because I can now see that you can over-analyse things. So, we all do that, don't we Selina?

Kristine: *This is that different perspective that has influenced me and my willingness and ability to challenge things, to stop and think it through from different perspectives.* This is what the balcony and dance floor concept is.

Salec: Exactly! *And from this FOL thinking, I like to understand*, at least try to understand a bit better *how a system works before pushing it. It was very different when I did FOL with Sheila (anonymised), who I love by the way.* She was transformative in my journey.

Bruce: [trying to figure out how he can put his thoughts into words] But now I'm confused. So, Selina, you learnt not jumping in from FOL and you can apply it as well, but you just don't know that you can apply these soft concepts. Is that it?

Selina: Well, now that you put it this way, *I think I've done it at work in some situations.* I guess without necessarily recognising or thinking about it like I'm doing it now [pausing] maybe yes. [suddenly] See that's what I mean – someone else has to tell me that I'm doing it, I'm applying all these concept from my MBA.

Salec: If you think about it *that's probably the biggest change, at least for me it's the ability to do that.* So, no one would do that for you Selina or for any of us for that matter.

Kristine: Exactly! That's why although *I still love to instil some order but now* the way I go about my work, *I can now step back like you* [looking at Selina] *and Salec and look at the broader picture* and see things from different perspectives. *Of course, I don't think that I'm close to the capacity of how to do that.* But with this sort of understanding of what you have learnt and how you're tacitly-unknowingly applying things at work, you can continue to grow.

Karolina: [looking at Selina] OK, let me explain, maybe it'll help.

4.7.4 A systems thinking 'mindset': can and cannot apply

Karolina: *In FOL, in a group consultation, everybody was, basically, looking to solve the problem.* But what we were not doing and *what we were supposed to do was, practice and develop a methodology to help solve the problem*, rather than just jumping in and solving it.

Kristine: Well said. I think definitely that's my number one learning. [looking at Selina] Right when I joined the MBA, *I think I was lost for my confidence too*. So, don't think you're the only one. Even though I had certain experiences under my belt, I lacked the confidence outside of that. I guess *I've always carried my willingness to learn with me and I believe I'll continue hopefully forever.* And this willingness has helped me not look for the right answers and not stay narrow minded. So, a lot depends on you.

Karolina: But I think this can only happen *when you look for effective methodologies that can take you to an answer, rather than going, "hey, that's the answer." Done.* Now, that's a valuable tool. But it's true—the confidence didn't come straight from the start. *I had no idea where it was going to take me, but I just understood that rather than just giving a sort of snap judgement, "oh well that person is an idiot"*, as Salec was saying about pushiness, *I say, "OK I disagree with you", but now I ask, why.* I think this is where I started seeing the change in my thinking, taking something as a whole and breaking it down into parts.

Selina: Sorry, but I'm not there yet. I think I understand what you all mean but I just don't remember whatever I might have learnt in this MBA. Like I said earlier, maybe there's someone else who has to see it for me and go, "oh wow you have applied this learning." So, *no matter how hard I try, I just don't see myself introspective enough to recognise that I've done something that I've learnt.*

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Salec: I think you're too focused on the rights and the wrongs. Again and again, you're saying the same thing. I think what Karolina meant by *breaking things down into parts*, isn't about waiting for others to say you're right or wrong. *It's about knowing your assumptions*. Look, *it's OK to think that you have assumptions* and *these assumptions are too important for you right now, but it's also important to keep in mind that these assumptions aren't true either.* This isn't just about your work. This sort of thinking reflects anything and everything that you do.

Bruce: [looking at Salec] So, what did you do?

Salec: Well, I should admit, I was like [momentary pause] I'll give you a simple example - if I wanted to exercise more, or let's say if I wanted to get fitter, I could do what I wanted. But I didn't know what was right or wrong. I just didn't. *The big underpinning assumption that stopped me from doing that was, the more time I exercise was less time with my kids. And you can't break that assumption. That assumption is actually true.* So, no one will tell you yes you've learnt or no you haven't learnt. You have to decide for yourself and *this is from this FOL thinking that I was able to develop.*

Bruce: It's interesting to hear how you three [looking at Kristine, Karolina and Salec] can find FOL great and [looking at Selina] you not useful at all.

Selina: Oh no, I wouldn't say that FOL wasn't useful. It's just always tricky at work to dive in. Let's take the dance floor and the balcony view concept. Now listening to you all maybe that's *my natural way to do things, to operate,* like I would sit back on the balcony and then I get on the dance floor later. But *it's just I don't think I can remember applying this concept.* It doesn't come naturally to me. I need someone to tell me that, like you did. *I know I can apply that in a small way in the* class by myself*, but I don't really recognise myself doing that at work.*

Karolina: Yeah, but *with FOL, you have to get in that 'mindset' that we're actually developing as people.* It's something different. And you have to do it yourself. You can't just rely on people to tell you that you've learnt something.

Selina: Well, yes, but *I don't think I've absorbed the information enough in this intensive MBA. So, to apply it without looking for someone who knows what they're doing would be so difficult.* That's why I can do it in MBA class because *I don't feel judged.* I can ask the lecturers. I have someone there who knows what they're doing and you go there to learn, but at work that's not possible, *it's not as safe at work as it is in an MBA.*

## 4.8 A safe MBA *v. un*safe work

Karolina: To an extent, yes. Like, *when you're in school, you do something wrong at the undergraduate level, you feel like an idiot.* I don't know what you guys think, but that's what I felt. *But in the MBA program, we're all in it together,* it's kind of new for everyone and *it's OK to be wrong as long as you learn from it.*

Selina: That's what I'm saying. The learning environment is *so psychologically safe that when you go back to work and certainly where I've been it's not the same.* So, the job that I told you about - *I've moved into that in the last month* and it has been challenging. I mean, *the psychological safety hasn't been there.* It's so disconnected from the MBA. It's so different.

Bruce: Wow. I had no idea you're so frustrated at work because of this.

Selina: You won't understand, Bruce. You haven't done an MBA. I'll give you an example. *Someone reported to my director who thought he was the team director and you couldn't say anything to him. He'd been around 20 years and he knew everything*

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*at least that's what he thought.* And you couldn't say anything to him because he knew exactly what had to be done and no matter what you do, *you just have to watch him go off into a ditch*, failing the project *and then he would obviously blame everyone else except himself* for his failure. And I can't do anything about it. I just thought my different thinking didn't matter. How on earth can someone expect me to go and apply my MBA learning at work?

Karolina: It's the same where I work. It's very hierarchical, *you have a principal and a deputy and others and I sort of look at some of the people more senior and think they're really just playing that role.*

Bruce: But that's what most organisation would be about hierarchy, order, rules and so on. So, how is this unsafe?

Karolina: *If you try something a bit different,* you feel vulnerable. *It makes everything unsafe.* You just don't know what you should, or you shouldn't do. At least there's just that sort of assumption.

Selina: And it's the assumption that makes me feel like *I'm going to kill myself.* Even when *I'm about to finish the MBA, it still feels like I've to ask for permission for everything* and I don't like that. *I have no freedom, no autonomy*, no one to report to me.

Kristine: This is quite depressing. I can see why you say that you've gone back in your confidence. I don't even know where to start. *It's been 5 years since I finished my MBA, but I've been on the same roller coaster ride* as you both. And *it definitely goes against who I am. I'm pretty risk averse* in that respect; but having been through the roller

coaster, I'm sure I'll continue to keep focusing on the positives. I <u>have</u> to. I'm happy to be unsafe.

Karolina: I guess it depends on the individual. [looking at Selina] It's probably your manager's fault to be honest. Like, *I have people to manage and I've always had my team. Earlier I was*, of course not like your manager but *always looking for the right answer*. But from this MBA now, I'm realising that the environment is very important. *The first thing I'll do with the new person or when I join a new place is, actually going offsite for a coffee and I find that works really well.* Also, if I'm having problems with people, I'll always take them offsite so they can relax.

Bruce: [extending left arm out, towards Selina, palm facing upward] But that's what she's saying. She can't help noticing that she can't apply whatever you both have been able to because she doesn't manage anyone and even when she tries on herself, she still has to go and ask for permission. This must be so challenging - she can't exercise her learning at work because she doesn't have freedom or autonomy.

Karolina: It is Bruce, it is. This challenge is ever-present. *I always say to people, you can talk complete freely it's fine, I'd rather know than not know and an MBA is very important to create that sort of environment, where people can take the risk* and say "you're answer is completely wrong." But *that's not how things work at work. The worst thing to do is to get an employee in your office and close the door.* That's how she feels.

Salec: I'll tell you something. I have an employee who I manage and I find her so incredibly difficult to engage and manage. I mean it's not as though she's doing bad work, but she's not getting the full benefit. Before I started this MBA, *I always thought she should be working more flexibly but now when I've gone through FOL, I can see*

*that because we are restructuring, she is a part of sort of transition. It's not only a few hygiene factors that affect her right now like salary, turnover or restructuring, but it's also that we haven't necessarily delivered as well as we could have.* It's us managers and not so much her who is at fault.

Selina: She and I must be same then.

Salec: [in a rude tone – a little loud and firm] But I'm not like your boss. OK.

Selina: Yeah I know. I didn't say you are. OK. I have given you my work example. Now I'll give you my MBA example. As I have said, *I know I'm a massive procrastinator and I leave it to the very end.* But just the way one of my peers in the last group assignment behaved, like *literally giving everyone a calendar—"this is when you need to do all these things" and I'm like, "well I'm not going to agree to that."* The point is, I can openly disagree and he can openly do what he wants and say what he wants and there're no consequences. But at work, I can't. I can't disagree with my boss, but I can with my peers in the MBA. So, in my MBA, *I'm developing my mind to deal with things differently,* but I am lost when I take that to work. That's what I mean.

Bruce: [surprised—raised eyebrows] so even the students in your MBA were behaving like micro-managers, I mean if I can call them micro-managers?

4.9 An MBA's in-class environment: strengths *v.* weaknesses

4.9.1 Role of diverse MBA peers in learning

Selina: The group I was in - this person was micro-managing us. *He actually ruined my experience of everything. So, I'm not going to talk too much about him.*

Karolina: It's important to have a good understanding of peers. That's for sure. *There are people from all walks of life in my classes - doctors and engineers and accountants or whoever and you learn so much* just by having casual conversations. All these diverse people *were coming together in a way that they never would in their silos of profession.*

Selina: I agree to disagree.

Karolina: It doesn't matter.

Selina: Look, with respect to diversity, *I met people from extremely diverse backgrounds, like military, engineering as you said. Also, some business people like pharmacists are* very diverse, which is the best thing, yes. But specifically, *my experience with engineers probably added to my confusion. First, they are so clear in what skills are to be used and when.* But I could never understand that, *so I cannot get the best out of my MBA class environment* by interacting with them. Second, *the business side of things is very foreign to them because they've been in a very technical engineering world.* Their way of thinking is so different that they can't help me with what I'm asking from a business sort of 'mindset'.

Karolina: I didn't find such a challenge, [lifting both the shoulders up and raising both eyebrows] fortunately for me, I guess. Unlike what you've just described, *I found my discussions incredibly stimulating. I would never talk to an engineer or a doctor, not more than socially, definitely not from that learning perspective*. So, this was a big surprise for me.

Kristine: I think I had similar experiences. *Having these diverse discussions with different people like accountants and then doing the accounting subject in the MBA,* I

came out with a very great appreciation for accounting and *a very strong opinion that I'll never be an accountant.*

Bruce: Why's that?

Kristine: Well, in my MBA, I understood why it had to be done and the importance of the role but *through that subject, I also got to partner with someone who's in finance but also has over the span of his career successfully designed and launched in the international market, different beverages. And so, our project through that subject was a new beverage that he was starting to investigate.* So, I was able to work with him and even though I only had narrow tech background, working with him *I was able to apply accounting and finance principles to work and ideas from a product perspective.* So, I learnt quite a lot from him and came out with this 'mindset' that I've a greater appreciation for accounting but balancing books and ledgers and so forth isn't for me.

Karolina: [laughing] Yeah, that sounds like an MBA.

Selina: I can see why you both are attracted to learning from people who are not from your background or field of work. As I said, *meeting people from extremely diverse backgrounds* was *probably the best thing about the generalist degree,* the MBA. Still, I keep thinking *if I was just a businessperson walking into another business degree where there are a whole bunch of business people who're all working for a few companies –*[momentary pause] I think that sort of learning is very different.

Kristine: I understand how you can learn from like-minded people and obviously, there are concepts that are taught, which helps in learning, but *what I really valued was all my different colleagues.* So, you're doing a subject, Finance or Economics or whatever it might be and you're in a room, discussing that content, the same lessons that they

were learning. It's fascinating. *Looking at the different industry perspective really made me learn to look at things and apply things.* I haven't thought about that before.

Salec: Well, hello, I'm right here, an engineer. [looking towards Selina] You're right, *we have a different mind from others when we think and apply our thinking but not every engineer is probably like that.* I'm a living example of this. *I did engineering because it was kind of the thing that you did back then.* I work in a pretty niche field of engineering.

Bruce: What do you mean?

Salec: So, I worked with an engineering firm. *My manager was an economist, so completely opposite of what you typically see in engineering firms. But he really gave me some interesting ideas and thoughts about applying some of the different non-traditional engineering thinking.* I liked that sort of thinking, working with an economist on engineering issues. It was surreal. It just gave me a great understanding of engineering work but from a different perspective.

Karolina: That's why I'm saying there's not much to learn if you all talk the same language, at least *not when you're looking for how other people use the same learning in their work in a different manner.* For example, in FOL, *mostly the people in the room were pretty smart, but then they were from completely different walks of life - different jobs, different professions, different everything* and just getting so many different perspectives was unbelievable. But then *I was really taken aback by some people sitting silently in the MBA. Although I know what I mean, some people will be passengers who'll sit there and don't contribute* and I don't really get any sense of who these passengers are. I think it's important that everybody gets involved.

Bruce: Passengers? That's quite an uncommon phrase to use to describe your peers.

Karolina: Maybe but I say this because *I don't know who they are, why are they sitting there if they don't have anything to contribute, or what they are learning.*

Kristine: Probably a couple of things. *I learnt very early on, first from experience and again I think my cousin commented to me - at the start of every subject, scan the room and make a choice, a wild choice who you sit next to. Obviously, it's a guess, but there's something to be said about judging a book by its cover to start and then obviously when you go through, you get to know.* For example, like you [looking at Karolina], *I was able to identify a few of my peers who were unable to think differently or pull their weight.* I found some of them just sitting in the same lecture as me, not saying anything at all – not engaging in the class discussion at all.. *I call such people narcissistic people, the same who I had at work with too.* I know it sounds like I'm judgy but that's a kind of person who wouldn't listen, wouldn't pick up something little to just reshape.

Salec: Well, *I don't think that all people sitting quiet and appearing as if they're not pulling their weight are narcissistic*, as you say. Yes, maybe your boss or that co-worker you told us about, they were, but when it comes to an MBA, I think that thinking has come out of the MBA that I wouldn't have even considered earlier.

Bruce: Meaning?

Salec: Meaning like, *earlier I used to get frustrated with some people who find themselves in a certain position that in my view makes no economic sense. I used to get angry about how different assumptions underlie where you end up,* like Kristine's frustration and narcissistic people. *But this FOL and Managing Contemporary Organisations (MCO) made me see them from a different perspective* and I can see how

that makes sense. I can see that now how my assumptions led me here and other people's assumptions led them there. *The point is <u>you cannot not assume</u>.* It doesn't mean that's what those people sitting in the same MBA classes are doing.

Karolina: That's a good point actually and that's why I don't blame them completely. *I believe often the people who are the quietest are the ones who are really thinking about it.*

Salec: *I think I still probably have similar views regarding where I land on this spectrum*, but I have so much more reasoning behind it.

Kristine: *I'm not saying that it's their mistake entirely a hundred percent,* but such people go on working in their organisations and then you come across these people in life. I think *it's the purposelessness of peers of getting out of every subject that I didn't want to be paired up with them in my MBA doing some group assignments or activities or whatnot.* [turning towards Karolina] As you said, what are they even doing here?

Karolina: Actually, it's the lecturers' fault. *The best lecturers create an environment where they don't put people on the spot* but give them an opportunity to contribute, add value, just like asking "what do you think."

4.9.2 Role of lecturers in learning

Selina: [speaking every word slowly] <u>Oh my God [momentary pause]</u>. The most unbelievable experience in my MBA was with my lecturers. I had one or two good lecturers, but *the experience was just not what I expected from an MBA, at least with a few lecturers.*

Kristine: I didn't…

Selina: Wait, wait, just let me finish.

It seemed as if Selina wanted to take out her frustration and she found the perfect moment to talk about it. She didn't let Kristine talk:

Selina: I <u>have to</u> tell this first, please [shifting her position – moving forward sitting at the edge of the couch]. *It was them standing up and lecturing for 3 hours on a weekday and that was really painful. I've heard different things about other lecturers who usually teach those subjects and how amazing the learning experience is.* I was looking to gain the same learning experience and because of these different lecturers, their different lecturing styles, *not only me but many others just sat on our laptops and did other work.* That was just a big hurdle in what I thought I would get from my MBA.

Salec: I think I know a few of those lecturers.

Bruce: Who?

Salec: That doesn't matter. What matters is that *I did a few courses under different lecturers and I ended up dropping a few of them.*

Bruce: Why would you do that?

Salec: *Well, I was so unhappy with those courses. I just thought that those courses weren't challenging at all.* I didn't feel any challenge. *We were just being given theories. We weren't talking about thinking about them. [turning towards Selina]* I mean *exactly* like she said, "them standing up for 3 hours and lecturing." Those weren't engaging discussions.

Karolina: I don't know who these lectures are, but *I did find a few lecturers teaching through the slides, which I know is a part of lecturing the content, but it's like death by*

*PowerPoint.* I am sort of a person who wants to go through it line by line, have more discussion and debate. *But those lecturers didn't make much effort to give everybody a chance to be involved, contribute, and bring that completely different perspective out.*

Selina: Exactly and that's why I didn't do the readings. *There was no incentive for me to do the homework and to discuss them in class.* So, you couldn't really follow what they said anyway.

Kristine: That I disagree. *I disagree that the lecturer has much to do with your willingness to learn.* Sorry! [looking at Selina] Maybe it's just a handful of lecturers, but still, *it shouldn't stop you wanting to get as much out of it as possible.* Look, *I wasn't striving for top marks* OK, I wasn't, but then I tried to do as well as I could. *It's one thing just to say "oh they are bad lecturers", but ultimately putting pressure on yourself that choice remains with you and only you.* You say that you didn't have any incentive, maybe, but *I worked this out pretty early on if you don't do the readings and the work in advance you'd be lost in class and I just hated that feeling of being lost.* That was my incentive, I guess, [extending left arm out towards Selina, palm facing upward] and that's why you felt lost in your MBA.

Salec: Oh no, I don't think so. I agree with Selina here. Simply, it wasn't what I'd been getting out of the MBA here. *I thought that following on from FOL, I could take that thinking and apply it to business now. But nope, nothing I could do with it.*

Karolina: Listening to you three, I can now see how passengers existed in my MBA classes. Could this be the lecturers' doing? Could this be the students' doing? I don't know. I mean you three are the examples of both these questions. As I said just now, *lecturers have to stop teaching only through PowerPoints. They need to ask people*

*what they think.* Unless that happens and even if we take you as examples, passengers wouldn't be any different.

Selina and Salec: [at the same time, in a stern voice – looking at Karolina] Are you calling me a passenger?

Karolina: Of course not. I'm just saying that *maybe in my class, those who were quiet and I called them passengers,* maybe they were wearing your shoes. *I don't think you can learn just purely by absorbing.* You still have to contribute and participate and test your ideas. [looking at Selina] As you said, you'd gone backwards in your confidence. *You're not alone and maybe some people lack confidence. It's still noticeable even at this level.* If you say it's the lecturers' fault then it's down to the individual, I guess.

Selina: Maybe and for me, yes it does. It totally comes down to the people who are lecturing. Maybe it's different for you, but even if I look at my workplace, that's the way things are. *In a job, your managers make or break the situation. It's the delivery method and the content that they choose as well. So, yes it comes down to the lecturers, absolutely one hundred percent.*

Bruce: So, Selina, you're saying that if a lecturer is teaching through slides, you wouldn't do the readings or prepare for the class?

Selina: I never said that Bruce and that's not what I meant. What I mean is, of course, *there is value in doing the readings and case study.* So, it's not about the slides or anything. OK, let's take another example. *So, I did Marketing and I really liked her style.* I mean my lecturer's style of teaching. *She had slides, but every slide was just to start the discussion so she would lay down a bit of theory. But then there would be real-life examples and she would give examples, then the whole class would talk and it was*

*very interactive.* That's what I call an interactive session—being transparent, focusing on the content and engaging students. What's the point otherwise? [looking at Karolina] You said that the quietest people are the ones who've more to contribute or something like that. Maybe your passengers saw what I saw in those lectures and never got a chance to contribute. Can this not be?

Kristine: I can relate to this last thing that you just said. *I had tunnel vision, working in one sort of food safety field. I worked with some really good people, professional type things. But for me, it was really about getting myself out of that tunnel vision.* And yes, the workshops or sessions or presentations or small group workshops and all that did help me reduce my narrow 'mindset', but *one woman, in particular, was just so good at teaching me to get out of my tunnel vision that I credit her alone with this. She told me that if I want to be a good strategic thinker, I have to look more broadly.* [looking at Selina] So, yes, it could be that.

Selina: Did we have the same lecturers?

Kristine: I'm not sure. It can't be. We are at least 7 years apart.

Selina: Anyway, from what you just said about being a good strategic thinker, *Strategic Management was probably one of my favourite subjects in the whole course. You could walk into a class, you knew what you read was actually relevant to what you were discussing in the class and the lecturer would just kind of bounce off everyone and ask questions and it was a group discussion.* It wasn't like someone lecturing at you as some of the other lecturers did.

Bruce: This is so interesting. I nearly forgot Kristine wanted to say something.

Kristine: I don't know. What was it? [tilting head on the right, frowning – a momentary pause] Oh yes, I was saying that *when I did Strategy, I worked with two people from finance but both with different backgrounds. We decided to pick something completely different from our experience and chose a coal project for our course assignment. Now, yes, the lecturer was involved in giving us that freedom, but it was all three of us, we were on that and we were the reason that we chose it.* It was a different experience working on something that none of us has worked in before and this new learning that we were all getting and we were all coming together, it was not the lecturer's doing, it was ours. Though I can see how this could have been the lecturer's way of engaging us, choosing such open assignments [momentary pause] it could be.

Selina: I just think his particular style. *To be fair, he has come from teaching at some University that Harvard people created. So, he has that kind of experience and that's his style of teaching and I know the've the case study method of teaching there.*

### 4.9.3 The lecturers' backgrounds and qualifications

Bruce: So, just because he has that experience, you think he is good at it?

Selina: Oh, no or maybe. I don't know. I'm saying that *it totally comes through and I think the learning experience is just next level because of that.*

Kristine: *I still think that it's more a student than a lecturer.* Maybe here Harvard played a part and you thought that whatever way he's teaching is the way Strategic Management should be taught.

Karolina: Look, *if you just want to come in and pay your money and just do the minimum, you'll get the minimum out.* [looking at Selina] Now, I'm not saying that you

did. But 2 years in, *if there're still people who are kind of skating through*, I suppose that's their choice then.

Selina: *I didn't do any of the readings. I am a terrible student.*

Bruce: No one is saying that Selina.

Selina: Well, in a way you all are saying that. *I somehow managed to pass, but I'm not really sure if I've learnt anything and then I'm like, "OK, put that aside." I'm just saying that it was disappointing because there were a couple of subjects I was told would be really impactful.* Maybe I set my expectations too high and started expecting that it would be the same way all the lecturers teach. I think it's much to do with a lecturer's background and experience in the field. *I believe business schools have gone to this policy that you need to have a PhD to teach. This would mean less practical and more theoretical discussions because not many of them lecturers tend to get PhDs* and it would mean you eliminate your industry experts. For example, *my Marketing and Strategy Management lecturers definitely don't have PhDs and I don't think the FOL lecturer does either. And then they're left with traditional academics who just want to give us theory for 3 hours.* I wouldn't see value in that. Like, in Accounting, I did learn a lot and really enjoyed the learning experience. *I think it's directly related to this fact that the lecturer who taught Accounting is a partner at one of the big 5s*; literally accounting is what he does. Purely an academic [swaying head left to right – shifting her posture], I don't think that's the way to go forward, not in an MBA at least.

Salec: I think I would probably side with you here. But only a little.

Bruce: Huh?

Salec: See I dropped those couple of courses *but then I re-enrolled with a different lecturer and coming into this with that lecturer is exactly what I was expecting*. I went home after the first lecture and [turning towards Selina] I said what you said, but for a more positive reason. It was amazing. *I really enjoyed negotiation skills in the last trimester and it was very different.* I side with Selina because the second lecturer is a consultant and he's from that field. But what I don't side with Selina is not doing the readings. That's the point. *If you choose not to do it for any reason that's your own fault and not the lecturers'* or anyone for that matter. *No matter what, you <u>have to</u> do the readings and come prepared for the class.*

4.10 An MBA: an independent effort, or a box-ticking exercise

Karolina: *An MBA education can change you as a person and hopefully improve you as a person, but you <u>have to</u> give a hundred percent to really benefit from it.* Now, it wouldn't matter who is from where. What would matter is that we understand that *it's not a box-ticking exercise that you just pass a subject and let it go.* I have understood from my MBA experience that everyone has got a different motivation, but what remains the same is that you need to be committed and give everything yourself. That's what I've learnt. [looking at Selina] I don't know and don't take it the wrong way, but I don't *really* understand why you're here doing the MBA.

Selina: What do you mean?

Salec: What she means is, in my class, *you can assume that 95% have done the readings because we are extremely engaged and that's what we're here for. It's us who wants to get the growth and* as Karolina said, it's not like, just tick a box and get your masters, then you wouldn't grow. Of course, you'll go back in your confidence because you wouldn't know what's going on in the class, you won't be engaged. Yes, you'll get a

piece of paper at the end of it, but you won't get that personal growth. Just passing isn't going to give you what you're looking for, nor are lecturers going to provide you with that. You have to make your own effort or just leave as I did.

Karolina: [looking at Selina] *We are paying so much money. We are investing so much time.* Why would you not give your best? I know an MBA is a completely free choice, but you can catch up with your lecturers at the end of the class. You can always say, "*hey, can we just catch up for 5 minutes, I want to talk something through with you."*

Selina: But why are you guys so angry at me?

Karolina: We are not angry at you. I'm just saying it's in your hands. *This is why I wanted to do a face-to-face MBA and get that approachability.*

Selina: Look, our circumstances are completely different and that's why we think differently. *I was planning to go back to Melbourne in the middle of the next year. But without a job* [momentary pausing] *I need financial security. I'm all by myself and so if I lose my job, then there's no one to support me.* That's why I wanted to give my own business a try and I was told that a few MBA subjects would give me that, but not all did. *The MBA is so broad and the lecturers were lecturing at me but I just couldn't take much back with me.* Maybe I should've done that, approach a few after the lecture but I didn't and I feel so bad now *not doing the readings because I am a terrible student.*

Bruce: I don't think you're terrible in any way, Selina. We managed to find out how you've learnt the balcony and dance floor concept in your MBA and used it in your MBA and at work. It's just because you're waiting for people to tell you that you've learnt it, you're feeling terrible. Anyway, I'll go and check if the coffees are ready. It's been long since we ordered them.

## Act 1 Scene 2: The two friends enter The Lounge Café.

The two close friends Coleen and Karina, who completed their MBA together 5 years back catch up now and then just to be blunt to each other. Even though they work in entirely different fields, they have a unique attitude to talking about failures to a level that they don't waste their time discussing their success as much. After an early finish, they met in the parking lot of the MBA Lounge to share another lot of experiences, exchanged pleasantries and walked towards the front door of the café…

Bruce came to the cashier to check how long their order was going to take. While waiting, he noticed and immediately recognised them from an MBA gathering a few months back. He hung around the front desk waiting for their coffees and looking at them periodically.

4.11 MBA students' 'mindsets' and their effect on learning

*Coleen is putting all the magazines in a stack and placing ashtrays at 90 degrees*, with a smile on her face.

> Karina: So, you haven't changed much?

> Coleen: What do you mean?

> Karina: You still have this tendency to keep moving things around and placing them perfectly in order.

> Coleen: Well, it got boring. Last week this was in the exact same position, so I just couldn't handle seeing it like this. [lifting both shoulders up, tilting head on the left] What can I say, *I do have a low boredom threshold*. OK, leave all that. Tell me how's things with you? It's been such a long time since I last saw you. Are you still trying to figure out ways to get more people to love your workplace?

Karina: Yes and yes. [both laugh] At work, it's always the same. *I want more people to love what we do and learn new things about our history, but we don't decide what people learn* or determine how and at what pace they'll learn.

Coleen: I know. You've always had this freedom-oriented 'mindset' to let people do what they do and continue what you do.

Karina: You know *there are different disciplines and schools of thought in the work that I do and one of them is an interpretive approach.*

Coleen: Yeah and it's fascinating. [with a smirk on her face] I know about that.

Karina: It is. *We encourage learning. We don't teach* if you know what I mean. As you know, *I love to create an environment where people can bring who they are, their experiences and connect to something either in an experience that we produce or in a place* and actually find their own meaning.

Coleen: So, this is what you spend most of your time planning now?

Karina: I just call this meaningful work - *taking care of the collection, the public*, something that I see has a value in itself.

Coleen: I know you're passionate and loving. But *I've always felt that staying in one job, doing one thing for too long is like being at the lonely end of the spectrum. But I understand that everybody has a different comfort or discomfort level for that matter, with change*, I mean. It's just me. I would struggle in one business for too long.

Karina: I agree with you and you know that. But *in my line of work, every day is a new day*. I mean, it's not repetitive. So, *I work with people ranging from aging communities and from, "actually I'm not interested in science, I'm just looking for a cup of coffee"*

*through to, "I'm fascinated by this and have been my whole life. How do I get more deeply engaged?"* It's amazing connecting what I do with what other people are doing or want to do.

Coleen: Oh, don't get me wrong. *I don't change it for the sake of changing. I'm just comfortable with it, comfortable with change.* You know very well that *my family kept moving around, I kept moving around with them around Australia as a child. It's just my upbringing,* my parents' influence that I now need change all the time. *You know it wasn't always easy to start again as the outsider and be that strange kid.*

Karina: *This is exactly what we look for when we recruit people to work with us.* The main criterion is that the person needs to be naturally inclined to work in our environment. Same as you.

Coleen: You still give me more credit than I deserve. You know this. *I've always been a timid, reserved child and I still am a fairly shy adult.* It's not in my nature to be extroverted. But yes, I must say that *I've developed this resilience that I might not have had if not for my parents over a while.* It's like now I know how to behave in different situations.

Karina: That's why *I've always believed that you can train skills, but you can't train attitude.* That you get only if you want to get it.

Coleen: In a way, yes. But *it took me a long time before I could be comfortable walking into a room of people that I don't know. But once I got that I learnt how to inject myself into a conversation and introduce myself.* If that's what you call attitude, then yes, I do it because I know what's required. It's like I'm comfortable with my discomforts.

Karina: But *the problem with people applying for jobs with us is that we don't find people who are like comfortable in uncomfortable situations.*

Coleen: It's not so simple. You know that *I'm a clever person and a really large part of my self-image actually is my intelligence and* I pride myself on that. So, yes, you can't teach this unless someone wants to be like this. But mind you, *I wasn't like this 6–7 years back. I guess our education, especially the MBA we did, had much to do with this change.*

Karina: You could say that. *I'm sure it had a profound effect on my ways of thinking too. Working for the government* is not easy at all. *You develop a great degree of imposter syndrome. And to be very honest, I don't know many people who've lived a life without that.*

Coleen: I don't know really. I would think that *I'm open to a variety of ideas and concepts and that I'm willing to explore them and not jump to conclusions about right and wrong.* Here, I don't see myself in imposter syndrome, but yes, one thing is that *I avoid people questioning me about myself. To avoid this discomfort, I ask questions and study people to know more about them and then feel comfortable talking to them on various things.* You might call this imposter syndrome, but there's a real cleverness to that.

Karina: I don't know if I do this, at least I haven't thought about it. But when you say discomfort, *I remember my first few weeks of experience in the MBA. I was like "oh my God, these people will be so smart and capable and high achieving and star people. And how will I hold my own here?"* It was so different. So, I had that imposter syndrome when I went in.

Coleen: Karina, *I'm as shallow as the next person and I'll make a first impression.* Like you said about star people in the MBA, I can be quite judgemental without allowing enough time for fair judgement.

Karina: Exactly, yes. Because one of the things that the MBA did for me was, even though I thought like that but *I didn't feel outmatched in any of the programs that I was in* and I was like, "I can hold my own here."

4.12 Reflective Thinking

Coleen: Of course, you can but *I think we stereotype things a lot.* Well, I do *and this is why I often spend a lot of time confirming my first impressions and sometimes my first impression appear incorrect.* But this is something I learnt in my MBA.

Karina: How's that? I always thought you knew what you were doing.

Coleen: Well, for example, *I thought that I would get very little from the business subjects, like, Accounting and Finance, Economics, Marketing and that I would gain the most from the management subjects.* That was the impression that I went in with.

Karina: And so, you were proved wrong?

Coleen: Well, not exactly. My experience wasn't too far from my expectations. I got more from the management subjects, like FOL and MCO *but I got far more from the business subjects.* I initially didn't consider that *studying those business subjects at a master level is different from studying at an undergrad level.* I just never thought that in the 15 years between my undergrad and masters, things would change so much.

Karina: It's not your fault. It's just *we don't reflect enough in our lives to keep a check on our impressions. The first course that I did was Marketing, but* as you said, *FOL,*

which we did as *one of our first things. It was grounded in self-reflection.* Do you remember, we did *lots of these self-assessments, lots of reflective learning*?

Coleen: I remember and *the concepts from academic papers, they just spoke to me very strongly.* Although *we didn't get a lot of opportunities to practice what we learnt in the MBA, I did increase my knowledge of alternatives.* It's not like there is an enormous change going from nothing to immense knowledge, but *it's definitely more like going from a base to more knowledge.*

Karina: I don't get it.

Coleen: Ok. So, the *MBA taught us that it's all about practice, practice, practice and trying different things.* And that's what I mean having a base and increasing knowledge, but you have to learn by doing, not just by listening.

Karina: I agree and disagree.

Coleen: huh?

Karina: You remember, like *our assignments, we're like "look at yourself as a case study, look at other people as a case study" and kind of paying attention.* I mean you do get that opportunity to reflect on what you see and learn, and like you, *I always question how you develop that muscle of observational learning about yourself*. It all came from the MBA. The whole program was set up to stimulate that as practice. So, you do get that opportunity in the MBA.

Coleen: Well maybe to an extent in management subjects, yes, but business subjects, I don't think so.

Karina: Means?

Coleen: So, like you said *FOL or MCO deal with the real gritty issues of management, it interests me, I could see a short-term requirement for knowledge and I can apply in some real practical things.* But when it comes to business subjects, these are just compulsory subjects that you were required to do. So, working out *as a quirk of nature, working out which ratio to apply in an accounting sense brings me no joy in life. It's something I consider black and white.* Something basic that anyone can do. *They just don't push my buttons* because they are so precise. So, I don't know how to apply them at work or during the MBA discussions for that matter. *I'm a very conscious person, you know that and that's why I know what to choose that I can get more from.*

Karina: Well, if you put it this way, I can understand what you mean but then I felt that the whole in-class learning environment and activities were designed to encourage us to practice. *I think I already had a higher orientation towards the internal locus of control. I'm very self-oriented.*

Coleen: Oh I know that.

Karina: Actually, we're quite similar in that way. So, it just improved the MBA experience for me. *But yes, there was variability with the class*, you're right but I wonder why?

4.13 Open *v.* closed subjects: the MBA student's role in a learning environment

Coleen: I think it's this variability that made me see how I focus on first impressions a lot. Like, *dealing with people from so many varied backgrounds and spheres of life, I could see how I could have an opinion and read meaning into something. At the same time, other people could have a completely alternative view and opinion.* So, I realised that yours is not right and mine is not right either. This is what I meant by management

subjects like *they're the shades of grey but business subjects like maths equations, once it's right, it's right, you can't grow anymore.* But *in FOL and MCO those layers of humanity I found fascinating.*

Karina: I know what you mean. Did you do the negotiation course?

Coleen: [frowning – looking upward] hmm…

Karina: Anyway, *I've zero confidence in my negotiation skills. And in this class, other students like me were project managers for big organisations and they said like, "I'm the negotiation lead on million dollar deals. I do this all day every day and I'm really good at it". And the fascinating part was that when the lecturer went, "okay, well let's pick what being good at negotiation actually means and watch a video as a case study.* Let's talk about what went well and what didn't in that." Doing this in the class helped me see what being good at negotiations actually mean.

Coleen: And these reflections that we were forced to do, *well, forced, that sounds awful. I mean that we did as part of subjects like FOL and MCO. Those reflective skills taught me to hone those reflection activities, taught me to hone my soft skills.* And I see negotiation as one of those skills because you're doing it in class and not just listening to a lecturer speak about it.

Karina: Yeah. *This is how we pick up value and identify shared growth. This is where we look at conflict. This is how we plan and prepare and all that sort of stuff.* Lecturers must pick up that point that we made at the beginning of the discussion. *Like in negotiations class, the lecturer once asked, "who feels that they are good negotiators". And after the negotiation exercise, he asked again, "who still feels now at this point that they are good negotiators".* This is what happened in our MBA. *That's why the*

*conversation was fascinating because several people said, "I actually realise I'm not a good complex issue negotiator. I'm transactional".* This is what I meant by agreeing and disagreeing with what you said. So, I don't mind if you used the word forced. To me, this doesn't sound awful at all.

Coleen: But this also depends on the student, Karina. If you're not looking for these things, you wouldn't really pick up that value or shared growth for that matter. *When I did MCO, I was doing it with another person, Danny (anonymised), who I worked with at the time. And he hated MCO with a passion and thought it was an enormous waste of time and didn't join in any of those conversations.* I think Danny was very black and white in his approach and enjoyed the subjects with more discipline and straightforward concepts, whether it was a right or wrong answer. [suddenly in a fast pace] *Oh and their affinity with the lecturer too. Now, obviously, I had a huge affinity with the MCO lecturer and respected him and his thought process enormously.* However, Danny found the conversation's abstract nature extremely frustrating because he's not an abstract person. And maybe that's another term, but that's what it was.

Karina: That sounds about right.

Coleen: *I came in for a piece of paper. I can put this very bluntly.* But then my mind didn't enjoy subjects with straightforward concepts. There was not much to learn. This sort of change made me see it as an enormous waste of time just to get the paper or not to get engaged in the discussion. *This and Change Management both made the MBA a soul-searching professional journey for me.* But that's not what everyone experiences, at least not Danny for sure.

Karina: I think you're right. I got engaged in the class discussion. That's why I can talk about what matters. And, *having done this with people from different institutions,*

*different backgrounds, different cultures, with different personal experiences and expectations who have different ways of doing things and different values they bring to the program, I realise now that it has much to do with the lecturer facilitating the discussion.*

Coleen: That's absolutely correct. *I could talk about typical conversations with that lecturer in MCO with comfort* and I did that over a full trimester. *With Julie (anonymised), that's a while back now, I remember, we would sit in class and talk about a concept and then we'd often talk about how people were applying that or what experiences they'd had.* So, we often talked about people management type issues.

Karina: And I think that's what engagement is, isn't it? *I see this with good lecturers who build on something with a real plan of what the learning over this period will be.* These sorts of lecturers make us recognise that you can think you're good at something and not be good at it. And you immediately think, *you actually adapt and evolve your understanding of self through that experience.* That's what I found in the MBA.

Coleen: I think *the challenges that some of the lecturers pushed us to do made us think differently.*

Karina: Yeah, but not all lecturers, I must say. For example, *I went into Finance and Managerial Finance and it was a completely different base because I didn't connect with the teacher. It was completely* [momentary pause – looking at the floor] *I mean like Accounting with values-free financial management, whether it was the particular teacher or the curriculum or whatever, but it was really driven by how you make the best profit. How do you get the best return?* [picking up pace] *What's your investment risk? How do you generate more wealth, more wealth and more wealth?* [inhaling slowly and exhaling quickly] *Whereas I come from a public value 'mindset' and so it*

was a foreign thing for me. It depends on what I like and what I don't and what I want to get from it.

Coleen: *I'm trying to think of the term block release types. I think we did three weekends of FOL.* Do you remember? *It was a really small class, like less than 10 of us, I think. I think that helped. The smaller number of students saw us getting comfortable with ambiguity and working styles, all sorts of different things.* It felt safe in talking about where I might have messed up. And *these things were so intimate and personal that we might not talk about in other settings.* So, yes, on one hand, it's the lecturer, but on the other hand, it matters if there are many people around. *Through some exercises, lecturers pushed us to go out of our comfort zone, which made us have some really intense discussions about failure.* That was soul searching. I mean, *we both have this enormous bond. We have carried on touching point with each other throughout the MBA and now, even after that.* And I think it's all because of that experience in FOL or, as you say, in negotiations class.

Karina: Completely.

For a long time, Bruce was standing there and saw his group waving their hands at him, asking him about coffees. He quickly turned to the two friends.

Bruce: Hello, do you remember me?

Coleen and Karina: Oh yes, Bruce. It's been some months now. How have you been?

Bruce: I'm well. How about you both?

Coleen and Karina: Just chatting as always.

All laugh.

Bruce: Sorry to barge in like this on your conversation, I just was standing here to check on the coffees that we ordered and I just couldn't stop myself from overhearing your chat on your MBA experiences.

All three laugh…

Karina: Yeah, it's just that sort of experience, you know. *You just can't stop talking about it.*

Bruce: Oh, of course, yes. I just wanted to check with you both if it's OK if I invite you to our couch there. You might know a few people there. They're also doing an MBA and one of them has done her MBA already, like you two.

Karina and Coleen looked at each other and after a bit of stammering:

Coleen: Yeah, OK, why not.

Bruce led the way.

### Act 1 Scene 3: Bruce, the common acquaintance.

Bruce: Hey, everyone, this is Coleen and Karina.

All around hi's and handshakes.

Bruce: Sorry, but I was standing there and I just saw them. The're MBAs like you Kristine. I thought it would be good just to sit together and eat together and talk, you know.

While Karina and Coleen were settling themselves on the couch, Kristine with a smile on her face:

Kristine: You missed it, Bruce. We were talking about something that you would've enjoyed [momentary pause] from a comic bookstore, really interesting.

Bruce: Huh? Comic bookstore?

Karolina: She doesn't mean comic bookstore as in proper comic, Bruce. She is just referring to my view of the MBA.

Bruce: And what's that?

4.14 An MBA: a claim

Karolina: A Superman cape.

All laugh.

Bruce: Tell me more.

Karolina: Oh, I was just saying that just because people have an MBA degree they think that they've got that cape and are Superman, but how it's really not that simple. *You have to make a lot of effort to be Superman and how it's not so different to what you have to do in life generally.*

Salec: Funny you say that. *Throughout this MBA, I was trying to be a good manager and a leader, but I now see how I apply a lot of these things to our kids*. I realise managing people is a lot like dealing with kids.

Bruce: Superman Dad.

All laugh except Salec.

Salec: I don't think so. It's not about super dad. I'm just saying they're pretty much the same. *You do something they don't like, they throw tantrums and are happy when you*

*do things right,* of course things they like. So, yes, in a way you have that power over them and you can get things right. *But they both feel emotions and* they just want to be acknowledged. *That's where the degree doesn't really matter.* It's all about you, who you are and how you deal with them.

Karina: Hmm. I think you have a point. *I always sit there with a balance sheet, not knowing what I'm doing, waiting for my manager to tell me about my work. So, I had this choice with me - Should I take a role where I'm increasing my professional expertise—should I do the masters in some other discipline, like communication, interpretation, engagement or a generalist degree. But quite quickly, I realised that I wanted to become someone who'd achieved things through influence and strategy rather than through the professional delivery of particular expertise.* So, maybe you see it like a Superman cape, but *I saw the MBA similar to a Swiss army knife.* Now that we are talking about analogies. Something that would be a good route, a good option for me, for my future, like a generalist tool kit.

Karolina: That's a nice analogy as well. *Let's say 3 years in the job if I started applying for other jobs, and it comes down to the straight choice between the two—a résumé with or without an MBA.* Of course, they're going to employ the candidate with an MBA. So, if 'm the latter, then the door is closed to me. So, yes, it's that red cape with the Swiss knife and that's why I wanted to get an MBA.

Kristine: That's so true. It made me remember, *I recently caught up with a fantastic consultant. He's in business management. He has done numerous start-ups and has helped restructure lots of businesses and his credentials are fantastic, but he feels like he needs to do an MBA, so he's got that on his credentials.* It's just so bizarre that even when he has such extensive life experience and maybe wouldn't get much out of an

MBA beside those letters, [spelling it out] <u>M.B.A.</u>, people still expected him to have those credentials - that cape of Superman or a Swiss army knife.

Karina: I think there can't be anything truer than this, at least, not when we talk about our MBA. *I also thought that the MBA gave me status in the role and it made it so easy for me to immediately position myself within a new team like this is who I am.* I mean people generally can see that cape and what I'm capable of, metaphorically speaking. This cape or Swiss knife gives them that faith that I know what I'm doing. Wearing that cape, having that degree that stamp on my résumé, *I don't need to spend 3 months building my professional profile.*

Bruce: I didn't know you all felt as strongly about your MBA as you do in the powers of Superman.

Selina: Not all, Bruce. I still can't find that cape on me. I mean, we need Superman from this era, not one created 50 or 100 years ago.

Bruce: Meaning?

Selina: Meaning, *the work environment is changing very rapidly. The way we do things has changed. People are creating new theories and writing new literature and unfortunately, I didn't see how some of the things in a few subjects were relevant to what's going on now.* There was that disconnect between the MBA and work and the course content, preparation material and in-class discussion. Don't get me wrong, *I thought that I'd probably left as a different person* if that makes sense, but in all honesty [momentary pause] I just don't feel it. That power, that claim, that tool kit, that cape, I don't see it on me. I feel so terrible in saying that now. It's not that I haven't learnt. *Indeed, I have learnt things, but I haven't grown.* Neither do I have that magic wand

nor have I become that different person I wanted to be. I'm not Superman. Not even remotely close.

Salec: [looking at Selina] You know, *I grew up in the times when the boys don't cry sort of ideology prevailed.* So, I just want to say that sometimes, you just got to suck it up and do it, just <u>do it</u>.

Kristine: [looking at Selina] I know you keep saying that, but I should tell you, *as it turned out, having this cape, it didn't take long for me to get my management job once I started my MBA.* So, for me, it was really good to be able to have that under my belt and start to be able to learn. This power, it was like [momentary pause - looking upward], like *I was able to have conversations that I wouldn't have been able to have a year or earlier than that.* That was the magic wand. *Suddenly I was flying to the balcony with much greater ability to look at challenges and opportunities from different perspectives,* I was able to see that bigger picture perspective. *I was so pigeon-holed* without this cape and now I can join all the pieces together, bring all of those together. I didn't see the disconnect you saw.

Bruce: Wow! Cape or no cape, it seems as if all MBAs are Superman.

Kristine: All of us have done or are doing the same degree and still there are two different people. *Perhaps, not everyone gets much out of an MBA besides those letters.*

Selina: It's sad actually that I've gone back in my confidence guys. *What the MBA gave me was perspective and different ways of looking at things, understanding, more principles around economic drivers or financial analysis, financial management or marketing, and having all of those informing my thinking and decision making. I listened and I learnt and I went, "yeah that sounds really good actually."* I should use

that, but *I never get around doing it.* It's just that I'm not great at applying those concepts. I just have the cape, I have the Swiss army knife, but I just walk with it in my hands. Unlike Superman, unlike you all, who know how to wear the cape or use the knife.

Karina: Come on, don't beat yourself up so much. I think I was  in your shoes right after I graduated. Like, *immediately after the MBA, I would say that I'd an appetite for any role. So, I was actively looking for work and at a more senior level.* And honestly, *I felt in my then-current role that my jacket was too tight*. I was getting quite frustrated with mundanity. So, it's not you, it's the job that you're doing. You have the cape and *to wear it you have to put your claim against the positions that require your sort of learning.*

Bruce: But how? What are these positions?

4.14.1 An MBA: a claim of a confident and self-developed personality

Karina: Like in my case, *I spent 6 months in an acting role while I was doing my MBA and I was only able to do that because I felt confident enough because of my studies.* I wouldn't have applied for that role if I hadn't been doing an MBA. [looking at Selina] *You'll feel confident of what you've learnt in the MBA only when you use what you have learnt rapidly in a role.* You've to get to that next level and find a role that requires this professional expertise.

Karolina: Yeah that might be true but I think first you need to have the right 'mindset' to approach that. *You'll not just get that piece of paper and think people will bow down in awe.* You actually have to put in a lot of effort, a lot of it, *but only by coming to class,*

*listening, doing the bare minimum,* as you said not doing the readings, *you'll not be strapped in the values of Superman.*

Bruce: It just seems that the degree is *definitely* a cape, but you don't become Superman or get those super powers only by carrying it in your hands just for the show. Am I right?

Selina: I just think *I wanted to do an MBA to be able to apply the things to the real world, but it just became an academic pursuit.* I looked at translating theory into reality and making it practical and useable in everyday life and work. That's what I wanted and *I know predominantly that's where the value is. That's where the value <u>has to be</u>.* I think my experience has been quite inconsistent, but *I still have the project to do and I'm hoping it might just be a game changer, maybe it would change a lot of my feelings.* Perhaps I can apply my learning there. I can't describe it any better than that.

Coleen: I think it's important to understand first, as I felt, *an MBA degree is quite different from other degrees - it's about personal development and professional development beyond just learning about a topic.* If you want to wear that cape or let's just say to be a manager of any type at any level, you'll require significant personal and professional skill development. And *an MBA takes you on a journey through acquiring that knowledge by giving you an opportunity to develop as a person.*

Karolina: *And that development as a person isn't just by sitting in class and not opening your mouth and doing the bare minimum.* Otherwise, you might as well call it *a box-ticking exercise.* If you really want to wear that cape and develop, you need to *recognise that you have to make efforts, make sacrifices.* This is the right 'mindset'.

Coleen: In a way, yes. But I suspect *that piece of paper did change people's perceptions about me. And maybe I went in just to get that piece of paper.* I was telling Karina earlier, *I didn't actually think I learnt that much more than my undergrad.* But doing some of the courses that you only do in an MBA, like, *there was an elective* in which we learnt about *failing forward.* I studied how to *identify triggers that will tell me when things are going to go wrong in the future.* That's the power that I got from doing the MBA. That was brilliant!

Bruce: [frowning] But Superman doesn't know what's going to go wrong in future?

Coleen: Of course, he doesn't. I didn't mean I can predict the future. It's just *this is where I can see myself applying that knowledge. I think it's a spectrum and a spectrum has no defined beginning or endpoint.* I mean, you wouldn't know the context, but I worked with a colleague. He and I would be at very different ends. *I think my brother, is far more emotionally intelligent than him. So, my brother will get more in ways that I got and even though both are tradesmen, he'll get more technical on business than what my colleague would've got.* So, I guess it depends on your personality as well, what you bring to your MBA. I keep saying it's not for everyone. *You come out with a lot more knowledge, with significant confidence, maybe a bit of cockiness to go with it, and know how to manage that.* If you want to be Superman, you'd better hold onto the reins and *manage those pressure cooker situations all the time*, not just during class discussions.

Bruce: You know what, listening to you guys, I remember four MBA students from last year. They were also talking about the same things about their work culture and what they felt and safe, unsafe MBA and work and whatnot. It was similar to what we're

discussing. I mean, one of those, if I remember correctly, was an engineer, [looking at Selec] just like you, Salec.

Salec: [looking at the laptop screen, continuing working] Really?

Bruce: It was like, I just happened to be observing one of the MBA classes and after it was over, I decided just to finish my remaining research work, sitting in the MBA lounge. Right then, these four from the same MBA class walked in, possibly, to just relax. They just sat in a corner and as I happened to be there, I asked them if it's OK for me to sit there and they didn't have a problem with it. So, I kind of overheard their whole conversation. Do you want to hear?

Coleen: *Listening to the experiences of professionals facing similar or different challenges, to see alternatives and different ways of doing things, it has always made me think differently. It has really fast-tracked years of experience.* So, I guess it wouldn't hurt to know how they saw their MBA. [leaned backwards, crossing her arms] It's been a while since we [looking at Karina] graduated. I'm sure listening to what they felt would be interesting. So, in short [lifting left shoulder up and tilting the head on the left] why not.

Bruce: OK. Do you remember how I observed your MBA class Salec?

Salec: Yeah.

Bruce: I remember that it was a very long day. Full days of work and then 3 hours of MBA class took a toll on all of us, I guess. It's not something that they've experienced the first time. But today, it was all about personal struggles and toxic managers at work and then the long MBA class, which I'm sure they enjoyed. I know I did, observing. Still, once it finished, they probably felt drained, at least that's how they appeared to

me—shoulders down, sitting at 45-degree angle, head stretched backwards, arms on the forehead. I mean all that. So, they decided to just sit in the lounge, having a cuppa. They talked about their work environment and the MBA safety we discussed earlier and how they tackled their work problems.

Salec: But what did they say?

Bruce: I don't remember the exact starting point of their conversation but it was something like [momentary pause – looking down at the floor], OK, I shall recap.

## Act 1 Scene 4: Story within a story

4.15 An MBA 'mindset'

4.15.1 Not fearing failure

Bowman: …I know how tiring evening classes could be but a year into my MBA, I'm happy to announce that *I've really disarmed myself.*

Maddie: [frowning – confused] Disarmed? Really? What does that even mean? I'm sure we're not comparing MBA to war.

Bowman: Well, I mean *I'm willing to give away all the things that protect me. I want to present myself to people as someone who doesn't know it all so that my views will be challenged and I'll be exposing my weaknesses.*

Maddie: I used to feel like that before this MBA. I mean I think *I'm still pretty much a kid who doesn't have enough experience to run a company* but back then *I lacked confidence and I felt this imposter syndrome.* I has to pretend that I know-it-all, but *now I think I've sort of freed myself and put that to bed and I feel great.* I show my

weaknesses and that's what I'm saying – I'm not afraid anymore. I'm not an imposter now. So, yes, maybe I've disarmed myself too.

Melanie: [sipping her hot cuppa] I don't put a label on a box. *This could both be a strength and a weakness.* What I mean is that sometimes *I get overly confident and* say what I have to say but then *other times,* I'm quite OK to keep my opinions to myself. *I think it's my excellent analytical brain that likes to problem solve.* I just feel I can pretty much deal with anything.

Marina: [annoyed] I didn't think this break would be to chat about the MBA and I'm tired guys. I can't think about all these things. *Look everybody is dying of cancer, I'm probably going to be dead at 40 with cancer too. So, I don't look for options. I just go for it* and do whatever makes me happy. Whether I feel disarmed or not, I enjoy life because you don't know if you're 5 years or 10 years away. That's my philosophy in life.

4.15.2 People focused: moving away from technicalities

Bowman: That's a bit sad, you know. I don't know about dying, but I feel that *being an engineer, I wasn't too open to expose my weaknesses* and unlike you Marina, *I was always looking for the best option.* I do enjoy engineering, but *I enjoy more of the people interactions rather than the technicality.* But then I just couldn't come out of it. *I found a lot of interest in managing people, but I struggled at work in terms of behavioural issues.* I'm not sure if this is industry dependant, but I'm sure *I didn't know how to choose. There's not much attention to the people side of things in my defence, not in my industry, at least.* Whether you're dying of cancer or not, in my industry [very short pause] people don't have that sense. *It's only about KPIs* [key performance indicators] *and achieving milestones and achieving product deliveries and all that.*

Marina: I think you're right. It's not industry specific. For example, *if I'm creative or trying to make a brochure or something, I need a template to follow.* Otherwise, I'll be bored quite quickly. *So, companies need to focus on people first.*

Melanie: I'm not sure if I follow. *I work full time in a non-business non-executive role, OK. And I'm a middle-level manager who's got 15 staff to manage. My job is very public health service, very public government service and you would think it's supposed to be people focused.* But no matter what, all companies are run like a business and it's not about right or wrong, *it's about recognising that companies have too many constraints, simple.*

Bowman: Yes and I agree. *It's not only the people side of things. People really need to do their job* but what I mean about issues in my industry is that people need to be constantly challenged and able to continue in the industry, which isn't that common. *It's not all about a technical piece. It's about being challenged mentally.*

Maddie: I think all three of you are right. Look, *I'm relatively easy going and I have a good network of friends in that space.* So, when I started working, *I loved doing animation jobs even though I wasn't an animator. But then there were too many emails, too much sitting at my desk, with headphone and drawing.* So, I wouldn't say that I hated it, but *it was just disconnected with people having no direct communication.* So, [looking at Bowman] I can understand what you're trying to share.

4.15.3 The attitude

Melanie: *I was just getting a bit sick of the daily rants of my managers. I was so sick that I had to go on holidays for 3 months just to cool myself off and gain the confidence back.* I do it to fight back and the same as engineering, *there wasn't a big difference in*

*my industry either. Working with managers with 30–40 years of experience, I can see how they're <u>stuck</u> in their old ways of doing things.* And to an extent that they never understood my *trial-and-error method to do things* and they took me as *a young health worker who doesn't know anything about hardship.* So, now I'm like "*whatever happens, happens, let's just work the way up.*" I was just happy to be back in the system after I cooled off.

Marina: Are you sure you're not over-analysing these situations? [momentary pause] What I mean is, *I'm a people person and I like people and I like business, but I know under the shadow of being an extrovert, I tend to over-analyse.* So, now that I know this, I keep myself busy needing a lot of work to stop myself from overthinking things. But I don't think it's just you or me. *In general, I think women tend to over-analyse* and for me, a bit of anxiety is a part of it. So, I do all this just to avoid that thinking cycle.

Bowman: And I think it's justified. Like, in the organisation I work, *there's a bit of contradiction between what I want to do and what my role is all about. I tried taking certain initiatives to give people the opportunity to explore and try to learn from their mistakes,* but these initiatives, they don't go too far. So, I can understand what you mean. [turning towards Marina] I can understand your over-analysis and you are "happy to be back in the system" attitude, because at the end of the day *it's all about following process and procedure, which doesn't really allow for playtime and be creative.* So, anxiety has got to be there.

Maddie: *When you do 60 hours a week, or like in my previous company where people were even doing in excess of 100 hours every week for a month straight, I couldn't see a future for myself.* I was anxious about my career. *I knew that I would move up the ranks, but I also knew I would just get more and more workload and never have a good*

*work–life balance.* So, my anxiety was more about keeping my family in mind. But like your engineering, health or gaming industry, it was difficult to balance, because it's so client driven that I kept thinking if I had a family, I wouldn't be there for them and one thing would have to suffer. *So, when I knew that I couldn't have success at both, I just left and went back to freelance.* [looking at Bowman] That's why I understand what disarming self means.

4.15.4 The 21<sup>st</sup> century 1950s management: psychological *un*safety

Bowman: You went back to freelance you say? *I think we're back in the 1950s in terms of management. Everything has become about meeting schedule and cost and budget.*

Melanie: Funny you say that. *When I worked in a hospital, I worked bottom up -* dealing with subordinates and peers first and then talking to management about ideas, *which isn't bad, but I increasingly got frustrated with management.* I could see the problems and wanted change but *my organisation found me too noisy* and just didn't like me making too many waves. So, yeah, the 1950s if you want to call it that.

Maddie: I think I'm a bit lucky with this. *I like working crazy hard and parenting a lot and then doing the MBA studies, but it's all because I feel great in this current company. I think because I grew with this company and this company grew with me too.* That's why I'm invested in it. But I think it's like this because there's nothing so historically deep that I can't change. So, that privilege, that opportunity makes me feel that "*yes, I have a lot more input.*"

Marina: Yes, you're lucky, Maddie. You <u>really are</u>. Unlike your organisation, *my previous company had such an inefficient culture that there was no room for me to*

*grow*. Really, it was <u>so frustrating</u> to be hammered back every… single… time that *I left public sector for a private one.*

Bowman: It's like…

Marina's voice was high and she was leaning forward as if she was trying to make a point and tell how complex her work environment was. She didn't let Bowman speak:

Marina: You know what, sorry for interrupting but *some people are just such micro-managers who don't trust anyone to do anything and so they're not even open to learning.* It's like my way or the highway. Such people don't embrace this fact that *I've got enough to give to the organisation.* That's why I'm here doing the MBA. I've to gain that confidence. Sorry, Bowman.

Bowman: Oh, no, no, that's OK. I understand how you feel. There're mixed feelings in the team. As a manager, although *I've a certain level of control and there're certain things, I can do at the lower level to create that sort of environment that you're describing* [looking at Maddie], but my struggle is not with that. *I struggle with the approach higher management takes.*

Maddie: When you put it that way, *I probably think it's that gated culture* – my way or the high way. Like, let's say now I'm discovering that these people are almost getting in the way of good product development *because they're not very good leaders or don't have a very good, shared language.* And so, *I don't feel psychologically safe.* [looking at Melanie] And that's what you were saying, I guess, how you work "bottom up" but then you "get increasingly frustrated with management."

Bowman: That's what I did too "bottom up." But then *I knew the system had failed.* After making so many efforts without results *I carried zero expectations.* And here I

am doing the MBA, *trying to figure out how the system failed and I'm frustrated that it clouded my ability to learn.*

4.16 Alternate views of psychological safety

Melanie: [turning towards Maddie] I'm quite interested to know what you mean by psychological safety. In my case, my current company *are happy to let me trial things in a safe-to-fail environment. So, I feel that I have an opportunity to try something* [very short pause – hurried into speaking] *within limits obviously, but at least keep building on it.* Now if I compare this with my managers in the first two companies I worked in, it's a complete 180 different.

Marina: [frowning - confused] 180?

Melanie: Yeah. I mean complete opposite. The company I work in now, my *current manager sees good in people and likes to work with people's weaknesses to improve them.* To me, this is psychological safety at work. I <u>have</u> that autonomy.

Maddie: I think you're right. At work, I have that autonomy but *doing this MBA, so many times I thought my manager should be here. He reads a lot of blogs and lots of other things, but he never goes deep.* And I've always believed that *if he does an MBA, I can talk about the learning with him. He sees good in people too*, but he <u>has</u> to go deeper to make it work. *I want to run my own company one day* and learn how to deal with people at a deeper level – not just work with them but understand them. *And this MBA teaches you this psychological safety*, which I think he lacks, my boss, I mean.

Bowman: I know what you mean. [interlocking fingers, both elbows on knees, leaning forward] But then *I've had discussions with several people, several managers* like yours *and they share the same opinion and the funny thing is that they're MBAs.*

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Marina: Then I think *they didn't do the FOL course*. I know I'm a people pleaser. In my childhood I did things that my siblings wanted to do to make them happy. So, I thought it's safe to do that. But in *FOL,* you remember our *projects on safe-to-fail experiments*?

All nod.

Marina: *Those made me focus more on myself than being a people pleaser. It just allowed me to feel like I've developed and grown more confident in myself without fear of failing the project.* This sort of project just felt like I can do this. I need to break away from my family and thrive. And this breakaway is all about thinking about spending time with myself, studying the MBA, *not just dropping everything and going if someone in my family or my husband is sick or whatever.* It's <u>OK</u> to fail.

Melanie: I think it does. *Earlier I wanted people to do what I say, but now it's like if someone mentions something, I'm like "oh actually that's a very good idea, let's try that".* At least, I'm eager to try that now, but of course, only if it relates to what I'm doing now.

Maddie: And because of this MBA safe-to-fail thinking, *I can think long term and I, sort of don't feel like I want to go back to being an artist at least.* I feel safe to do something outside of my comfort zone. I mean, *my mother has a hobby and she absolutely enjoys it. So, I also had a hobby that I enjoyed,* but then this MBA happened and *now I'm like what do I do? Where do I want to go?* And this made me see *how big—real big—an ego I have and I felt like this is about my boss because I feel as if I can do a better job than him. So, I see my boss differently now, I know I love the company's founder, but I also know that he's human.* So, even though I still think that

I can do a better job than him, I want to see him do further training, do an MBA to learn this. I just stopped blaming.

4.17 An MBA safety (or too much safety) *v.* work *un*safety

Bowman: To me, that's the core of who I'm now, yes. But *I have noticed that many of my core beliefs, values and behaviours are being challenged where I am now.* As a manager, I can create a safe environment as this MBA is doing it for me.

Marina: Really?

Bowman: Well, not exactly like we experience in our MBA but similar. Like, my work culture *it's a highly male-dominated environment*, a highly driven authoritarian environment. *Before I used to accept this fact. Now my belief system is like everybody should be treated equally and respect your views—there is no bullying* and that's safety. And this is what I'm getting from the MBA. But *at work, there's a lot of governance and compliance and* it just limits your ability to challenge those behaviours and culture. *That's what happens when we accept the easy way out.* So, where's this safety for us managers?

Marina: *It's safe in a way that I can create that safety Bowman, but being with my boss for 6 years, I don't know any other styles of management in this field.* So, I don't know the answer to your question. For example, I wondered what other management styles are there or *how it would be to work under someone else with a different management style. How can we be taught to be a good boss, but not make people unsafe?*

Bowman: I don't know the answer to that question. *I grew up in a country that was recuperating from a war. I saw what violence could do to people and I know what value a person has in certain parts of the world and I must say, it's not much in those parts*

*of environments* where I grew up. *While here,* in western countries, in Australia, *you do get a sense of appreciation for little things.* But then this appreciation *is taken for granted and* that's what I see - the work culture stems a little bit from that. *But when you see certain things in your life*, when you don't have the safety to even fulfil your daily needs and can't even imagine what lies for you even in near future, *at such a young age, it changes people.* I don't take things for granted. I guess that's why I feel quite connected with that part and I'm able to think about creating safety. *But then when I'm unable to challenge those ideas and behaviours and attitudes of my superiors, I don't find that safety with higher management.* At work, I really don't feel safe, but here in the MBA, I feel safe knowing I'm not the only one and there're other people with similar experiences like me. So, what I'm saying is, I've grown to appreciate, but I'm not being appreciated and that doesn't feel safe.

Marina: That's why I'm doing an MBA. *That's why I say how important it is to stay relevant in the career world and have many opportunities. I'm glad I'm doing an MBA to stay relevant* and keep on top of it. I don't want to feel unsafe again.

Melanie: That's one thing, but when I say that I know what feeling safe is, *it just means that unlike my pre-MBA thinking, I don't set everything out from A to Z, but try a little bit to see if it works. This safety made me stay away from my war-and-peace 'mindset'* and focus on people's strengths and ways to transform their weaknesses into their strengths. Learning this process is safety, at least for me it is.

Marina was getting agitated that others were taking this notion of psychological safety so casually. For her, it was hard work and she wanted to make a statement to everyone:

Marina: Yeah, that's all fine, but it doesn't start like that. *When I started, I was constantly in this dilemma: what if I sound dumb, or ask stupid questions and all that.*

So, it wasn't even important what I said. It was more about what people would say about me or think about me or [didn't complete the sentence].

### 4.17.1 The *un*safety in the MBA

Marina: So, let's say, *in this MBA, I found everyone to be really friendly*. Still, I don't speak up in class, not much. *But in a group setting, I will chew others' ears off as I know no one judges me and I don't really feel judged among five people* anyways. *But then when it comes to class discussions, if the lecturer doesn't military-select me to talk, I'm not going to even try.* That's for sure. I know it's my thinking that I believe this, but really, until lecturers ask me directly, like "what about you Marina? What do you think?" I'll just wait and keep thinking "oh *when can I come and chime in.*" So, that's a feeling of unsafety [momentary pause], not knowing.

Maddie: *I felt unsafe and a bit worried too, thinking that I might scare some people off.* It's not that I know more than others, but until I uncover things and viewpoints that I haven't considered before, I feel it's really not safe to fail.

Melanie: I can relate to that. I tried to have robust discussions about why people might agree or disagree with something. *In both MCO and FOL, I learnt that you'll get different perspectives and as long as you're aware that it's not an attack on you, per se, you'll be fine.* It's on you. Unless you're open to listening to what others have to give rather than saying no and disagreeing straight away, the purpose of learning in an MBA is defeated. *I feel you make MBA unsafe for yourself. No one can do that for you.*

Bowman: But I don't think it's that easy, though. [looking at Melanie] Maybe in our classes, I can make myself safe by just being open to accepting others' ideas. But taking this mind to work doesn't help me feel safe. I feel unsafe instead. So, let's take an

example of the organisation I work in. *My organisation often doesn't take kindly to people making mistakes, which creates that level of,* [momentary pause – looking at the floor – lifting head up suddenly] *let's just say, it doesn't create a safe environment for people to experiment and make mistakes. But in the MBA, you can control the learning environment. You can experiment and learn about yourself because that's how we learn* [very short pause], *by doing… things ourselves.* But it's disconnected from work. Their acceptance level for that sort of behaviour is minimal. You don't feel that it's OK to be vulnerable at work or it's OK to fail, like you do in the MBA

Maddie: That's what I mean. *The MBA is so controlled that you might say I'm safe to fail, but you wouldn't actually live it.* You can learn it, develop it and *improve on it but you wouldn't see the value of taking time to think* about those management skills and collaboration at work and speak your mind, just because it's not controlled. *People just spin their wheels on inconsequential things, just because they have to show something. That mentality is a sign of not feeling safe-to-fail at work.* [while crossing legs, leaning back, folding her arms] I agree with Bowman on this, one hundred percent.

Melanie: I think there's strong correlation between what happens at work and what we see in the MBA. *But many of my colleagues and some of my senior staff members at work and in the MBA don't really care about this. Surprisingly, such people are mostly working in the government sector. And what they do affects everything we do.* It's slightly different for people doing an MBA, and everyone tackles things a bit differently. Maybe for them, it's not really important, but then we have this sort of thinking mechanism, this MBA 'mindset', which makes it important for us.

Bowman: Look, I don't want to talk too much about it, but I think it's important to discuss this issue of the MBA being too safe that it becomes unsafe at work for us. *I*

*believe that nobody goes to work to do a lousy job. So, what does that person need to be successful in every aspect of their job? Now, I must say I'm not young and I consider myself a high achiever. OK. But in the past 2 years, I felt that I've been very limited in my ability to grow, feel inclusive and have my own opinion because there wasn't a safe environment.* So, psychologically I wasn't safe. Now you would question why a high achiever would feel unsafe? But here's the thing –*we operate in an organisation where emotional intelligence is non-existent. In most leadership, EI isn't a part of the organisational culture.* And I've struggled for a very long time because I believe that when it comes to people's emotions, *you need to listen to what people need and I've always given that to my team,* but nobody gave me that. *So, I started this MBA* and what did I find [very short pause] *that I wasn't emotionally intelligent.*

Maddie: How did you find this?

Bowman: *Well, I attribute a lot of this stuff to what I'm doing now through the MBA and through this MCO course that we're doing right now.* It's given me a lot of ideas. *For example, at work, my team provides me with a status report, a weekly report in an email and I usually get those on Thursday mornings and that kind of just sits with me.* I don't usually act on them until next week. *Now, in the MCO, an activity to form a Socrates circle and give feedback to the inner circle by being a part of the outer circle made me see the value of timely feedback.* I realised that the team had been sending me these for quite a while and I've not been doing justice to their efforts.

Maddie: [nodding head] MCO has some exciting activities.

Bowman: Yes and this activity helped me see that as *I don't get to read these reports until sometimes towards the end of the week and sometimes early in the following week,* in a sense, I made them feel unsafe. But now that I know this, *I hold stand-up meetings,*

*10 minutes every day, to tell me what they want instead of sending me reports. Now, this has created a more dynamic environment. Now, this is* what I call *safe - safe for them, but the point is I don't feel the same with my superiors.* They haven't given me that safety at a higher level. In the MBA classes, *I can speak my mind. I can share personal things, and I know for a fact that people aren't going to put me in an uncomfortable position.* So, I feel safe in the culture that the MBA has created. You might be wondering why I'm harping on about this if everything is so good in the MBA - it's like, *the MBA environment is controlled, so, you can learn how to create safety for your team members because you experience that yourself in the MBA but then you don't really learn how to be safe yourself from your superiors—the ones who don't have emotional intelligence. This MBA doesn't teach us this sort of safety.* So, I continue to be very reluctant to allow other people to criticise me at work. I know that this MBA has made me *a better technical person*, but it has also helped me become *a better human, for lack of a better word if I can say. But I still have that need to be appreciated*, which I don't get at work. It's the organisation's fault, yes, but *it's also because of this safe MBA,* this [momentary pause], this MBA 'mindset'.

Maddie: Wow! I didn't see the MBA learning environment from this perspective. I know *in FOL, I felt as if I was pushed towards unsafety and I was like, "yeah give it to me, I want this, I want to feel unsafe and a bit worried."* But now that I'm thinking about it, I don't feel so strongly about it. *I can remember when the FOL lecturer chose my case study to discuss in the class. I freaked out, which scared them off, but they always kept it fairly safe. At work, this wouldn't be the case.* I mean, in the MBA, the shared goal was not to make people uncomfortable or *to make them feel safe* so that they could learn from their mistakes, but at work, it's neither so simple nor

straightforward. [looking at Bowman] I agree - it's like what work expects and what the MBA provides are distant and *we're sort of in the middle.*

Marina: I think telling people off when they are wrong is necessary, but it's also necessary to just be fair and not treat everyone as equals. *I learnt about the difference between a first-line employee and the boss. If I'm the boss and treat first-line employees from this viewpoint, I feel stronger, but they don't. So, I learnt this emotional intelligence here in the MBA.* But whether…

Bowman: Sorry to interrupt Marina. I know what you're saying. Like, I took it as a personal challenge to make sure that this person at work who I managed was well taken care of. *I provided everything that he needed from training through intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which of course I learnt here in the MBA, but where we work, opportunities to provide this to the team are limited and my initiatives don't go far.* So, I guess what I'm saying is that the MBA taught me how to create a safe environment for my team, but I don't know how to be safe myself. I'm not saying anything about treating employees and bosses differently.

Maddie: I don't think it's as bad with you both as it's with my boss's 'mindset'. *My boss believed he didn't want to know what standard business did because, as a business, they were special,* which suggests he knows what he's doing and right all the time, at least that's what he thinks. *But I see they're not special because 95% of the world's companies work in the same manner.* I think it's a difference of opinion between what you think is safe and unsafe and what your boss feels about it. Although I cannot undo the past, from this MBA I've certainly learnt to build my thinking around this potential issue of, [looking at Marina] *a first-line employee and the boss and how they are different and cannot be treated same.*

4.18 Safe *un*safe: playing politics

Melanie: I see now how *I got a better appreciation of what I saw on paper, experiencing with execs.*

Bowman: What do you mean?

Melanie: Like, *if it's just a difference of opinions, then I can see a noticeable difference in the way I now operate.* Look, it's up to us to create that safety at work, be it our team members or with our superiors. *I now look forward to my 6-monthly catch up with my boss to ask how I'm doing.* Until now, I've been craving to know how I've changed, but now I know. I made the effort. My boss didn't. [looking at Bowman] Unlike your subordinates - they didn't make efforts, you did.

Maddie: I'm not sure. I agree with Bowman. *I feel that people must come to work and do things that drive them. That's why I rejected my COO's* [Chief Operating Officer] *controlling attitude.* Maybe it's because I come from a freelance background where there's a real passion for work. So, I want to feel that sense of achievement and happiness that I did something cool today and feel good about myself. So, instead of fighting with my COO, I have now changed my way of thinking. *Now, I'm like, I want to go home feeling reinvigorated and excited for the next day and even though there will always be things that still tick over, it will not be draining, rather it'll be something that fuels me and my team's lives.* So, I just stopped focusing on what people make me feel. I just want my team to feel what I feel.

Marina: But then that means you're still unsafe, knowing that your boss isn't going to make any effort. *I'm a self-learner.* So, like you, *if I see such behaviour, I discount people and they lose their credibility in my eyes*. I ignore such people. But I don't think

ignorance has taught me anything about dealing with this issue of unsafety because I just stop acknowledging what they say. And I know this isn't the answer to this unsafe work environment. *I didn't find an answer in the MBA. So, now, it has just become a habit.* Even though *I'm still a very easy person to get along with*, I've developed my own way of making people safe and dealing with my unsafety at work. That I'll agree with.

Maddie: Maybe it doesn't teach you how to deal with unsafety, but I'm sure it helps you identify an unsafe work environment. For example, *FOL and MCO discussions made me notice how my CEO doesn't want people to do overtime, something that he's maintained through his message throughout.* This seems relatively safe because it shows that he cares about his employees' health, *but the unsafety is that he's never equipped himself with the tools to drive this message of no overtime.* People are still doing overtime. Now I know what *walking the talk* means. If he doesn't create an environment that prevents people from doing overtime, he hasn't built that safety in the work environment. He hasn't done his job. *My way of dealing with this is, I can talk to the cows till the cows come home, but when it comes to him it's like there's a headline and then the contents were missing.* There is not much to talk about.

Marina: Huh?

Maddie: It's like people know what they aren't supposed to do - yes you've told them that, but then given the nature of work if people don't work overtime, they won't finish their tasks in time. So, [looking at Marina] I didn't find this solution in our MBA either. *I just try to be a person who is in between.*

Bowman: I know it's not as clear and the MBA doesn't have all the answers but I think *it's also a little bit of give and take in the MBA.* For example, studying cases could help

us *experiment at work and see if what worked for others would work for us as well. But the readings that we read in the MBA that're supposed to help us with this experiment are <u>so complicated</u>* that it works adversely. I'm sure there's a much simpler way of writing these. *So, maybe that's just me, I don't know.* Maybe we're not learning the ways of knowing how we can apply what we read in case studies at work.

4.19 The frustrating issues of the MBA

4.19.1 Application of concepts

Marina: I think it's much to do with people studying the MBA and a problem with the MBA learning environment. For example, *I have a colleague who knows that she has learnt a lot about managing a business, but she hasn't been able to apply her learning in her start-up directly. She even forgot some basic accounting ideas.*

Bowman: Which is why learning to learn is the main point of education and I realise that now.

Marina: Well, I know what you mean but although it might appear as if she's at fault for not remembering her MBA learning, *I don't see this as much of her doing. I mean, what can you do if our MBA program or the lecturers* are *not concerned with students applying theories at work.*

Bowman: But I don't think there's a way for our lecturers to actually confirm whether we have applied our learning at work or not.

Maddie: I know what you're saying and maybe that's one of the reasons why we all feel this unsafety at work. But from what you just said, although *I know it's tough to keep up and sometimes the self-reflection part doesn't bring that out,* it could be just who she is and how she took it. I believe learning depends on the individual, but then I

can see your point that *the MBA is spread thinly from this aspect of keeping track of MBA students applying their learning at work*—how things are supposed to work versus how things are *actually* working.

Melanie: That's why *people shouldn't do an MBA just for the sake of doing it, and MBA lecturers shouldn't teach for the sake of it either.*

Bowman: I think the MBA shows you how you can understand people's performance through feedback and conversations. And I can do just that with my team—track their performance by having one-on-one conversations. Although the MBA taught me how I could establish *trust with my team and help them with their performance, this MBA didn't do the same for us* when it came to our superiors. Well, good feedback and trust, both are required.

Marina: It's quite simple for me. The MBA doesn't come cheap and *when you feel the lecturers or MBA programs, in general, aren't doing a good job, you get frustrated and lose a bit of interest in the course and so that resentment is still there.* It just feels that in the MBA program we don't practice what is taught. So, *that credibility is still missing.*

Salec interrupted.


**Act 1 Scene 5: The interruption.**

4.19.2 State of disequilibrium

Salec: Wait, wait, wait. I want to say something about this <u>safe thing</u> first before moving forward with what the MBA should or shouldn't do. So, who said that [momentary

silence – looking upward, snapping fingers a few times] that his MBA peers did not put him in an uncomfortable situation and that he was able to explore those forbidden things in his MBA, who said that?

Bruce: Oh, you mean Bowman, when he just talked for long…

Salec: Yeah, yeah, Bowman. By the way, I know all these four. We're all in the same class.

Bruce: Oh yes, I remember, I observed that class.

Salec: So, you know that's not true for everyone that the MBA is entirely safe? As you would have observed in class, *you would have seen how I like to throw bombs*.

Bruce: Oh yeah. I remember. It was funny.

Salec: [in a stern voice] it's not about being funny. *I like to occasionally needle people just to get a response.* I don't necessarily believe what I'm saying every time, but then I add some heat. Doing these sorts of things, I try to replicate the workplace environment in MBA. *I try to get up to that state of productive disequilibrium.*

Bowman: So, you remember adaptive leadership from FOL.

Salec: Of course, I do. It's important to have that correct balance between discomfort and overwhelm. That's how workplaces really are.

Kristine: I guess if you didn't do these things, you might just end up staying very siloed, very narrow. And if that's the case, why would we bother doing that.

Salec: Yes, and you can't afford that. *I used to be very siloed, but then I realised no one kept a check on me.* I had to do it myself, which is why I can't just sit and let a lecture pass. I've called out people in the middle of a class, *just saying they don't have any*

*traction and no one's paying any attention to what they're saying*. Just to let them taste how it feels at work and instigate those work experiences.

Bruce: Really, you do that?

Salec: Yes, *isn't this how work operates? You get blamed for things and people get hyper defensive. It's important to try often to drive that heat, but maybe I'm not all that good at taking the heat myself. No one in my MBA did that to me, so I don't know.* And that's where I see the MBA being very theoretical and not so much about application.

### 4.19.3 A gap in expectations

Selina: You know what, *we millennials work in a very different way. We expect very different things out of it.* I think that's the reason behind such thinking.

Bruce: What do you mean?

Selina: [looking at Salec] I'm frustrated with 50-year-old theories. *I just cannot relate those to what I'm doing at my workplace.* None of that came through in the MBA. Just attending lectures and feeling safe all the time, *it's really traditional, like the panopticon view,* where you can see everyone and, you know cubicles and offices. And I'm sure that's not how Millennials learn. [turning towards Salec] I think needling people works well because modern cases from the last 20 years don't relate well with how Millennials operate. *We are a very traditional sort of MBA student, very strutted, full of swagger.*

Karolina: There's certainly a difference between why people sign up for an MBA and where they're at the end of it. This is the breadth of an MBA. But I still see this learning as an individual's responsibility and *they're the ones to be blamed for not learning.*

Selina: Look, *even though I'm only here to learn, I didn't get what I wanted*. I wasn't pushed harder, maybe needling would've worked.

Karolina: Only *if there could be some sort of mechanism to have that conversation with candidates on how they got there, what was their thought process, what research did they do, what kind of theories they looked at, what they discount* and don't look at or leave out -[speaking slowly ever word]*a step-by-step process to find out how we'll reach there.* And that's the learning - what worked well and what didn't work well. This needs to happen at an individual level. It occurs in some classes, but then passengers are ever increasing.

Bruce: I think that's what those four were saying as well, especially Melanie.

Selina: Maybe. [looking at Karolina] you can say that yes, but then again, *the whole problem lies with this idea of thinking differently.* You can suggest an MBA should do that, but I find the *issue is more to do with you coming out of a sausage factory* where everyone thinks the same. And it happened to some degree in this MBA.

Bruce: I'm not following you. You mean?

Selina: I mean, *I used to work in innovations, you have to think differently.* But then the MBA degree is a factory. It cannot claim to teach innovation. That's my issue with it. *This has diminished the impact of the MBA. That's why I don't think the value is there.*

Salec: [looking at Selina] There is no right or wrong answer to it. *It's just about encouraging that thinking of innovation, of thinking differently.* So, there've been times with some of my staff where I've been a bit more casual. If *they were annoyed at something, I just brushed them aside by saying, "deal with it."* Now, that's casual. *I*

*mean systems are complex and sometimes you'll mess up. This doesn't mean that you can't think differently.* You can't just blame the whole degree like that.

Selina: OK, I'll give you an example - have you heard about the marshmallow challenge?

Bruce: What's that?

Selina: *So, you have 30 sticks of spaghetti and you get a metre of sticky tape and a metre of twine and a marshmallow and you've to build the tallest tower. If it falls over, then obviously you haven't done very well and you only have 18 minutes to complete it. It's very scientifically designed.*

Bruce: That sounds interesting!

Selina: Well interesting or not, *if you read about it, you'll l find that the MBAs don't do very well at it.* This is because they all think in a very structured way. ; *Kindergarteners, however, are the best because they experiment. They test things. They might eat the marshmallow halfway through…*

Everyone laughs, except Selina.

Selina: *…but they kind of play around with it.* I think, as an MBA student, that's not necessarily what you get. And that's what I mean by an MBA being a factory claiming to teach innovation, but it doesn't.

Karolina: I think it's not so different from what I've learnt in our MBA. *It's more about working out who they are, what they need, what their needs really are to get them where you need them to be so that everyone is comfortable. That's what I can do at my*

*workplace.* Are you suggesting that we're supposed to do this, but then our MBA doesn't teach us this?

Selina: I don't know Karolina. My head aches thinking about this. How I see our MBA is lecturers continually telling me, "here are some theories, learn these theories, I'm going to assess you on them." We would have [speaking slowly] probably applied the theory once and that's it. The subjects are too theoretical. What will I do with these theories that're so important in our MBA, *when they don't mean anything to me, when I cannot relate them to anything?* And what I'm saying is - this is a frustrating issue for me.

Selina's frustration was evident in the way she spoke. She broadened her eyes with heavy breathing. It was like she was asking for answers and no one there was giving them to her. Karolina understood but before she could say anything...

Kristine: I'd never really thought about them like this. *I can see why an MBA* program *keeping track of its candidates would only bring positives.*

Selina: Talking with you all, I think it's definitely about the individual. As you'll keep saying *you can teach 40 different people the same thing and they all can come with a different lens on it.* I don't see it that way. For me, it's more like *they've learnt a lot or nothing at all, which is why some people love FOL and some people hate it. I didn't like it, but it's just that I understand how it's about being able to consciously practice what you learn and take it back to work and just apply it.* Still, the problem is that this MBA is safe and you don't get judged, it's a controlled environment as those four MBAs said. But at work the learning needs to be very specific because you don't have that controlled learning environment at work. So, it's always tricky at work to dive in. It's not like "yes, I have learnt a theory and now I can apply it at work."

Salec: *There's been stuff that I've thought has come out of the MBA that I wouldn't have even considered*, but I can see your reasoning.

Selina: Well, on a positive note, *I'm hoping my final trimester project will be a game changer and will change a lot of my feelings there.*

Bruce: Maybe in the final year project you need to disarm yourself…

Before Bruce could finish his sentence, came the chorus, "no more, no more about disarming, we know." All laughed.

Bruce: Well, this was fun. Are you all going to stay longer? I might go now.

Selina: [with a smirk on her face] Well, it's fun, a costly bit of fun though [lifting up shoulders], I mean our MBA.

Bruce: [smiling] OK. I'm leaving now. See you all on campus or the MBA get together next week if you're there.

In chorus [See ya]. Bruce exits the Café.

### Act 2 Scene 1: An MBA Conference - the guest speakers.

A week passed; Bruce wrote his reflections on the discussions that took place in the café. Now, he has just reached the MBA conference venue, hoping to see some of the MBA students in the audience.

Announcer: Today, we're going to welcome our four MBA students as today's guest speakers. One has 20 years to bridge since she finished her MBA. The second is a freshman in our MBA and the last two are best friends and are into the second half of

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their MBA journey as full-time MBA candidates. I'm sure this is going to be an exciting discussion. [looking at the guest speakers] This debate is about you, your perspectives and what worked for you and what didn't. It's about finding what an MBA is for you, individually. How many faces does an MBA have, what have you learnt, what issues did you face and so on? Let this be the moment of truth, if there is something like that. [everyone chuckles] But whether you want this to be a heated or a friendly discussion on the value of the MBA, I'll leave that up to you. So, without any further ado, I'd like to welcome Vonnie, Charing, Graisam and Halim.

All applaud. All four take their respective seats.

Announcer: So, each of our four guests will talk about their MBA journey and then we'll open the floor for discussion. So, let's begin with Vonnie. The stage is all yours.

All applaud.

4.20 Inception: stereotypes—stories within stories leading to an MBA

Vonnie: Thank you, everyone, for joining us today. I graduated in 2000 and it was *a very different kind of world. I was happy being a nutritionist in the 1990s, but I didn't see much of a future running a nutritionist department. I wanted some challenges to feel enthusiastic, but I felt contrived instead.* I was bored. When this became apparent, I started looking for other jobs. Now, you'll must be thinking "well that's common" and everyone probably has gone through something like this in their lives. But for me, *I became very stereotyped in that role.* People were *like "when you are a nutritionist, why are you looking at other jobs?"* I felt stereotyped in this very female oriented role and that's when I got frustrated with people asking me questions about what I was doing. "Why would I be looking at something else?" This was when I started looking at other

options and one of them was to do an MBA. *I felt like I had to have that piece of paper. I was getting disillusioned by talking to people about their diet in a hospital setting.* And I thought this piece of paper would get me out of here. Given my nature back then, *if I decided to do something, I was just going to get on with it.* I didn't deliberate much. I know it's not always the wisest thing to do, but that's who I was. *I was so rigid and an I-know-what-I-want kind of person and that's why I didn't even speak to anybody about I doing an MBA.* I was just like I needed to break out of the stereotype and secure some leadership-type roles, *broadening the leadership experience that I'd gained from managing a nutrition department for a while.* And the other thing was I wanted to do something management wise. *My sister-in-law had done an MBA and I felt that was the business world. I was like, "how could I get into the business world." I just felt excluded from it.* I wanted to get this piece of paper to get my own identity and not just be a nutritionist for life. *So, that's why I said, most people were like me, looking for their next opportunity, but then I was different* because I just wanted to break the stereotype and an MBA was the one thing that would give me that confidence. So, that was the start of my MBA journey.

Everyone applauded. Vonnie passed the microphone to Charing.

Charing: Thank you, Vonnie. Thank you, everyone, for being here. My name is Charing. I'm an international student. And the reason I'm pointing this out is because *even though I've been working for over a decade in Australia, I still see differences between how I do things and how Australians do them.* I struggle to work and study in an Australian setting. *And, as my background is Asian,* I found everything different. *It's like, how you deal with people?* They're *so different, how you manage time, how you discuss things and how you are with others? It's all so different.* Even spending more than 9 years, I'm still not clear about the Australian way of doing things. *I believe in the core values I*

*gained growing up* and, like, *it's a bad thing if you talk back to your parents, but in Australia, I've seen people talk back to their parents.* So, I know I'm like this because I've spent all these years in my home environment and I'm used to my own culture and so, my values come from what I was told, what I've always seen and done in my life. But here, working in a university, *I saw how in my work I was required to understand the operations of the school and how different schoolwork was* and how I was supposed to work there. Amid all these changes, *I thought that I couldn't make suggestions because they were different* even though I wanted to. So, I was unable to share my opinions. *So, I decided that I should know more about what they do, people I work with, and what I could do to manage things.* So, I started working closely with my school manager and [with animated voice] you know, "*these newsletters you get in your email.*"

All laughed.

Charing: *That's how I found that an MBA is more about management, about business and how you manage it. That's how I thought I could try to figure out my motivations. A Bachelor degree is nothing to be proud of in my culture, it's just the basic, but getting an MBA is high level and it's all about learning.* So, I thought [pausing for a brief moment] "*I'm open to learning and I must go and do an MBA.*" Then my family's background - most of them have higher education. *My father has a master degree. My sister back home has a double degree. Even my relatives have a good educational background. I don't value education just for the degree, just for that piece of paper, I value it for learning for self. Education is the best way to find these things.* I wanted to gain more knowledge and satisfy my need for learning *so that my family would feel nice and I could look for another career. It's like I've always looked at others and asked myself "what should I do? Where should I go?"* Then I found an MBA and I knew this was where I should go.

Everyone applauded and then came Graisam.

Graisam: *It's not easy to be away from your family. At least that's what I slowly noticed in my life.* Graduating with a science degree from an Asian country and then with a finance degree from another part of the world, *I've held several high-level positions and was paid quite handsomely over many years. I spent a luxurious life and had a perfect lifestyle. But then I decided to give it all up to do something different.* You all must be wondering why I would do that. Well, it's like my whole life story actually connects directly to why I started my MBA journey. *I generally thought that most people who take up an MBA want to either get promoted or gain economic benefit. I had both an emotional reason and a professional one. After a long time, I saw my family and it just made me realise how all this luxury is a waste if I can't be with them. One of my family members suggested that I do a 1-year course and an MBA would be the best choice. It would fulfil the requirement to get me permanent residency in Australia. That's how I started thinking about it.* It was important to secure my residency status in Australia if I needed to live with my family. *Then I reflected on my work environment and I saw how it was more about making economic gains and being disconnected and disengaged from customers.* We held different values. The organisation I worked for *was focused on financial gains, while I wanted to keep client centricity at the top to discuss and brainstorm things internally.* I wanted to talk about client growth and then company growth. But then that wasn't the case. *Without any holistic, systematic analysis, we push our products to clients and assure them that it perfectly matches their needs, which it doesn't.* I even had an altercation when my colleague tried to push the product when I said to the client, "*you know other products are much better suited to you than what we are offering.*" So, this added to my decision to go to Australia and study an MBA, to get away from all this [momentary pause] luxury.

Everyone applauded and Halim got the microphone.

Halim: It's a big risk that Graisam took. I know him. He's my friend. But like him, I took a risk too. *In 2016, we had a newborn and so I was trying to find a job for a better career, better income to feed my family and meet the end needs*. Although I had extensive experience, I tried to find a better income and a high position to have a stable career. *I'd already worked in multiple research industries, like automotive, finance, banking, media, FMCG* [Fast Moving Consumer Goods] *and health care, and this made recruiters quite interested in my background.* But when I looked at different job ads, *I saw that most companies specifically mentioned the MBA, of course not as mandatory but for added value.* Although I always thought that being a specialist will be better, like Master *of Accounting or Master of Data Analytics, the MBA just stood out.* It would not only include specialist knowledge but also give me some general understanding about how my work contributes to other areas in my organisation and vice-versa. That's why I was eager to achieve an MBA as my next goal,  to fulfil recruitment criteria. I must say it wasn't a hasty decision. *I read the news and a few articles, even alumni testimonials on the MBA*. I thought that an MBA could change my career like it changed their careers, and their perspectives.

*I even read how an IT* [information technology] *manager could become a management consultant by doing an MBA. All this convinced me to return to studying and leave my job in Indonesia* [anonymised]. An MBA was going to give me opportunities to be whatever I want to be. *It was like Aladdin's lamp, you know. I wanted to pursue my FMCG industry career, like at Unilever, Coca Cola or Pepsi in management or a brand marketing role.* But then my lack of knowledge in how to promote a brand or how to advertise a brand made me establish my career elsewhere. *When I read all this about the MBA, I thought that I could learn how to make customers buy my product and brand*

*my product into the customer's mind.* It was like a <u>wow</u> moment for me. *Looking at the title Master of Business Administration, I got sold on this idea that an MBA would enable me to learn the overall business context, like marketing, finance or maybe leadership.* I understood this title would give me an overview of business knowledge, which would help me make my career choices. It was like an MBA would decide the career I chose. I was sold on this idea that an MBA would give me what other degrees wouldn't. So, yeah, that's my story.

All applaud.

Announcer: Thank you for your introductions and about your decisions to pursue an MBA. You all had your views before you started an MBA and you had your reasons but among all the reasons, getting that piece of paper was essential to all of you. So now, I want to ask you what happened in your MBA? Did you get what you thought you would get from your MBA, from that piece of paper?

4.21 A Bachelor *vs.* an MBA: is it different or isn't it?

Halim: First, it's not so straightforward to describe this. But I can assure you, an *MBA is different.* For example, *in my Bachelor, I didn't need to prepare myself before entering the class.* I could just join and sit and listen to lecturers, *but I just can't learn anything if I don't prepare in the MBA.* I understood why I would need to give my best and why an MBA is not just about that piece of paper, but it's all about *investing time and money, in being responsible for myself.* The challenge is, *this isn't explicit. You just come to terms with it when you start your MBA.*

Vonnie: *You know what, it's easy. I mean no doubt it's competitive, but it's all just laid out there, to be honest.* You talk about dissimilarity between a Bachelor and an MBA.

Maybe now there is, but to me, *it felt very much like my undergraduate experience. Apart from the fact that we were all mature people, there was a broad spectrum and definitely, it was more diverse*, it felt very much *set on a lecture room*. We listened to someone at the front. It wasn't significantly different. And people don't overly talk about all this when it comes to discussing the MBA.

Halim: This could be the way 20 years back, but an MBA is *definitely* a superior degree now. There're no two ways about it. In my MBA, first, *I was assigned a mentor, which doesn't happen in a Bachelor. Second, lecturers* were from industry—*some with private experience, some from the government sector and some who had their own business before they started teaching. It's a big difference when an industry expert talks about accounting or finance people's perspectives versus an undergrad non-industry lecturer.* Third, the approach is so different from how it was taught to how you learn. In the MBA, *I learnt so much from my classmates.* You see practical, real-life issues and then your peers are very active. They ask questions, give comments and feedback. *Students themselves are professionals with a lot of experience. The classes are more liveable. They pushed me to talk at least slightly,* which is so different from a Bachelor where you just come, sit and listen. The only similarity that I see is that *you get theories and neither MBA nor Bachelor students want that,* atleast not among the ones I know.

Graisam: [looking at Vonnie] I agree that an MBA is easy, but then I'm afraid I have to disagree with its comparison with a Bachelor. *To be comfortable, you need to know what you want from it* and I see a big difference between an undergrad and the MBA education. Before coming to Australia, *I had a few friends who had either done an MBA or were in the process of doing it at that time,* and I was able to see the difference in their pre-and post-MBA selves. *I worked with my colleague on the same team. She had to quit her job to continue studying her MBA. So, I always thought that an MBA was*

*expensive and hard, and I could not do it without quitting my job. So, it's not easy for everyone. And in undergrad for that matter, I mean you don't read so many articles. In MBA, I read articles, especially when I started FOL—although I'm naturally resistant to reading academic articles and that's why I think I couldn't get the best from FOL, which is a shame, but then I got much better in the Systems Thinking class. I started reading the Harvard Business Review literally every day* and started finding it very interesting. It just boosted my confidence, something that I <u>did not</u> find in undergrad.

Vonnie: Well, our MBA degrees are from different times, but I agree, *it does boost your confidence and I think it does change your views on things* as well.

4.22 Thinking outside the box

Charing: But Graisam, FOL was all about you. *It was like a psychology class where I learnt how some things will always be mismanaged and that I shouldn't think that I've learnt enough. I learnt so much from others - to not make mistakes and value this learning more than as just technology.* And it's like this because it's all about people. *I learnt how to dig deeper about myself and confront my established values. Yes, it was very confronting as it was all about* [moving head back and forth] *why, why, why, but then it became so personal for me and I had to take a step-by-step approach* to take down the person I was in the end. I just enjoyed learning about myself and knowing why I do different things. I mean, how can you not learn?

Graisam: *I know it's strange that I did FOL right at the start of my MBA journey when I was actually struggling to settle in Australia both mentally and physically.* And as you said, my classmates told me that *FOL was by far the most enjoyable subjects they'd done in their MBA, but I couldn't fully devote myself to studying* FOL. [shaking his head sideways] It was just too soon for me to enrol and no one helped me understand this.

Halim: Yeah, you should've done it way later.

Charing: I don't think so. You should always do FOL right at the start.

Halim: But *it's essential to be at a hundred percent because FOL is all about critical thinking* and developing this competency to ask better questions. *Now I can see that sense of importance* [speaking slowly] *that need to think from all aspects.* Like, if you're not fully there, you may only look from just two views, *like for me it was me and my client's, that's it.* But FOL made me think outside the box, *investigate the box from all perspectives and integrally enhance the importance of this to myself.* [turning towards Charing] Yes, it's all about yourself and it brought me to that sense of importance.

Charing: *I know and maybe that difference others wouldn't see*, but it has impacted my overall thinking. *It's like every 3 weeks, you write an assignment of 750 or 2,000 words. How can you not learn*? Working in the finance sector, *these words are just too many for me to write. But just by doing it, <u>again and again</u>, it helped me a lot, even to the extent that my manager notices that now I speak up more.* Now I don't do things thinking I'm right. *I just do it because this is what needs to be done.* That's it. FOL just changes you.

Halim: Aand people notice this change. I'll give you an example. *During a case consultation in FOL, I shared an example of one of my American ex-colleagues with my MBA group. It was like how that ex-colleague wasn't willing to learn more because he didn't perform well and no matter how much I tried to help him by sharing my knowledge and training him, his performance didn't get any better. And I outright blamed him for this.* But then in FOL, my peers said *it's entirely possible that I played safe* [pointing right hand index finger at self] and put the blame on him when it might've been my fault. So, the point is, it's not about whose fault it was, *it's about how I didn't*

*see it from the viewpoint that I could be the one creating the problem.* I just discovered that unintentionally that I blame people so that I'm safe. So, that's what thinking outside the box from all perspective is for me. You change. Yes, you do.

Announcer: These are some exciting ideas. Let's open the floor for everyone.

**Act 2 Scene 2: A Debate.**

4.23 Challenges:

4.23.1 The rights and wrongs

Halim: I just want to say that I think the problem lies with people who're doing an MBA. It's up to them if they want to change.

Vonnie: Yeah OK. But if they are highly experienced executives, then that's different. Here, I'm talking about people with aspirations, *but who are not quite in the leadership position.*

Halim: OK, but irrespective of who they are, people need to understand that you need to work together with peers and meet people who can share their views from different industries. *How to say it ... it's like twinning, like gathering with each other; like a network.*

Vonnie: That is just a sheer expectation and nothing else. I mean yes, *you do an MBA and you prioritise learning, you listen and really the networking is possible, but then you don't just stick with a little group, you have to spread yourself across and then form friendship groups.* There's a difference. Unlike networking, you form a friendship group *without thinking about the possibility where they would be going to be in future.* You

just form bonds and become friends not because you want something in return. We have to be genuine in those connections. *Sorry, but I've seen people think that you're just there to kind of use them, but it's not going to go very far.* So, yes, it's very much about people but then what kind?

Someone from the audience raises a hand.

Announcer: Yes, Ms…

Karolina: Karolina. Hi everyone. So, I'm about to finish my MBA and *there's such a cross-section of people doing it. It's like older people, younger people who've barely just done their undergraduate degree and people who've been engineers and want to change careers.* So, there're so many people and so many different pathways that you have to choose. And when you choose, you have an agenda. So, it's not so much about being genuine. *It's more about* [momentary pause – looing upward]*, we should continue to catch up and continue these conversations that we're having about how we develop.* I think *giving other people a level of comfort and confidence in what you're doing is one thing, but then finding ways to persuade them to show them what's right for them is entirely different.* It depends on you as a person, not something that a degree would teach you. It wouldn't tell you what's right and what's wrong nor would it tell you anything about your morals or ethics.

Vonnie: Yes, it doesn't. It doesn't facilitate the rights and the wrongs. When I say genuine, *it's like you see a doctor, you can't tell whether a doctor is telling you the right thing. You just <u>have to</u> put your trust in them. But when it comes to an MBA, a shared belief system, that's all we have. We make that leap of faith*. That's how the world works and it's the only way we can make sense of what's the right thing to do. *But then,* as you would know *MBAs and doctors are hugely different, so, trust gets eroded when we*

*see people fabricating things and they often come back to bite us really*, more often than not, and the MBA doesn't *really* cover all that.

Charing: I disagree a little. I mean, *the MBA made me understand that the system is also about understanding people and not just the budgets, not just the money or the operations* but also about people.

Another hand raised from the audience.

Bowman: I think Charing has a point here. I'm Bowman and I'm currently doing my MBA. I think the MBA's value is *learning about yourself, your abilities, capabilities, weaknesses, vulnerabilities and how I can use all this in a business in a leadership context.* But we need more people in the world who think similar to what Charing said. Only then they can make work a better place.

Graisam: Well, of course, but then I think there'll always be dishonesty when you work for organisations. *You see products might not fulfil a client's requirement, but you still push those to them.* I left my job because I always thought that the client comes first, but then through my MBA, *I understood and jumped out of my comfort zone and challenged myself* to accept others' perspectives. But then, just because I accepted, *it doesn't mean I have to be like that, so I decided against changing my character. It wasn't the MBA, but I thought I'd be at fault if I continue working for a longer time.* It my morals, my ethics that I just decided that after I finish my MBA, *I'd go back to the back-end work that I did earlier, which is not client focused.* So, no more dishonesty with the clients.

Melanie: Hi, this is Melanie, another MBA student. *I think these are quite narrow perceptions, but* I agree with Graisam *that it's all about me. It's up to me - I need to*

*ensure that I know what I want to get out of myself in the MBA, instead of using the MBA to inform me what I'll get out of it.* I hope you know what I mean - it's not about what the MBA would give me. It's what I want and what I'll get from it.

Halim: That's why an MBA is not so straightforward, Melanie. This is not narrow. *All these interactive discussions that we have in the MBA, where you can ask questions and the lecturers opine and then some classmates join in the debate* like we're doing now and then maybe show their disagreement as we have shown. It's not so different from what I found in the MBA. *We're only human and we cannot be a hundred percent correct. So, we need someone else to correct us or maybe give us another perspective.* At some level, it happened in the MBA, but then we're on our own to decide what's right and what's wrong, *MBA doesn't really tell you this in any way* and that's why you're needed to think outside the box and see the same problem from another perspective.

Charing: But I did that Halim and it didn't work for me. Okay, I agree that we're only humans and that *we're from different cultural backgrounds and so everyone is careful about what they say,* so we don't make others uncomfortable. *But I'd no idea what to say.* As you noted another person's perspective, *I continued doing just what everyone was doing to understand their perspective, but then I really didn't know what everyone was doing. You cannot just start understanding others' perspectives until you know them. So, I just sat in my MBA classes and then thought for self-improvement.* I did that. No one told me to do it.

4.23.2 an shared unspoken belief

Vonnie: But then the question is, as <u>Masters of</u> Business Administration, what do we stand for? *Look at the world and we keep coming back to economic gains.* I think

*focusing on people is the right thing to do.* But then, the MBA programs have become more-or-less sort of go-to degrees for people who more-or-less think about economic gains. And the important part is that *it's like a shared belief system across the community.* It dawned on me that we all believe and we carry this perception of the MBA programs that it'll tell us about this [speaking slowly] honesty and dishonesty and right and wrong, and *people don't look past that. They just see an MBA as the endpoint.* This narrow mindedness has created *this belief that from an MBA a great leader will emerge.* But it doesn't work that way. The MBA programs are not designed to make you leaders. That's not where the value is.

Charing: Well, if I don't see value in something, there's no reason for me to continue. I see value in my MBA. *I might not be able to tell you what it is and its level, but I know the value of an MBA for myself.* MCO and FOL showed me what I want to learn and continuously learn and give my best. *This sort of learning made me humble in my approach. I've accepted that the more I learn and think that I know, the more I realise that I don't know anything and there's much to learn.* But that's coming from an MBA perspective. Isn't this how leaders think?

Graisam: I agree with both of you in this matter. [looking at Charing] I agree with your perspectives because *earlier I used to look at everything through a scientific lens. Now, coming so far in my MBA journey, I can pick some real case scenarios and look for open-ended answers to questions, which is different from how science works.* I've found this intrinsic personal value, it's an internal thing—and as you said I couldn't tell you what it is, but I know this: *I might forget all the things I've been taught in my MBA 5– 10 years down the line, of course, depending on my memory power, but the parts, the angles, the different ends, the perspectives that I never looked at previously will remain with me.* It's about the conversations that I had with my peers, lecturers and industry

experts during my time in the MBA. Those taught me something about myself. So, as time goes by, the taught content might fade away, but my reflections and experiences will stay forever with me. [turning towards Vonnie] But then you have a point too when you talk about how it's all about economic gain. I left my job because I didn't want to frustrate myself. So, I didn't put these two things together - *first, my character that I can't change and second that this organisation is doing business just for economic gain* and not so much to empower their employees and evaluating the rights and the wrongs. But then in the MBA, *I learnt that I have to accept both of these. I understood why those people were doing business in their own way. I was able to connect between the academic and the real world.* But then it's my choice whether I accept to work in such an environment. An MBA wouldn't tell me that. It doesn't tell me what company is right for me, what work culture I should aim to work in.

Vonnie: Yes, and you're talking from your perspective because you think in this manner. But if your MBA doesn't tell you that and it's all about your initiative, *what about those who pursue an MBA thinking and believing that they'd be professionals* at the end of it*?* Why do we think or believe that?

Another hand raised from the audience.

4.24 The MBAs' preferences

Selina: Hi, I'm Selina. I'm another MBA student and we were discussing this the other day. A part of the value that I understood going into an MBA was that *I would be learning from industry experts*. But that's where I was wrong. They weren't necessarily industry experts. So, I get your point Vonnie when you say "why do we believe them." Well, you can't because not all who teach in MBA are industry experts.

Vonnie: In a way, yes. As you went in thinking this, many carry the same thinking and when we pull this apart, *we find* how it's just our belief that only because *they've been at it for several years—those professional people would know what the MBA students should learn.* So, we start trusting them. In the process, when the students graduate, *people start trusting MBAs that they know what they're doing* because they think MBAs are taught by people who know. *On the one hand, as individuals, we can't know everything, but then, on the other hand, there's a lot of trust that we put in.*

Selina: I don't want to debate this. I did it a lot last week, sorry Vonnie. *I've nothing against academics, but some of my lecturers were purely academics and it was very difficult to learn from them because they'd no real experience.* I don't mean they don't have industry experience, what I mean is, they're not currently in the field. *Although there's that little bit more of the case study kind of thing that went in the MBA, it was still very theoretical with pure academics and as* you said Halim, "*we don't want theory anyway.*"

Halim: I didn't mean we don't need it completely, Selina, but then like *my MBA classmates who were general managers, directors, managers, we need to learn from our MBA lecturers' vast experience, their professional background.* And for me this is important. *I got that from a few of my lecturers because they're able to tell me what was happening in their company and their industry, and that's what I put my trust in.*

Selina: I think that's why my experience was quite inconsistent. I put the trust in them thinking something else, but then *they weren't necessarily* who I thought they'd be. *So, I couldn't trust them wholly.*

Vonnie: That's why *when you see a doctor, you can't tell whether the doctor is telling you the right thing, you just have to put the trust in them.* But then *my quarrel with this*

*unspoken belief is that nowadays, many people use that piece of paper to justify that they're right. As they get their MBA degree, they use it to justify their knowledge.* That's where the problem is. It's very much possible that they might be justifying what they don't have.

Another hand raised in the audience.

Salec: Hi, Vonnie, that's a great example. I'm Salec, an MBA student. And I keep saying to everyone "*even though you're extremely engaged, what are we here for?" I dropped out of a few MBA courses and lost a lot of my time because the lecturers weren't really making me see the practical learning.* As you said, it was all theory. *I'm here to get the growth, both personal and professional that I really want to leverage off and not to just get that piece of paper at the end of it.* So, yes it matters who teaches you in an MBA. It matters.

Graisam: I don't know about that. I don't know what courses you dropped but it's quite certain that those same courses *made me understand my struggles better, made me see how my values were not in line with what I was doing* and how my company always exaggerated things and over-promised things. And some of those lecturers weren't in the field. Yes, they had vast experience, but then they were pure academics. *It depends on whether you trust them because they are practitioners* doing the same thing they're teaching you every day at work *or because they show you the learning path.* As I said, I could see the connection to the real-world learning from these pure academic. So, I can't agree or disagree with you on this.

## 4.25 Unclear message

Vonnie: And that comes back to my original comment about *how we can talk about theory and training. I say it's the how-to that matters more*, and [turning towards Graisam] if *you are an MBA, you can neither wholly agree nor disagree with these views. I mean let's be clear here, we put everyone in a box [smirking] OK. My question is, don't we miss how we see the world?* You're talking about seeing the connection between the academic and the real world. *I don't see this connection. Instead, I see a disconnect and it has much to do with business schools sending the wrong messag*e. Like, *having ASX* [Australian Stock Exchange] *information right when you walk into a building*.

Graisam: I don't know about that. What I do know is that I've learnt this in MBA—*I make connections, I've started to open myself up through reflections and now I feel like everything is connected. I'm not religious, but I go to church. I don't want to create any conflict here, but religious teachings conflict with my scientific knowledge. I failed to understand that failure is connected to a call.* Then the *Systems Thinking class triggered something deep in my heart and totally changed how I look at the world.* I started seeing the connection between religion and science. *But it's tough to explain.* It's just sometime during my MBA, my 'mindset' changed.

Vonnie: Yes, but *this isn't the message that MBA programs or business schools are sending to the community. As I said, I can't help but think walking into* one business school's *building where you see* electronic information on current *ASX right as you enter. I mean, who cares about those things. What about people? Shouldn't we be talking about what's leadership. Is it all about profit? I know it gives that kind of a feel like,* [in animated voice]*"ooh, this is corporate, this is the money in the town", but*

*business schools don't care.* It has just remained a side issue and it's sending the entirely wrong message around. *It's just that the more we think about money, the less we think about people and the right thing to do.*

Graisam: I can see your point. When I started MCO, *I thought the business development manager had interpreted the company's slogan incorrectly and was actually focused more on the economic side of his dealing with clients,* while I was only client centric. But then in the MBA, *I learnt that in the real world—his and others like him—their performance would depend purely on how a business performs and how many deals they can close.* So, it wasn't so much about my incorrect interpretation. It was just a choice that he made - a different one to mine.

Vonnie: And that's the message - not about choice but economic gain.

Halim: You both just made me realise why my family, although unaware of what an MBA is, *changed their perspective towards me after learning that I'm pursuing an MBA.* [turning towards Vonnie] I agree with both your sentiments and arguments. Once my family knew about my decision to pursue an MBA, *they assumed an MBA—being an expensive course—would bring higher job prospects. That it'd be an added value to employers and make them treat me differently in terms of the package.* I mean salary and other benefits. It highlights that the MBA notion is so seamlessly integrated with economic gain that it has become a global message. So, yeah, probably you're right when you say, "it's all about money and not much about people." And it wasn't only my family that changed. *When my ex-boss found out that I'm enrolled in an MBA, even though he had someone managing the international division, he still wanted to appoint me as the country manager to oversee those offices. He even went to the extent of contacting my wife and requested she convince me to accept the offer.* He didn't do all

this because he thought I'd be good with people, but because *if I came back, I would contribute more to the company economically.* So, maybe that's the message that everybody gets, that an MBA is all about money and this ASX thing that you're saying is just the visible version of this message.

Charing: But I still think *it depends on the people.* People who pursue an MBA just to position themselves as tools for making organisations wealthier—that's the value of an MBA for them. They may not recognise learning has anything to do with their decision to pursue an MBA because that's not what they want from it. Of course, *if this is what people think an MBA gives, their behaviour would be a product of such a 'mindset'.*

Graisam: Of course, it's about people and much more than money. I don't think that's what Vonnie means. [momentary pause] OK, do you know how we all have to prepare for our social enterprise project, the one that we do in our last semester?

Charing: Yeah.

Graisam: *I started working towards making a shopper's experience meaningful. At the same time, others I know focused on increasing sales and marketing for their companies.* So, *if I reformed my thinking to look at the world as a whole and everything within it as interconnected parts, it doesn't mean everyone will.* Yes, it's an individual choice and I agree with you, but Vonnie's point is more to do with the MBA programs or business schools only focusing on and communicating one side of their MBA and not the other.

4.26 The authoritative voice

Vonnie: Look, *I don't have the data on this, but there're probably multiple reasons why they're doing it. I assume that most people are like me—we're looking for the next*

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*opportunity. So, in that sense, I'd think that they'd probably be fairly open to what's presented and that they have an open mind. But I doubt that the course is pushing them enough. People come here because an MBA gives them an authoritative voice, which they think they need for their next opportunity.* People have this perception that the MBAs know what they're talking about and that's the trust that people put in an MBA degree. *And that's why many people use that piece of paper to justify that they're right just because they fought for it.* But then I don't believe you get that from doing an MBA.

Halim: *Well, some employers value work experience over education and they don't really care if you have a PhD or an MBA or a Bachelor degree for that matter. But then, companies such as McKinsey, Boston Consulting Group, Deloitte, PWC all know the value of having an MBA degree and see it as a value add.* So, that's what the trust is, the value added.

Charing: I don't know what's all this fuss about. I already have a Bachelor degree in Accounting. *For me, the MBA was a step up as I struggled to deal with people in the Australian setting. To some extent, I got a lot of new ideas on how to deal with people, but then I also found that the MBA is literally about business administration. I've set a goal for running a business in an Australian setting*, just because of this 'mindset'. But it's a long-term goal. So, *I've chosen working in finance as a services and operations manager.* There's an opportunity to learn so many things. Whether it gives that authoritative voice or not, that's a different matter.

Vonnie: *I know people like to brand themselves.* This mentality also originated from MBA culture. *But I always wonder if that's how society is anyway.*

Charing: Oh, no, no, no. That's not what I meant. *I'm sure you'll agree that there's a way of doing things, like analysis, critical thinking and academic preferences. I identify*

*my MBA as a higher degree for learning and not so basic* as undergraduate degrees.. What I'm trying to say that *I don't have to leave the finance domain to use what I'm learning in the MBA.*

Vonnie: No matter what you say, *I don't believe in my heart of hearts that it gives you that real <u>how-to</u> to understand a business problem.*

Halim: I think I know what you mean, but then the theories taught in the MBA did give me some understanding of different problems. *Let's say Belbin's nine team roles gave me some insight into like mindedness. This is a positive perspective, which made me focus on my needs and what I was capable and incapable of. It made me understand that to become a general manager or CEO or director,* which I want to, *I don't really need to be a technical person nor a* master in identifying problems. That's not what this MBA gives you. You have to understand that an MBA is about knowing how to oversee the business. As Charing said, it is "literally business administration." *So, if I'm administering a business and have a head for accounting or finance, I just need a little exposure. That's all I want. So, I can speak their language and understand it.* I just need to understand the technical jargon and basic principles, *I don't need to be a technical expert to solve a problem.* If I'm an expert then what's the use of having a team, I could well be a one-man army, isn't?

4.27 Tacit learning

Graisam: Yes, exactly and it depends on how you take it. Like, from my MBA, two things changed—*first, I reflect on practical aspects of my decisions and second, I identify real-world scenarios through my MBA's theoretical concepts. The rest is up to you - how you make connections between the two.* That's up to you.

Vonnie: Of course, it's very much about the theoretical understanding and I don't deny that. In fact, I agree. But *it's the how-to that was missing from my MBA and still, 20 years after, nothing has changed.* Often you have to understand the theory first and then make sense of how-to. But then an MBA doesn't teach the mechanism to make sense of it. It's all theory and not so much about the how-to.

Halim: I really don't understand what is the gap. *Lecturers* share their business experiences. They then *relate those experiences to a theory that they're teaching in class.* This practical approach to learning made much more sense to me and others, I'm sure of it.

Graisam: And you have to do that yourself.

Halim: Exactly!

Graisam: You have to identify that gap. *Like I'm a gym fanatic and when I go to the gym and do cross-fit training*, I reflect on the things linked to my personal life and the existing problems around me. For example, *I observe people exercising with me* in a very different way from how I exercise. *I start with formation, a structure, repeating the formation a hundred times, like having a routine.* I like having guidelines that I can follow. Having protocols prevents me from creating problems for myself. *But then I see people pick up heavy weights and start to exercise without any formation or structure and then they have physical problems because of it.* So, in a way, the MBA gave me this platform to link theory and practice and *reflect on logic, teamwork and patience and so on.* Maybe it wasn't a very good example. I don't know, it's hard to explain. But that's the confidence I have now from this MBA. It goes with me wherever I go.

Vonnie: *Oh, it definitely provided confidence and gave me belief in myself, and others believe in me too, but then the approach was very much on theoretical understanding and not so much on making the link* you just explained. I didn't do any of that. I know I'm on my own to make those connections. And if this is true then what's the MBA doing for me? You keep saying your MBA gave you all this but then it appears that it's you who is trying and learning and making changes, those necessary adjustments in your life routine. What role is the MBA playing in it?

Halim: [inhaling air slowly] I don't know. [exhaling it after] I see it differently, Vonnie. What can I do? *Like in the FOL case study class discussions, we all looked at problems from another perspective. Besides, the lecturer's feedback on individual assignments, reading articles from HBR* [Harvard Business Review] *and academic journals, everyone's comments on the article, I mean, coming from the private sector and non-academic background, this MCO and FOL took me to the practical world.* That's because it helped me recognise and understand others' perspectives.

Another hand raised in the audience.

Coleen: Hi, I'm Coleen. I'm an MBA graduate and professional. Listening to you all, I must emphasise that *I didn't learn how to apply ideas sitting in a class.* So, yes Vonnie, *it was up to me to apply those ideas as a professional and practice, practice, practice, trying different things.* I don't think you become a master just by learning concepts sitting in an MBA class. I also agree that *you have to adapt the theories in a way that works for your environment.* But I'm afraid I have to disagree that an MBA is supposed to provide you with some magic potion. Until you practice the concepts that your MBA introduces to you, you're not going to recognise the connections.

Kristine: Hi, everyone, I'm also an MBA graduate. I agree with Coleen. Everyone has a certain way of thinking and doing things. *When I did my MBA, I couldn't apply any specific model or theory to any work situation. However, I learnt how to exercise reflections, sitting in an MBA class, which helped me connect my work and what I was taught. The MBA didn't provide that relationship.* I had to create it.

Halim: That's an excellent way to put it. But I think there're two sides to my MBA. Like there're open subjects and closed subjects. *So, in open subjects, like MCO and FOL, I was able to relate the taught content to my situations. I was quite okay with that. But when it came to closed subjects such as finance, it provided me with the knowledge that helped me make sense of my organisation's financial data.* The MBA *gave me the ability to read the company's annual report*—something I'd no idea about before. *With this 'mindset', I've a sense of the likelihood of things on a more strategic level. Now I know why people on a management board, normally the CEO, other directors, usually have an MBA title*.

4.28 Pigeon-holed roles

Vonnie: Sorry, Halim, I don't want to sound rude, but this doesn't necessarily make you entrepreneurial if that's what you mean. *I don't see an MBA as a certificate of an entrepreneurial 'mindset'. It has more of a corporate aroma around it. There're plenty of examples of people who've done extraordinarily well and haven't got an MBA.* So yes, you see people in those positions with an MBA, but that's not a stamp for anything at all. It's your perception that just because people in senior positions have done an MBA, that's *the accepted route you have to take to be in such roles*—an MBA.

Halim: Look, I don't think there's a straightforward answer. I'm sure there were senior level position before the MBA even existed but now, *I don't know what comes first - senior roles and then the MBA or the MBA then senior roles.*

Bowman: I agree with both of your arguments. Yes, an MBA is the accepted route that one has to take to be in senior roles and it's not just because I'm an MBA student. *As a manager, I had to look at what other areas are possibly available for me to transition. I realised that I could think along these lines just because now I've more knowledge in different domains* than before enrolling in this MBA. *So, it complements my 10-year goal career path in getting into a more director type role.* So, I can see Halim's point too.

Vonnie: You know what, many people I know think that and why wouldn't they. Having *an MBA on your résumé adds more credibility, but it's not full front and centre. I mean this perception qualifies you and no one thinks beyond that.*

Another hand goes up in the audience.

Maddie: Hi, I'm Maddie and I'm a current MBA student. I can see what Bowman means and how *I've started gravitating from assistant to a coordinator to a manager role. This MBA has got me some good opportunities.* But then I agree with Vonnie as well that although it adds credibility, what's beyond? *My company has two sorts of creative leaders, a CEO and a COO. They both have an MBA and maybe they're who they are because of that. Still, one of them is very prescriptive and very controlling, instead of consulting or talking to the team. For example, one of my discipline leads would just grab someone out from a team and put them somewhere else without any explanation or consultation. There is this giant ego and they think they're right and that they know everything.* So, having an MBA being an accepted route to senior positions is more of a

way to get the pigeon-holed roles somewhat created for MBAs. But then *it's also about individuals more than just a degree and people should think beyond that because I found this really hard to go through.*

Charing: It's always about people. Before enrolling in this MBA, *I'd no idea what my values were. I just went in thinking the MBA will give me all I want, but it only introduced concepts and terms and other people's experiences. So, the MBA is a valuable tool for my understanding, but the real learning was when I stepped back and observed everyone and their managerial styles.* I went to work and compared everyone's managerial styles with those of my managers and what they do to me and others. *No one did that for me* or told me about it. *From doing this exercise at work, I saw how my boss doesn't usually engage with people. So, the MBA is confronting* because *it's your peers' experiences and your own that you have to bring out in the open and share and learn from them.* I understand now that this MBA is not about a piece of paper but more about understanding myself in the end.

Bowman: I think as Maddie said about too much ego, I've realised *how I came for all the wrong reasons.* These are the reasons that Vonnie is criticising. We all know a lot of people enrol in an MBA for the same reasons. *I enrolled in this MBA thinking how I'd just tick the box for career progression and respect and how I'll just get that senior role, but then from the second class of FOL, I disarmed myself and got emotionally exposed.* So, Charing, you are right, the MBA is confronting and I had no idea about it earlier. *I just saw the directors in my company and most of them had an MBA. So, I thought, "well, if they have an MBA to be where they are, even though they don't understand people, then I should go and get an MBA too.* It's just about that piece of paper after all." So, that was the wrong reason I started my MBA with.

Vonnie: That's what I mean. *Even though there are things to take from the course, in the end, it's all about how you use that piece of paper and not just have it in your possession.* But Bowman, don't be so hard on yourself. This is something that I didn't understand at the time either. Like you, *I needed something to hold onto and the MBA gave me that something and that's perhaps my point - build your network, really engage and nurture the relationships with people in the MBA.* That's what is going to get you what you want. Of course, get that piece of paper but then think beyond it.

Halim: Exactly, Vonnie. At last, we can agree on something. That's why I say that an *MBA is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.* There're your peers who *are professionals,* lecturers who practice what they teach, *they're practitioners, of course not all but a few. You learn from them.*

Vonnie: *This is what dawned on me when I spoke to my peer, who is lecturing in an MBA subject, after such a long time - use that piece of paper, find yourself a position because you can.* That's what that piece of paper offers you. *But it's up to you how you leverage the relationships you develop in your MBA with others beneficially and mutually. That'll be your road to success.*

All applaud, led by the announcer.

Announcer: This brings us to the first break of our MBA conference. I hope the first half was useful for everyone. We definitely gathered a lot of ideas and perspectives that you MBAs carry. So, well done for sharing your thoughts and ideas and experiences. I now welcome you all for tea and coffee. We shall start our next session in the next 30 minutes.

Bruce had to leave, so, he did not join the refreshments.

I discovered 7 phenomena through the integrated dialogue:

1. Supposed right-and-wrong-people and right-and-wrong-time to do an MBA.

   a. The gap between knowing-doing.

2. Psychological safety: an unsafety from being too safe.

3. The MBAs' perspectives: how long is a piece of string?

4. A destination only, or a preparation for the 'real' journey ahead.

5. A pseudo-philosophy.

6. The participants' MBA experiences:

   a. Networking.

   b. Students' learning inclinations and lecturers' teaching approaches.

   c. Non-practitioner academic lecturers v. practitioner–lecturers: trust in a lecturer's background, not in the lecturer.

7. A disconnect between academic subjects.

Researchers are not free to identify and use the notion of 'phenomena' casually. We, as researchers, could see idiographic research as seeking to understand how participants perceive phenomena and any perceived causal relationships form their interpretations, i.e. we want to understand how they interpret cause, effect and influence. To understand phenomena, we need to dig deeper into how changes (in something or someone) affect the overall understanding of a context, and how participants, themselves, perceive these phenomena. This is why I call these seven, phenomena and not themes. I recognise them as phenomena because they look from inside to outside, meaning – first, I created dialogues based on a similar (different participants) theme. For example, psychological safety is a theme: themes allow for variation of application (e.g. they don't apply to every individual or situation in the same way); the mindset relates to the theme, but the theme remains a theme.

In this chapter, I shed light on the four questions stated in Section 3.1:

- What made an MBA the preferred degree for these participants?

- What were the implications of values, beliefs and attitudes for MBA candidates' and graduates' learning and practice?

- What changes in perspective, attitude, philosophy, learning had the MBA candidates and graduates gone through during their MBA education?

- Whether and how the MBA participants apply their learning in their work?

This chapter focuses on the journeys taken by the MBA participants, what they gained from this journey and whether, at the end of it, they represent expeditioners or explorers. In his 1927 book, *My Life as an Explorer*, Amundsen (pp.19–20) describes his experiences as an Arctic and Antarctic expeditioner and explorer. He writes:

> these expeditions were carefully planned, and they were outfitted and managed according to the best knowledge of their times. Though they invariably resulted in failure, and frequently in disaster, they did not fail for lack of care in planning. And they achieved scientific information of great value.

He also writes:

> the explorer is looking, not for thrills, but for facts about the unknown […] Every explorer has adventures. He gets a thrill out of them, and he takes pleasure in thinking back upon them. But he never goes about

looking for them. Exploration is too serious a business. However, not

all would-be explorers realize this truth.

According to Leane and Philpott (2017, p.106), 'Expeditioner provides a concise solution.' They know possible challenges that they might encounter while embarking on their expedition. So, they prepare themselves to meet those challenges if occurred (Amundsen, 1927). While for explorers, even though they need to prepare themselves for exploration, they cannot acquire any familiarity as the defects are unknown. Amundsen observes that "exploration is too serious a business", explorers do not, in general, have opportunities to acquaint themselves with business methods. Instead, they have to rely upon others to manage any business details (Amundsen, 1927, pp.132-133).

Plato long ago saw the need for rulers to seek wisdom, exemplified by his 'Philosopher King' concept - 'Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy and political greatness and philosophic wisdom meet in one … cities will never have rest from their evils, nor will the whole of mankind' (cited in Chroust 1968, pp.16–17): Aristotle (cited in Chroust 1968, pp.16–17) took a slightly different perspective:

It was not merely unnecessary for a king to be a philosopher, but even

distinct disadvantage. What a king should do was to listen to and take

the advice of true philosophers. In doing so he would enrich his reign

with good deeds and not merely with [a] fine word.

According to Lesser (1982, p.6), 'the Aristotelian style- which is used in an adapted form by St Thomas and others-has the dangers of its virtues: it can satisfy the desire to know without stimulating the desire to think. The Platonic style has the opposite danger: it can lead

the student to enjoy thinking for its own sake so much that he simply wants to ponder on the questions without having any real wish to discover the answers. It is a common vice of professional philosophers, just as the Aristotelian vice is the vice of laymen who come to philosophy, sometimes, wanting answers but too impatient to take the necessary steps towards getting them.' 'Vice epistemology is the philosophical study of the nature, identity, and epistemological significance of intellectual vices. Such vices include gullibility, dogmatism, prejudice, closed-mindedness, and negligence. These are intellectual character vices, that is, intellectual vices that are also character traits' (Cassam 2016, p.159).

As Lesser recommends a teacher to use both methods, what might be required and expected from an MBA relates to both. Perhaps, the business community expects MBAs to be ethical in their approach towards their work and people; at the same time, they also expect them to be flexible and open to suggestions by others. In this chapter, I draw from my research findings to identify both expeditioner and explorer participants and discuss their reasons for embarking on an MBA journey. I do this by revisiting the findings to recollect what the participants have said, borrowing ideas from the literature to make sense of this. This chapter does not provide final answers to the questions raised in the literature. Instead, it shows what my participants experienced in their quest to become an MBA.

The chapter is framed around the seven phenomena I discovered through the integrated dialogue:

1. Supposed right-and-wrong-people and right-and-wrong-time to do an MBA.

    a. The gap between knowing-doing.

2. Psychological safety: an unsafety from being too safe.

3. The MBAs' perspectives: how long is a piece of string?

4. A destination only, or a preparation for the 'real' journey ahead.

5. A pseudo-philosophy.

6. The participants' MBA experiences:

    a. Networking.

    b. Students' learning inclinations and lecturers' teaching approaches.

    c. Non-practitioner academic lecturers v. practitioner–lecturers: trust in a lecturer's background, not in the lecturer.

7. A disconnect between academic subjects.

5.1 Supposed right-and-wrong-people and right-and-wrong-time to do an MBA

Each participant told the story of how they wanted to grow and develop themselves. These stories all had one main ingredient—their work culture—which pushed participants to pursue an MBA. For example, while Karolina felt the need to surpass the upper limit she had set for herself, leaving a tedious job, Kristine wanted to let go of her pigeon-holed 'mindset', which was due to her area of expertise. Selina felt stagnant in her own business and encountered a dominating boss at work who talked down to her and Salec disliked his boss because of the lack of regard towards his personal life. Both Karolina and Kristine expected an MBA to address their lack of growth in their current jobs. For Selina and Salec, an MBA would break their shackles and help them change their career trajectory and bureaucracy-driven work lives, enabling them to enter their chosen business area, which is consistent with Murray's (1988, p.72) argument on how MBA programs provide general grounding in business concepts. This suggests some of these participants focused on getting their MBA degree and not so much on their learning experience, identifying their MBA as a destination, rather than a journey, which contrasts with Martin Luther King Jr's (1947, pp.123–124) statement that 'education must enable a man to become more efficient, to achieve with increasing facility the ligitimate [sic]

goals of his life'. It is about training people to think critically and incisively (see Section 6.3). This implies that people who decide to pursue an MBA are 'either too impatient to climb the ladder through promotions or too analytical to look in other directions than just one best way' (Mintzberg 2004, p.14).

Although there is a vast literature on why people pursue an MBA, it is essential to note that, like Salec, Bowman (both engineers) pursued his MBA to earn promotions and move away from the engineering domain to another field of work. Later during his MBA studies, Bowman realised that he had initially enrolled in the program for the wrong reasons, seeing 'the MBA degree as a vehicle by which to enter managerial ranks from a technical job function' (Herbert 1980, p.280). Several other participants had a similar experience to Bowman. For example, Selina pursued her MBA with a similar 'mindset'—wanting to open the door to a new career and apply learning to real-life situations. However, when it came to applying concepts from her MBA, she could do so in her in-class activities with peers, but less so at work. Despite being a trainer in a company that trained staff to deal with customers, she perceived she had no idea what the MBA had taught her and what she was supposed to do with her MBA learning. Because of her firm belief at the start of her MBA that she would leave it a different person (see Section 4.4.3), in the absence of a team to test her understanding at work, she instead ended up feeling lost and thus lost confidence. This indicates how Selina believed the MBA to be the holy grail that would automatically transform her into a different person (Mintzberg 2004). Although she knew that an MBA was a lot more in depth than her Bachelor degree and that she had broadened her knowledge base via the many subjects she studied in her MBA, she did not know how to use this expanded knowledge base at work. Instead, she felt as if she had not learnt at all. It shows that Selina could be the wrong person, doing her MBA at the wrong time in her career (e.g. Mintzberg 2004). By not being in a managerial role,

Selina had no possible way to understand what being a manager involved. She did not know what concepts from her MBA she could apply at work and how. It suggests that completing an MBA program does not necessarily result in *mastery* of business administration. This relates to how she may have pursued her MBA at the wrong time in her career. It also indicates that until and unless the MBA learning is put to use, an MBA degree remains just a piece of paper, a certificate that students receive after *spending or investing* 2 years or less of their time. It gets clearer that neither business schools measure managerial potential (Mintzberg 2013), nor does academic achievement alone is a valid yardstick to measure managerial potential (Livingston 1971).

Without a team of reportees, Selina struggled to identify her soft skills and confirm whether she was engaging with people. Thus, she could not understand what Kristine meant when she suggested that Selina should go on a journey with the people she trained (see Section 4.7.1). Being in a sole contributor role, Selina appeared instrumental towards her growth (Table 5.1 & 5.2), which Rokeach (1973) might call self-centeredness. Her learning and development were self-focused and self-gratifying, which relates to Schwartz's (1992) hedonistic values (see table 2.2). Thus, for her, thinking about others was not as straightforward as it was for other participants. Perhaps, her individual contributor role at work was anti-catalytical in creating a gap between her expectations from an MBA and her MBA experiences, which when she tried applying at work, for her, were nothing short of arduous initiatives. This may be one reason for Selina's inability to determine whether she had those soft skills. This could be one of the consequences of graduates' MBA credentials helping them find a managerial position (Mintzberg 2004, p.14). Even though Selina studied a range of subjects (e.g. Finance, Accounting, Economics, Marketing, Strategic Management, etc; see Table 5.2) and gained a general grounding in business concepts and techniques in her MBA, akin to Murray's (1988,

p.72) argument, she could not understand how the different parts of her organisation interlinked and how this influenced the overall functioning of the business. One of the only things Selina was concerned about was getting people, such as people she trains, to care about the customers, saying '*That's it*' (see Section 4.2). This is where it becomes problematic to generalise about MBAs: if choosing between two candidates, one with an MBA and one without, the first would be employed (Sorrell, cited in Dearlove 2006, p.6). Even when Selina was aware of looking at the broader picture, possibly due to her myopic view of learning and developing, she fell short of developing that systems thinking 'mindset', which she needed to apply concepts from her MBA at work. Perhaps, this was one of the causes behind Selina blaming some of her MBA lecturers for her lack of practical knowledge.

Selina loathed slide-based learning in theoretical subjects where lecturers stood and delivered content for three hours, asking her to find answers independently instead of providing solutions. Thus, Selina chose to sit at the back of the class and continue her office work instead of listening to what the lecturers had to say. This indicates Selina's inflexibility regarding learning new methods. She was determined to get only yes–no and right–wrong answers to her questions. This suggests she expected to receive prescriptive answers to her questions, which she could then apply to real-world situations, instead of learning how to explore the solutions independently. Thus, although enrolling in an MBA was a worthwhile endeavour from Selina's perspective, McCormack (1984, p.9) might go to the extent of calling it at worst a naive form of arrogance. Because of this linear 'mindset', Selina looked outward, always yearning for people to point out her MBA learning to her. Unless she received this explicitly from other people, Selina could not understand what she had learnt and whether she had applied her MBA learning in any way (see Section 4.7.3). This could be due to a lack of introspection, mainly because of an increased dependency on other people for approval. Although Selina aspired to

high-level managerial positions, perhaps she lacked the will to manage (Mintzberg 2004). Even though an MBA was an addition to her undergraduate education, due to a lack of managerial responsibility at work and her 'need for the continual upgrading of skills' (Waters 2009, p.1865) to apply in the *real world*, for Selina, both the taught content and the lecturers' teaching approaches remained contentious.

'Theories and ideas have done much to strengthen management practices' (Ghoshal 2005, p.75), yet for Selina, her MBA remained *just an academic pursuit* and too theoretical. Although Selina was looking to learn, translate and apply theories and concepts at work, as some theoretical concepts are not prescriptive and do not provide straightforward answers, she concluded that the MBA is a factory that claims to teach innovation, but does not. This is where Rubin and Dierdoff's (2007) findings that although MBA programs adequately cover the essential requirements for managerial competency (hard skills/technical), the most critical aspects, such as managing people and strategy and innovation (soft skills/interpersonal), remain the weakest becomes important. It could be argued that Selina's issue was not a lack of soft skills, but a mechanistic 'mindset' that rendered her unable to engage with complexity and ambiguity. From this notion, it is essential for business schools to 'make significant headway in improving the practice of managing' by focusing on helping students learn the *soft* aspect of managing people (Mintzberg 2013, p.16). This requires business schools to create an open environment where students like Selina can gather a deep understanding of what drives them, which they can then link to their personal and collective potentials (Hagmann et al. 2003, p.21). However, as Selina's 'mindset' did not allow her to recognise managing as a facilitating activity (Mintzberg 2004, p.12), she believed that she needed to know whether she was appropriately doing the right thing in the best way. For her, this was the only way forward (i.e.,

a Taylorist perspective; Taylor, 1911, 2004), leading her to conclude that she was taught the wrong things in the wrong manner instead.

### 5.1.1 The gap between *knowing* and *doing*

From another perspective, blaming the lecturers' mode of teaching entirely could be problematic. For example, Selina discovered how she had been tacitly using one of the abstract concepts, Balcony View and the Dance Floor, at her work and in her life (see Section 4.7.3). She acknowledged that she had started taking time to absorb, instead of jumping into things and how she could just sit back and observe what was going on and wait to interject herself later in conversations. She even said, 'that's probably who I am now'. From a theoretical perspective, this indicates a gap between *knowing* and *doing*. It also indicates that to recognise tacit knowledge explicitly, Selina needed to be reflective. She could have achieved this reflexivity through 'acts of reflection aimed at translating' her individual experiences into 'tangible forms of knowledge' that would have brought her 'tacit understandings of practice and experiences to a visible state' (Costa & Murphy 2015, p.6). As she was so engrossed in knowing 'one best way' (Mintzberg 2014, p.13), perhaps she failed to recognise her tacit knowledge explicitly. This could be one of the reasons why she thought FOL did not work for her. This could also be one reason why the MBA education has been under constant pressure to evolve and achieve a balance between basic job-related KSACs and more tacit attributes such as leadership, values and ethical decision making (Nesbit 2012). This gap in tacit knowledge (knowledge we have without really knowing that we have it) and explicit knowledge (knowledge that we know we have) led Selina to blame her lecturers.

Dickinson, Herbst and O'Shaughnessy (1983, p.51) state that 'communication between business academics and the business community appears to be minimal, and perhaps even

threatening to both parties; academics have little interest in practitioners and their ideas.' Even after decades of business research, there appears to remain a divide between the employer needs and the training provided at some business schools, which adversely impact 'business students, business schools, business firms, and society' (David, David & David 2010, p.52). Although this is consistent with the criticism that MBA degrees often lack relevance to employers' perceived needs (Gupta & Bennett 2014; Mihail & Kloutsiniotis 2014), not all participants went through the same experience as Selina. Karolina opinionated that it is an individual's responsibility to learn and it is the student who is to be blamed for not developing an ability to apply concepts from MBA at work. Similarly, Karolina also blamed some lecturers for not having mechanisms in place that could help students, like Selina, to understand how they tackled work issues - 'what research did the lecturers do or what kind of theories they looked at, or what theories they left out and what they found useful' (see section 4.19.3). But unlike Selina, Karolina's FOL discussions transformed her thinking. Karolina tacitly learned to ask questions over giving her verdict to people and then realised this knowledge when she noticed herself asking too many questions from people to get to the bottom of a problem (see section 4.7.2). Similarly, Salec and Kristine realised that there are no right or wrong answers and reflected on their work experiences and attitudes toward their subordinates and peers. Unlike Selina, Salec and Kristine could practice the Balcony View and the Dance Floor concept from FOL. While Salec understood how 'systems are complex' and that he needed to think differently to apply his MBA learning explicitly at work – treating his employee differently (see section 4.19.3), Kristine, perhaps, unknowingly, modified her preference from instilling some order in doing work tasks to stepping back to look at the broader picture, knowingly (see section 4.7.3). However, when it came to Selina, although she could externalise the concepts and tell people what she had learnt in her MBA (see Section 4.7.3), she stopped short of externalising her learning (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995).

This fits with Kolb and Kolb's (2009, pp.321–322) elaboration of John and Tanya Reese's (1998) 'Connecting with the Professor' workshop. Recognising that law school professors were unlikely to change their course and learning style, both John and Tanya Reese worked with their students to develop the learning skills they thought their students needed to succeed in their professors' learning spaces. This is where Selina found that the MBA had failed in fulfilling the aim of education by not training her to think and act independently (e.g. Einstein 1936, cited by Calaprice 2005, p.67). At least that is how she perceived her MBA. Contrary to Selina's feelings, Salec did not favour blaming the whole degree like that (see section 4.19.3). Although this shows that Selina's lecturers were not at fault, at least not entirely, this sort of experience prompted her to develop a closed 'mindset' and blame her lecturers, work colleagues and MBA peers for her lack of learning and failure in applying new concepts at work (Gupta et al. 2007). Kolb and Kolb (2009) put emphasis on understanding a student's learning style before creating learning spaces to match their style (see figure 5.1).

**Figure 5.1: The Nine Regions of the Experiential Learning Theory Learning Space (adapted from Kolb & Kolb 2009, p.322)**

The Nine Regions of the Experiential Learning Theory Learning Space

EXPERIENCING

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| NW Accommodating | N Experiencing | NE Diverging |
| W Acting | C Balancing | E Reflecting |
| SW Converging | S Thinking | SE Assimilating |

ACTING (left side) — REFLECTING (right side)

THINKING

For example, they suggest 'a person who learns best by diverging may want to form a group of classmates to talk about the material in the course, or a thinking style person may

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want to prepare in advance by reading about material to be covered in the course' (Kolb & Kolb 2009, p.322). In the absence of appropriate learning space, Selina remained resistant to gaining the required insight to resolve real-life problems, which is a form of external attribution (McCormack 1984; Mintzberg 2004, 2013). Although it is quite challenging to narrow down to a particular learning space that would have been appropriate for Selina's approach to knowledge, Halim, on the other hand, adjusted between *thinking* and *diverging* learning spaces. Halim, although hesitant at first, discovered his peers' vast work experience. He made efforts to talk to them and learn from their experiences. He also found that if he does not prepare in advance by reading about the material to be discussed in class, and participate in class discussions, he would not learn anything from his MBA (see section 4.21). These two approaches to learning helped Halim realise how he could explicitly apply his finance knowledge at work – reading financial data and how he has developed a 'sense of likelihood of things on a more strategic level' (see section 4.27). In one of the MBA classes that I observed, one of Selina's lecturers quoted Donella H. Meadows (2008) - 'Remember, always, that everything you know and everything everyone knows, is only a model. Get your model out there where it can be viewed. Invite others to challenge your assumptions and add their own'. Perhaps, if Selina could have understood Meadows in her MBA, she might not have lost her confidence, nor would she be waiting for others to confirm her actions as right or wrong.

5.2 Psychological safety: an *uns*afety from being too safe

According to the participants, this MBA program's in-class learning environment was relatively safe. This phenomenon (psychological safety; see Section 5.2) described by the participants suggests that MBA candidates can take risks and share what they think without any reservations about any damaging consequences. But perhaps this harmonious learning environment is too safe. As already established (see Sections 4.9 and 4.14, 4.15.1, 4.16.4, 4.17,

4.18, 4.18.1, 4.19, 4.20.1, 4.20.2, 4.20.3), it may not be safe at work in the same way it is safe in an MBA class. In this MBA program, the participants, particularly Kristine, Selina, Salec and Bowman, were 'comfortable being themselves' (Edmondson 1999, p.354). They were also aware of their ability to show and employ themselves 'without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career' (Kahn 1990, p.708). For example, Selina *did not feel judged* when she shared her ideas in class. Instead, her MBA learning environment was so psychologically safe that she actively sought affirmation of whether she was right or wrong. However, at work, this was not the case because of the *un*safety of being dominated by her boss.

Similarly, Karolina experienced that, despite feeling like an idiot in her undergraduate course, it was acceptable to be wrong during her MBA if she learnt from it (see Section 4.8). From Selina's perspective, she experienced a *disconnection* between her MBA and her work environment; participants were able to deal with student peers who micro-managed assignments but could not deal with micro-managers when it came to their superiors at work (see Sections 4.8, 4.9.1). Here, it becomes essential to understand that although learning about different facets of the work environment might increase a manager's managerial competence (Gupta et al. 2007; Leavitt 1991; Sunoo 1999), it remains an assumption that all MBAs have mastery of business administration.

Concerning psychological safety, according to Carmeli et al. (2013, p.119), businesses are expected to encourage their employees to take interpersonal risks and express themselves to realise their potential and growth. Although this appeared to be a fundamental belief underpinning the participants' MBA in-class learning environment, it was very different from many of their work environments. This suggests another gap between what the business

community does and how business schools assist their MBA candidates in learning. Table 5.1 summarises the issues that participants encountered at work; what they experienced in their work environment compared with what they experienced in their MBA classes; and how they acted during their in-class discussions.

**Table 5.1: Comparing the work and MBA environment with the MBA 'mindset' and work behaviour of seven participants**

| SELINA | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Work Environment | Pre-work 'mindset' | MBA Environment | MBA 'mindset' | During/Post-MBA 'mindset' |
| Psychological safety definitely hasn't been there. Someone who reported to my director who thought he was the team director and you couldn't say anything to him; then he would obviously blame everyone else except himself. I have no freedom, no autonomy, no one to report to me. | It's not as safe at work as it is in an MBA classroom. I can't do anything about it. My different thinking did not matter. It feels like I have to ask for permission for everything and I don't like that. Where can I practice all these MBA things? | I could ask the lecturer; you have got someone there who knows what they are doing. This guy in the last group assignment handled, like seriously, literally giving everyone a calendar. There are no consequences. | I didn't feel judged. I can do it in a small group in the MBA class. I can openly disagree and he can openly do and say what he wants. | How on earth can someone expect me to go and apply my MBA things at work? It feels like I'm gonna kill myself. I cannot disagree with you if you are my boss, but I can in my MBA. |

| KAROLINA | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Work Environment | Pre-work 'mindset' | MBA Environment | MBA 'mindset' | During/Post-MBA 'mindset' |
| Where I work, it is very hierarchical. If you try something a bit different and that shapes the vulnerability, it just makes everything unsafe. | They are just playing that role. You don't know what you should, or you shouldn't do. | You are all in it together. Sort of an environment where people can take risks. | It's OK to be wrong as long as you learn from it. I am realising that the environment is very, very important. | If I am having problems with people, I will always take them offsite so that they can relax. I always say to people, you can talk completely freely it's fine. I'd rather know than not know. |

| SALEC | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Work Environment** | **Pre-work 'mindset'** | **MBA Environment** | **MBA 'mindset'** | **During/Post-MBA 'mindset'** |
| I have an employee who I manage and I find her so incredibly difficult to engage and manage. | With her cycling, she should be working more flexibly. | Reflective and open to discussion. | Poking students to share their mind. Argumentative, if not convinced of others' perspectives. | She is not doing bad work, but she is not getting the full benefits. We haven't necessarily delivered as well as we could have. It's us managers and not so much her. |

| MELANIE | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Work Environment** | **Pre-work 'mindset'** | **MBA Environment** | **MBA 'mindset'** | **During/Post-MBA 'mindset'** |
| Old company—they just found me too noisy and just didn't like me making too many waves. | I could see the problems and wanted change, but my organisation set everything out from A–Z. War-and-peace 'mindset'. | Focus on people's strengths and ways to transform their weaknesses, if any, into strengths. MCO and FOL in particular, that's what I learnt … that you will get different perspectives. | Learning this process is safety. As long as you are aware that it is not an attack on you, you will be fine. Unless you are open to listening to what others have to give rather than saying no and disagreeing straight away, the whole purpose of the MBA is defeated. | Unlike my pre-MBA 'mindset', I don't set everything out from A–Z but try a little bit to see if it works. You make the MBA unsafe for yourself. No one can do that for you. How can we be taught to be a good boss, but not make people unsafe? |

| MARINA | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Work Environment** | **Pre-work 'mindset'** | **MBA Environment** | **MBA 'mindset'** | **During/Post-MBA 'mindset'** |
| They were hammered back every single time. An inefficient culture. Some people are just micro-managers who don't trust anyone to do anything and so they are not even open to learning. My boss wasn't good. | There was no room for me to grow. I do things that my siblings want to do and make them happy. So, I thought it's safe to do. I wondered what other management styles are there or how it would be to work under someone else with a different management style. | I was constantly in this dilemma about what if I sound dumb, ask stupid questions. If the lecturer doesn't military-select me to talk, I am not going to even try. | Through FOL, it's like now one of the projects was the safe-to-fail experiments, which made me focus more on myself than being a people pleaser. I can do this and I need to break away from my family and kind of thrive. I am glad I am doing an MBA *just* to stay relevant and keep on top of it. I don't want to feel *un*safe again. | I have developed growth, put more confidence in myself without any fear of failing the project. It is safe in a way that I can create that safety. |

| BOWMAN | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Work Environment** | **Pre-work 'mindset'** | **MBA Environment** | **MBA 'mindset'** | **During/Post-MBA 'mindset'** |
| A highly male-dominated environment, highly driven, authoritarian environment. A lot of governance and compliance. When I am unable to challenge those ideas and behaviours and attitudes of my superiors, I don't find that safety with higher management. Don't take kindly to people making mistakes. | I struggle with the approach higher management has. I used to accept this fact. Limits your ability to challenge those behaviours and culture. I really don't feel safe. You don't feel that it's OK to be vulnerable at work. No way that you're gonna feel that it's OK to fail. | I am not the only screwed-up child in the world and that other people have experienced that. You can control the learning environment and you can go and experiment and learn about yourself. | Now my belief system is that everybody should be treated equally and you know, your respect, your views, there is no bullying and that's a safe culture. I feel safe. I can make myself safe by just being open to accepting others' ideas. That's how we learn by doing things ourselves. | As I can do at the lower level to create that sort of environment. I am a manager, right. So, I can create a safe environment as an MBA did for me. Just accept the easy way out. So, where is this safety? I have grown to appreciate things, but I am not appreciated and that doesn't feel safe. |

| MADDIE | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Work Environment** | **Pre-work 'mindset'** | **MBA Environment** | **MBA 'mindset'** | **During/Post-MBA 'mindset'** |
| People are almost getting in the way of good development. My manager, he is a guy at the moment where he reads a lot of blogs and lots of stuff, but he never goes deep. People just spin their wheels on inconsequential things, just because they have to show something. | They are not very good leaders or don't have a very good, shared language. I don't feel psychologically safe. | It is so controlled; you might say that I am safe to fail, but you wouldn't actually live it. | If he does his MBA, then I can talk about the learning with him. I think an MBA teaches you this psychological safety, which I think he lacks. This made me see how big an ego I have and I felt like this is about my boss. | MBA's safe-to-fail kind of thinking—I am able to think long term. I see my boss differently now; I know I love the company's founder, but I also know that he is human. I want to see him do further training. I just stopped blaming others. You can learn it, develop it and improve on it but you wouldn't see the value in taking time out to think about those management skills and collaboration at work and speak your mind just because it is not controlled. |

Table 5.1 contains excerpts from the findings chapter that illustrate how these seven participants (Selina, Karolina, Salec, Melanie, Marina, Bowman and Maddie) discussed the disconnection between their MBA training in how to be psychologically safe and their psychologically unsafe work environments. These seven participants were selected as they discussed psychological safety during their interview. In discussions of psychological safety, the MBA program's FOL and MCO subjects featured more than once. This suggests that these two subjects helped them understand what psychological safety meant. Several participants (Karolina, Salec, Bowman, Marina) were even able to recreate the same safety they experienced in their MBA, at work, for their team members (see Sections 4.8, 4.17). This shows why classroom safety is so valuable in the first place. However, Bowman and Maddie questioned how they were supposed to feel safe at work from their superiors. 'Ancient evolutionary adaptations explain why psychological safety is both fragile and vital to success in uncertain, interdependent environments' (Delizonna 2017); for example:

the brain processes a provocation by a boss, competitive coworker, or dismissive subordinate as a life-or-death threat. The amygdala, the alarm bell in the brain, ignites the fight-or-flight response, hijacking higher brain centers. This 'act first, think later' brain structure shuts down perspective and analytical reasoning. Quite literally, just when we need it most, we lose our minds (Delizonna 2017).

The participants uniformly suggested that their MBA classes were a controlled environment where students could choose to be open and discuss their ideas without being subject to humiliation or discouragement. However, as their workplaces were not controlled environments, psychological safety was not so available at work. This suggests that although MBA training allows MBA candidates to become better managers when dealing with subordinates, they do not have mechanisms to exercise the same with their superiors at work. This is where Delizonna's (2017) statement becomes so central to understanding the gap between an MBA learning environment and a work environment in which MBAs are supposed to apply their learning. Thus, to bring 'their brains to work and collaborate with each other to solve problems and accomplish work that's perpetually changing' (Edmondson 2018, p.xiii) was not a concern, at least not from the participants' perspectives. Here, the participants understood the notion of being safe and unsafe, which led them to recreate their MBA environment for their teams at work to challenge each other's ideas without fear of being judged or being subject to criticism and make suggestions for improvement. A disconnect seemed to have arisen when participants tried to establish a similar sort of safety with their superiors. They had no idea how to recreate that *safety for themselves*. This suggests that psychological safety appears to live at the group/team level. In any organisation there are

pockets of both high and low psychological safety, often linked to the leader in that area. It starts at the top, but everyone's also responsible for it (Edmondson 2018).

The participants' MBA education helped prepare them to operate in the *real world*. It also provided them with a platform to 'acquire the required skills and experience' (Cullen & Calitz 2016, p.2) and to an extent the participants modified their behaviour (e.g. Karolina, Salec, Bowman) to deal with this *un*safety in their team (see Table 5.1). This suggests that they understood the concept of *soft*, which requires focusing on the needs of their employees, akin to Schwartz's benevolence and universalism values (see table 2.2). They were even able to work on messiness consisting of intractable problems (see sections, 4.5; 4.17.1) and complicated connections (Mintzberg 2004, p.13), but only from their team's perspective. When it came to their superiors, participants were confronted with different challenges to their intuition and judgement (Mintzberg 2004) (see sections 4.17; 4.17; 4.19). As work environments and their experiences are different for different people, different concepts cannot be taught by looking at *one best way* (Mintzberg 2004). This approach might not be as effective for 'congenitally naive' students. Instead, this may act anti-catalytically in their learning, making them victims of their business training and pushing them to develop an uncanny knack for forming the wrong perceptions (McCormack 1984, p.12). This might be one of the reasons why MBAs upon graduation are cast 'in the roles of Darth Vaders of the business world' (Anderson & Escher 2010, pp.26–27), with a reputation of being 'Masters of the Universe' who identify the only social responsibility of business is to maximise profits (Anderson & Escher, 2010, p.26). It also provides an insight into why the business community criticises MBA programs for failing to prepare leaders. It has unbalanced the scale (Bennis & O'Toole 2005; Jain & Golosinski 2011; Mintzberg 2004, 2013). Maddie's words sum it up quite nicely:

you can learn [the skills and concepts in an MBA class], develop it, improve on it but you wouldn't see the same value in taking time out to think about those management skills and collaboration at work and speak your mind, just because it is not controlled (see section 4.17.1).

Maddie's words suggest that the MBA provided a platform to act. Nonetheless, the lack of an explicit mechanism for participants to seek feedback on how they acted at work and whether they could apply their MBA training in all spheres of their work setting led these seven participants to feel let down. This may explain why Mintzberg (2004) identifies management as a craft to be honed through practice and experience, not in a traditional classroom. For example, Melanie began asking her boss for a 6-monthly catch up to evaluate her performance (see Section 4.18). Being unable to do something similar at his work, Bowman stopped being concerned about how his superiors made him feel and began focusing on sharing his MBA experience with his team. However, in the process, he continued to feel frustrated at work (see Section 4.17.1).

Similarly, Marina grew increasingly frustrated and stopped acknowledging what her bosses said to her, which, over a while, became a habit (see Section 4.18). For Marina, this was her preferred way to deal with *un*safety at work and continue to make her team members feel safe. However, Maddie dealt with this sort of issue differently. Like Bowman and Marina, Maddie adjusted her work behaviour and transformed herself into a person who took a middle road when it came to deciding whether to listen to her boss or do what she thought was right in her mind (see Section 4.18). This suggests that the very process of teaching MBA candidates to become responsible managers may have led them away from even considering how to tackle unsafe situations with their superiors at work. It made each of these participants develop a

habit, dependant on what they thought was right, to deal with *their* unsafety at work. It appears as if they were learning the feel for the game, which reveals why habitus is 'as much as an agent of continuity and tradition as it can be regarded as a force of change' (Costa & Murphy 2015, p.4). An MBA education is 'largely a self-learning process' and cannot teach 'all the ins and outs of everyday business life' to its students (McCormack 1984, p.9). Thus, to significantly improve their management practice, the participants had 'to come to grips with the realities of being a manager' (Mintzberg 2004, p.1). An MBA classroom needs to be engaging enough to allow students (like Selina) to make use of their own experiences (Mintzberg 2004). At the same time, participants working in managerial roles needed to make the best of those engaging classes. This may be one of the reasons for academia's concern with how an MBA education facilitates the application of knowledge and the link between what is taught in an [psychologically safe] MBA and students' [psychologically unsafe] work settings (Benjamin & O'Reilly 2011).

5.3 The MBAs' perspectives: how long is a piece of string?

Both Karolina and Salec began their MBA journey with a 'mindset' that an MBA would require them to focus on the end result. Karolina harboured the idea that trying different things would only make her vulnerable in her MBA. Salec was adamant that he could break everything down into small parts and that his opinions were the only right ones (see Section 4.6.1). Both focused on the end result rather than on learning what was taught. However, very early in their MBA studies, both realised they could not continue with this sort of instrumental thinking. Karolina saw herself as just 'scratching the surface' (see section 4.6.1), while Salec started dealing with what he needed to learn and not worrying about what he would do at the end of the MBA. Starting his MBA having an engineering 'mindset' that controlled his learning habits, Salec's view on how things were, was relatively rigid. This rigidity influenced his view

of himself as a perfectionist and working towards not 'messing things up'. However, as Salec continued his journey in the MBA, he changed his view. He began to see perfection as just an illusion, moving away from 'viewing the world in a polarized fashion', labelling the events around him as 'black or white, wonderful or horrible' to acknowledging that sometimes he would 'mess things up' and that was okay (Sorotzkin 1985, p.564). His ideology, an underlying assumption in absolute terms that he 'knows-it-all' changed (see Section 4.7.1).

Like Salec, Karolina came to her MBA studies with a 'mindset' that she had hit the upper limit at work (see Section 4.1) and started realising that there was no upper limit to how much she lacked. This led Karolina to realise how learning is an active choice that she needed to make and doing an MBA does not make learning an automatic process (Mintzberg 2004). This is where Karolina shifted her 'mindset' from being an expeditioner at the start of her MBA to an explorer somewhere during her MBA (see Section 4.10). The explorer understands that it is quite impossible to codify practice and as it doesn't have any room for any certification as to its effectiveness, there cannot be one best way of managing people (Mintzberg 2004). Mchombu (2007, p.3) asserts:

> A master craftsman after years of experience develops a wealth of expertise "at his fingertips." But he is often unable to articulate the scientific or technical principles behind what he knows.

This is where Mintzberg's (2014) notion of the *holy grail*, a criticism of people who see the MBA degree as *a magic wand* makes sense. By becoming explorers, the expectations of some of the participants at the start of their MBA were, if not the opposite, at least different from their MBA experience (see appendix 8.1). Karolina's MBA experience allowed her to confront her pre-MBA 'mindset', which considered an MBA as simply a box-ticking exercise

in the pursuit of an opportunity to improve one's career options (Anderson & Escher 2010, p.19) (see Section 4.10). This further enabled her to uncover how her MBA had changed and provided an opportunity for personal development, which is very different from how Selina felt. This may be why business schools or their MBA programs cannot in itself stimulate intellectual activity, but rather can only support what is already in existence (e.g. Einstein 1919).

Similarly, Coleen, shifting from a stereotypical judgemental 'mindset', explained how the MBA helped her recognise the incorrectness of her first impressions on more than one occasion. For example, at the start of her MBA journey, Coleen harboured the thought that she would gain very little from technical subjects and more from management subjects; in fact her experience was quite the opposite (see Section 4.12). Karina was surprised to experience how her MBA was grounded in self-reflection, something she thought was all about practice and trying different things. This suggests that learning reflective practice enabled Karina 'to stand back and understand what is happening and why' (Hay et al. 2004, p.170). Similarly, Bowman started with the perception that getting an MBA degree would resolve all his current work issues, but he discovered that he had enrolled for the wrong reasons—ticking a box for career progression (like Karolina) and gaining respect and promotion. However, a few months into his MBA journey, Bowman realised that an MBA is about being open to learning and emotionally exposed (transforming from an expeditioner to an explorer). Something that he identifies as 'disarming self' (see section 4.15.1). This sort of emotional exposure disclosed that he has from the very beginning harboured "illusions of greatness". He realised that there was an element of arrogance in that. Bowman uncovered, perhaps, his contrived opinion that what an MBA is going to teach him that he does not already know, perhaps, made him narrow-minded when it came to learning (see Sections 4.28, 4.15.2, 4.15.3 and 4.17.1)- 'His vanity,

feeding upon his ambition, had built up in his own mind an idea of his importance in the matter' (Amundsen 1927, p.206). This is one reason why, alongside Bowman, Charing also experienced how confronting an MBA could be. They both understood that getting that piece of paper is essential, but then knowing how to use it was central to their learning. At least, that is what the integrated dialogue helped me discover (see Section 4.28).

Vonnie described an MBA as a degree that gives her something to hold onto, but that building and nurturing relationships with peers remained the most important aspects of her MBA journey. It was only when she started her MBA studies that Vonnie understood that 'effective organizations are communities of human beings not collections of human resources' (Mintzberg 2015), and 'community means caring about our work, our colleagues and our place in the world, geographic and otherwise and in turn being inspired by this caring' (Mintzberg 2009, p.141). Although this explains how some of the participants were able to tap into their *will to manage* to move away from a *zest for business* (Livingston 1971; Mintzberg 2004), this transformation is dependent on an MBA student's open-to-learning 'mindset'. Arguably this sort of openness can arise in at least two ways: first, when they realise it themselves and second, when their work experiences are discussed and practised in class. However, the latter seemed to be missing, at least for some of the participants. This could be a reason behind Mintzberg's (2004) criticism of an MBA that claims to create managers in a traditional classroom.

Halim argued that although for him studying for an MBA was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, he found his MBA overly focused on theories. Upon sharing his sentiments and frustration with other students, he discovered how others also detested theories and models. This explains why the business community has doubled up on its criticism of MBA programs for over-emphasising theory rather than practice (Klimoski & Amos 2012). Although Ghoshal

(2005) disagrees with such thinking, Halim suggested that considering theories as independent concepts did not help him see the interconnection of those theories concerning real-world situations; hence, discussing case studies did not work for him. Instead, he preferred discussing his own case studies and gaining knowledge of his current work situation. Here, MBA peers' role and how they critique their peers' experiences would take centre stage, yet the *too safe* MBA learning environment might act as an anticatalyst and become an underlying reason for participants feeling *unsafe* at work. It may facilitate presenting management theories in an over-simplistic manner (Ghoshal 2005)—something that could create too many theories being taught too many times independent from each other or the wrong type of theory altogether being taught. Although Lewin (1945, p.129) argues that 'nothing is as practical as a good theory', over-simplifying theories may prevent MBA students from paying attention to those theories as a whole, as well as their application in a broad spectrum of interconnected and interdependent parts of their work. This criticism of an MBA education over simplifying theories does not stem only from the business schools' incapability to foster an engaging learning environment. These discussion points show how MBA students' open-mindedness might be an active factor in developing their learning capability. Thus, the experience of our participants often challenges the conventional impression that an MBA will provide the possessor with a golden entry ticket to the magic wonderland – perhaps that is indeed a fairy tale (e.g. de Meyer 2011; Mintzberg 2014).

As protested by Selina, Vonnie, Halim and Kristine, an MBA education over-focuses on theoretical concepts and KSACs, and very little on how MBA candidates learn and how their beliefs and attitudes shape their learning predispositions (Koljatic & Silva 2015). Here, I find a small portion from *Alice in Wonderland* fitting. Alice suffers an identity crisis because

she has grown and then shrunk back down. Still, the conversation she has with the Gryphon and Mock Turtle lends itself to reflection about less physical types of changes.

> Alice says she can describe her adventures from this morning, but that yesterday she was a different person entirely. The Gryphon wishes only to hear the adventures – explanations bore him – so Alice tells them both the story from the beginning. They listen intently. They are very interested in the part about the Caterpillar, and they tell her to recite another rhyme to see if she has forgotten it. Alice is getting quite fed up with animals ordering her about but she tries it. It comes out all mixed up. "Uncommon nonsense", the Turtle calls it (Georgina 2013).

From the above, Alice seems to be implying that her adventure in Wonderland has changed her and made her a new/different person. The Gryphon and Mock Turtle although listen intently, giving Alice the impression that they care about her, what becomes evident is that they are interested in the story and not so much in Alice. They are not interested in how Alice *feels* about not remembering rhymes but only in the *fact* that she can't remember. This suggests that Alice is treated as an object of interest, not as a person. Meanwhile, Alice is getting annoyed with Gryphon and Mock Turtle for telling her what to do (Georgina 2013).

From the participants' perspectives, identifying Alice as individual participants and their MBA lecturers as Gryphon and Mock Turtle, Karina believed that it was not their fault if they did not reflect enough in their lives to keep a check on their impressions. Instead, it was the lecturers' responsibility to help them do so (see section 4.12). Similarly, Marina queried what she could do if the MBA educators had no concern with students applying theories at work. Although this could be an unfair assessment of an MBA education, it highlights business

community's concern with business schools and how an MBA facilitates the application of knowledge and establish a link between the education context and work setting (Benjamin & O'Reilly 2011). This supports Segon and Booth's (2010, p.157) argument that MBA programs 'are rarely holistic, with subjects taught in isolation with little integration across the entire degree'. This is one reason why Maddie struggled to apply her learning at work, felt *unsafe at work,* and commented that her MBA was spread thin concerning keeping track of whether the taught content was working. From her experience, Melanie advised MBA aspirants to not do an MBA just for its sake and, at the same time, suggested business schools should not offer an MBA that teaches theories just for the sake of it. Although this could be misattribution – Melanie unable to monitor and control the influence of her attitude, toward her judgment, at the time of retrieval, the suggestion of another participant, Marina, indicates why the business community blames business schools as being more focused on theories and less on how MBA graduates apply them at work (Gupta & Bennett 2014; Mihail & Kloutsiniotis 2014) (see section 4.19.1).

5.4 A destination only, or a preparation for the 'real' journey ahead

The previous section discussed issues with MBA programs over-focusing on theories or teaching inappropriate theories or being perceived to do so by instrumental participants. This section is about the role of MBA candidates in learning and applying their knowledge at work.

All the participants talked about a range of work issues. For example, Kristine pigeon-holed herself by her expertise. She thought she needed to broaden her perspective to understand different facets of her work and her team members' work. However, her focus remained on herself: she thought only about needing to be proactive, not wanting to work with complacent people and so on. Even though she was a forward-looking and empathetic person, Kristine

considered her needs over others', akin to Schwartz's (1994) values of achievement. This suggests that although MBA students' instrumentality, like that of Kristine, which consists of self-centred values (Rokeach 1973), could be advantageous for them to achieve their goals, it might come at the cost of 'absolute disregard for other people's interests and welfare' (Rosanas 2011, p.150). Even though it was quite clear that Kristine did not disregard other people's welfare and interests, her work environment made her think about herself first (see Section 4.2). Although this could simply be a human trait, Rokeach's (1973) self- and other-centred values shed light on people's 'mindset' when acting according to their belief systems.

Bowman—an engineer by profession, working in a multi-national organisation and responsible for managing a team of a few dozen people—did not enjoy the technicality of his work. His conversations showed how he struggled in his organisation when choosing between the people side of things and achieving milestones, product deliveries and KPIs (see Section 4.15.2). Even though he was a people person, the engineering profession programmed Bowman's 'mindset' to seek the best option, only from the organisation's perspective (e.g. Taylor 1911, 2004). In a series of tweets between Tom Peters—best known for his book *In Search of Excellence (1984)*—and Mukom Akong Tamon, chief excellence officer and head of capacity building at the African Network Information Centre, Wakanda (2020), Tamon opines:

> If we can define 'value' we can apply excellence to it. That of course
>
> doesn't mean we should be finding the standard deviation of excellence.

to which Peters responds,

> spoken like an MBA who got off on finance courses.

to which Tamon replies,

> I didn't do an MBA sir, but I did engineering and like to quantify things.

It was only after Bowman started studying FOL that he became aware of his mode of behaviour. His FOL lecturer helped him recognise this aspect of his personality – his engineering 'mindset'. Participating in the Socratic circle[3] in-class activity allowed Bowman to reflect on his overall behaviour and confront his attitude at work. Socrates Circle's[4] systematic procedure is used to examine a text through questions and answers founded on the beliefs that all new knowledge is connected to prior knowledge and that asking one question should lead to asking further questions (Matt 2010). This activity aims to have participants work together to construct meaning and arrive at an answer, not for one student or one group to *win the argument*. This was what he meant by *disarming himself*—focusing on learning and accepting shortcomings instead of exercising what he thought was right (self-direction and conformity; Schwartz 1994; see Table 2.2). This sort of critical reflection at 'the highest level of the reflective learning hierarchy' (Hay et al. 2004, p.172) helped Bowman become aware of why he thought, perceived or acted in the way he did. He could critically and reflexively examine his underlying assumptions; question those assumptions and actions that affected his organisation and the community at large; act in more responsive ways; and engage in critical and open dialogue (Cunliffe 2009, pp.98–99).

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[3] a pedagogical approach based on the Socratic method that uses a dialogic approach to understand information in a text

[4] According to Copeland (2005, pp.3-4), Socratic circles turn partial classroom control, classroom direction, and classroom governance over to students by creating a truly equitable learning community where the weight and value of student voices and teacher voices are indistinguishable from each other. Socratic circles change the way individuals read, think, discuss, write, and act; they have the power to change a student's perspective on living, learning, and behaving. Socratic Circles foster in students a new way of looking at the world around them. Socratic questioning is a systematic process for examining the ideas, questions, and answers that form the basis of human belief (Copeland 2005, p.7). While Socratic Circles can differ in structure, and even in name, they typically involve the following components: a passage of text that students must read beforehand and two concentric circles of students: an outer circle and an inner circle (Participant Observation Notes from MCO class 2019). The inner circle focuses on exploring and analysing the text through the act of questioning and answering. During this phase, the outer circle remains silent. Students in the outer circle are much like scientific observers watching and listening to the conversation of the inner circle. When the text has been discussed and the inner circle is finished talking, the outer circle provides feedback on the dialogue that took place. This process alternates with the inner circle students going to the outer circle for the next meeting and vice versa (https://selspace.ca/socratic-seminars/).

For example, Bowman's pre-MBA engineering 'mindset' and his belief that he had answers to all possible problems concerning his work is akin to Schwartz's (1994) values of power (see Table 2.2). His disposition about what an MBA program was going to teach him that he did not already have knowledge of is akin to Schwartz's (1994) values of achievement. But these values changed during his MBA to Bowman being content with being wrong. He let go of his pre-MBA engineering 'mindset' and found a way to reset himself and go on this journey akin to Schwartz's (1994) values of stimulation and self-direction (see sections 4.15.2; 4.17.1). This shows how individuals' 'dispositions reflect their lived trajectories and justify their practice approaches' (Bourdieu 2000, p.138). It supports Mintzberg's (2014, p.14) argument that the very nature of an MBA attracts the wrong people, the ones who are too motivated by the need for power and control. And yet, in this case, the MBA helped Bowman to transform his mental models. Bowman's transformation from an expeditioner to an explorer allowed him to make changes to his work behaviour – abolishing receiving written reports from his subordinates to starting ten-minute stand-up meetings to engage with his team (see section 4.17.1). By getting involved in team discussions, he noticed his heightened level of emotional involvement, which even led him to go out of his way to support one of his subordinates and motivate him to perform (see section 4.17.1), akin to Schwartz's (1994) values of benevolence (see Table 2.2). Bowman could see how his MBA has made him a better technical person, but that it has also helped him become a better human (see section 4.17.1). It shows that Bowman developed reflective capability and understood how 'managers have to lead, and leaders have to manage' (Mintzberg 2004, p.6).

This is where the value of education becomes visible: 'not the learning of many facts, but the training of the mind to think something that cannot be learned from textbooks' (Einstein 1921a, cited by Calaprice 2005, p.65).

Like Karolina and Bowman, Maddie also began her MBA with the impression that it was just a *box-ticking exercise* and that she must pretend to be someone she was not. However, through this journey, she recognised her imposter syndrome was not about pretending to be someone she was not, but about feeling that she is an imposter that she is not as good as people think she is. This led Maddie to understand the meaning behind disarming self and learning from others' criticisms of her (see Section 4.15.1). Maddie, like others, saw her MBA as being quite linear. Being anxious about her career, Maddie only focused on doing an MBA because she wanted to move up in the ranks. She also thought that the more work she did, the more work her organisation would give her, which would limit her time with her family and prevent her from achieving a work-life balance. It suggests that her means-to-an-end mentality clouded her ability to learn (see Section 5.4) and allowed her to seek short-term instrumental outcomes (e.g. salary increase, promotion). Instead of engaging in a longer-term career process (e.g. developing into a better manager) (Wilkins et al. 2018). The change in Maddie's 'mindset' reflected a growing understanding of management as 'the acceptance of responsibility (Wilkin et al. 2018); aspects that allow MBA students to gain insights to resolve real-life problems (also see McCormack 1984; Mintzberg 2004, 2013).

Concerning real-life problems, Charing also went into the MBA thinking that *just* because she was open to learning new ideas, an MBA would give her answers to all her questions. Pre-set expectations made Charing see the MBA as 'specialised training in the functions of business and not so much a general education in the practice of managing' (Mintzberg 2004, p.5). However, she quickly realised that an MBA simply introduced her to concepts and other people's experiences. She needed to step back and observe everyone's managerial styles to make sense of those concepts independently. Like Selina, Charing was also left to integrate different theories and models and concepts with given tasks, a big

Mintzbergian criticism of MBA education (Mintzberg 2004). Although Charing could identify her learning from the in-class activities, it was only after she applied her knowledge at work that she could make sense of her learning and realise that her boss did not usually engage with people. Although this is consistent with the notion that higher levels of reflection are thought to be critical to effective learning (Hay, Peltier & Drago 2004, p.172), leaving students on their own to make sense of their education at work could be problematic. This could be one of the reasons behind many to argue that business schools are on the wrong track (Bennis & O'Toole 2005), focusing too much on teaching theories and not so much on establishing the links between those theories and work settings (Benjamin & O'Reilly 2011).

The mechanism to ensure the application of learning at work—working on this messiness consisting of intractable problems and complicated connections requires MBA educators to create a learning environment where MBA students can explore their experience, intuition, judgement, and wisdom - something that cannot be taught by just looking at *one best way* (Mintzberg 2004). This is one reason why Coleen later realised that to learn is to engage in a discussion, not to look at the world through the lens of right and wrong (see Section 4.12)— something Selina did not accept.

5.5 A pseudo-philosophy

The notion of an MBA being the *go-to degree* for working individuals was at the centre of most discussions among participants. However, not only did the MBA candidates and graduates differ in motivation; their learning inclinations were different too. For some, it was all about possessing that piece of paper; while for others, it was about learning how they could use the learning that they acquired while obtaining that piece of paper at work.

Karolina identified the possessor of an MBA degree as 'Superman'[5]. *DC Universe* (1938) describes the character of Superman as the most immediately recognizable ultimate symbol of truth, justice and hope; a guiding light to all; the gold standard of heroism, compassion and responsibility; god-like next to his human compatriots. Superman's story is not one of greed or conquest. Instead, he strives to represent the inherent goodness of the human spirit and the capacity of every living thing to do right by their neighbours. I find the DC Universe's *American way* quite fitting with Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address (cited in Clyde 1934). He famously said that the US government was *of the people, by the people, for the people*. The participants pointed out that they needed to have the right 'mindset' to approach work. For example, unlike her pre-MBA 'mindset', Karolina stopped focusing on the power Superman holds. Instead, somewhere during her MBA, she focused on how Superman uses his powers for others' welfare (see Section 4.14).

Similarly, Karina identified an MBA degree as both the cape of Superman and a Swiss army knife—a generalist tool kit (see Section 4.14). Karina's metaphor supports Kristine's story about a work colleague who still needed to get that cape to prove his knowledge base and expertise in his area of work, even with several years of experience. This implies a focus on appearance (visible through that piece of paper); maybe that is why Superman is not visible to New York City's general public as Clarke Kent.

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[5] DC Universe (1938) describes the character of Superman as follows:
From his blue uniform to his flowing red cape to the 'S' shield on his chest, Superman is one of the most immediately recognizable and beloved DC Superheroes of all time. The Man of Steel is the ultimate symbol of truth, justice and hope. He is the world's first Superhero and a guiding light to all.
The tip of the spear in a revolution that would change the landscape of pop culture, Superman has spent the last eighty years redefining what it means to stand for truth, justice and the American way. The last survivor of the doomed planet Krypton, raised in the quiet heartland of Smallville, Kansas, Superman is as much a legend as he is a man: the gold standard of heroism, compassion and responsibility.
Though his powers make him god-like next to his human compatriots, Superman's story is not one of greed or conquest. Instead, he strives to represent the inherent goodness of the human spirit and the capacity of every living thing to do right by their neighbors.

Pre-MBA, Karina questioned how an MBA would give her status in her role and allow her to position herself within a new team. In the second half of her MBA, Karina was confident that this cape would be a stamp of her capabilities. People would have faith in her, saving her from spending months building her professional profile and establishing networks (see Section 4.14). This is probably why Sir Martin Sorrell would employ MBA over non-MBA candidates (Dearlove 2006, p.6). However, this illustrates a change in Karina's view of what Superman stands for—it appears to slip to a social identity rather than internalised values and ethics. This sort of generalisation suggests that job candidates with that cape would automatically possess a higher level of general business skills and required knowledge than candidates who did not possess that cape, making MBAs preferable over others (Gupta et al. 2007). However, concerning Selina and Graisam, it was unclear whether that cape itself had any power. Selina, who would earn an MBA degree shortly after this study, still lacked confidence, and Graisam preferred to go back to a non-people-focused role (see Section 4.23.2). Although this suggests that generally, the person with the degree could be more qualified or deserving of the job (Gillespie 2019), the MBA label only has superficial power that does not stand up to scrutiny. It only works when MBAs themselves live up to the symbol of the cape. This could be one of the reasons why 'by virtue of their education' although the MBAs are considered 'the best people to administer' business areas (McCormack 1984, p.12), Anderson and Escher (2010, pp.26-27) upon graduating with the Harvard MBA found themselves 'staring into a great abyss instead of standing on the threshold of new and exciting careers.' Even though they had experience in the business world, 'they understood the realities of the marketplace as well as the public's rightful expectations of business managers' (pp.26-27). From this view people have of an MBA degree and the efforts the MBAs are required to make to live up to the symbol of cape, equating the holding of an MBA with possession of these capabilities in every case would not only be problematic but ignorant (Mintzberg 2004).

Being an individual contributor at work, Selina still did not know how to wear the cape of Superman. Selina acknowledged that she neither had *a magic wand* nor had become that different person that the other participants seemed to have been talking about and that she envisaged she would be at the end of her MBA. This suggests that not all students who possess an MBA have the same expertise, knowledge, experience or confidence level. Thus, Sorrell's (cited in Dearlove 2006) statement on preferring to employ MBAs over non-MBAs would only fulfil expectations of adding an MBA graduate to the workforce, but it would not necessarily mean that the workforce has the expertise (McCormack 1984) and/or Superman characteristics that employers, perhaps, expect from MBA candidates. This would make the business community continue to blame business schools for their inability to fulfil the *soft* requirement. It fits Karolina's assertion that just because MBA students have that piece of paper, people are not going to bow down in awe (see Section 4.14.1). They would neither be powerful and god-like next to peers and colleagues, not having the legitimate or expert power, nor would they have referent power that would automatically 'represent the inherent goodness of the human spirit and the capacity of every living thing to do right by their neighbors' (DC Universe 1938). That MBAs do not necessarily have 'special knowledge or expertise in a given area' (Rahim 1989, p.546) (do not have *expert power*), having that piece of paper would not provide MBAs with 'the right to prescribe or control behaviour' (Rahim 1989, p.546) or direct people to follow them (do not have *legitimate power*), nor kindle a desire in their subordinates to identify with them 'because of administration or personal liking' (Rahim 1989, p.546) (do not have *referent power*). This also explains why Superman's power is not the cause of his goodness; his goodness is more personal than 'professional'. I find this quite significant in understanding the issues and criticisms of MBA education. Although Elliott et al. (1994) generalise that MBAs are effective in all areas of communication and teamwork, the examples of Selina (lacking confidence), Kristine (happy to be unsafe) and Graisam (leaving customer facing role and

going back to non-customer facing back-end job) demonstrate how the one-size-fits-all is a pseudo-philosophy. This idea that all MBAs are effective masquerades itself as philosophy while significantly failing to meet some suitable intellectual standards. It creates an assumption that all MBAs are a master in these facets, which they are not, at least, not when it comes to these 14 participants. As Peters (2020) says, 'one size NEVER fits all. One size fits one [or none]. Period'.

Coleen pursued her MBA to obtain a stamp of authority and mastery in her area of work. Although she suspected that this piece of paper had changed people's perceptions of her, she did not feel that she had learnt much more than her undergraduate business degree. Although this does not seem surprising, this contrasts with Waters' assertion that an MBA is often seen as almost an essential addition to undergraduate education in the face of prevalent discourses 'the need for the continual upgrading of skills' (2009, p.1865). Thus, what should be taught and how it should be taught to MBA students remains contentious. Coleen found that she had to apply her knowledge and 'hold onto the reins' to complete her work and manage a 'pressure cooker' situation all the time by herself (see Section 4.14.1). Although education aims to train an independently acting and thinking individual (Einstein 1936, p.35), not being a manager and not having a team to manage at work (unlike Coleen), Selina was neither an independently acting nor a thinking manager or supervisor. Because of her 'mindset' to depend on others and seek confirmation of her learning, she could not be trained in this aim of education. Thus, she found her experience quite inconsistent with what Coleen and others described (see section 4.19.3). Similarly, Coleen said that her MBA studies took her on a journey that allowed her to develop her knowledge base and develop into a better person. At the same time, Salec pointed out how it was all about emotions and how the degree did not really matter as much as how you dealt with people (Marcus 2007, cited in Bledsoe & Oatsvall

2009). While Kristine described how experienced people would not get much out of an MBA, apart from a qualification, Karina asserted that an MBA degree was a stamp of knowledge on a résumé. Although she also pointed out that even though students had the cape, they needed to wear it first and then prove they are worthy of a role of their choice, Karolina warned that just by coming to class, doing the bare minimum, students would not gain the values of Superman. On the contrary, Selina concluded her assessment of an MBA as *just an academic pursuit*, which did not really give her much to apply the concepts in real-life. These conflicting ideas and perceptions of the MBA education have much to do with the education system their business school promoted (e.g. Livingston 1971). Thus, developing into a better manager as part of a long-term career process will be hindered if MBA programs continue to be seen mostly as 'specialised training in the functions of business [and] not general education in the practice of managing' (Mintzberg 2004, p.5).

These examples suggest that MBAs neither have the same understanding of what they get from their MBA degree nor do they have one learning that prevents them from transforming themselves into the 'Darth Vaders of the business world' (Anderson & Escher 2010, pp.26–27). They neither learn the taught content in the same manner nor develop an ability to apply the content in the same way at work. They do not even have the same work situations in which MBA learning could be applied and tested. Although teaching MBA courses in a safe and controlled environment enables MBA students to learn and apply their knowledge in class, it does not equate to them automatically applying the same in their work environment, which is often unsafe and uncontrolled. The issue is that although, upon graduation, MBAs are often placed 'at a higher level in the pecking order for jobs' (Donnelly 1981, p.63) having an MBA certificate is not, in itself, a guarantee of mastery in business administration (McCormack 1984;

Rapert et al. 2004). This issue of assuming all MBA programs and MBAs are the same and learn the same has led to global criticism of MBA education.

Vonnie summarised this well when she opined that people do not look past the MBA qualification; they see it as the endpoint and carry the perception that in an MBA, they will learn what is right and what is wrong. It is vital that MBAs have social skills and are not just graduates with academic credentials. Even though 'we are now inundated with great stories about the grand successes and even grander failures of great leaders' (Mintzberg 2004, p.1), the tunnel vision has created a belief that suddenly, a great leader is going to emerge (see Section 4.23.2). It is not just a misconception, misassumption, or miscalculation; it seems to have become standard to measure all MBAs as one. Mintzberg (2004, p.1) argues that 'we have yet to come to grips with the realities of being a manager.' From this notion, generalising that all MBAs will be effective and successful (Dearlove 2006) is problematic. This could be the reason why both Mintzberg (2004, p.15) and McCormack (1984, p.12) caution against business schools accepting applicants into MBA programs based largely on GMAT scores.

This chapter sums up the discussion of participants' views of their MBA - KSACs are essential to carry out different tasks at work and an MBA's value system becomes pertinent to deal with people. It highlights Marcus's (2007, cited in Bledsoe & Oatsvall 2009, p.2) advice to MBAs that, 'Business school will give you entrée to a company, but what you do when you get there matters more'. This is where a conceptual framework and discussion of the 'X factor' becomes necessary (see Figure 5.2).
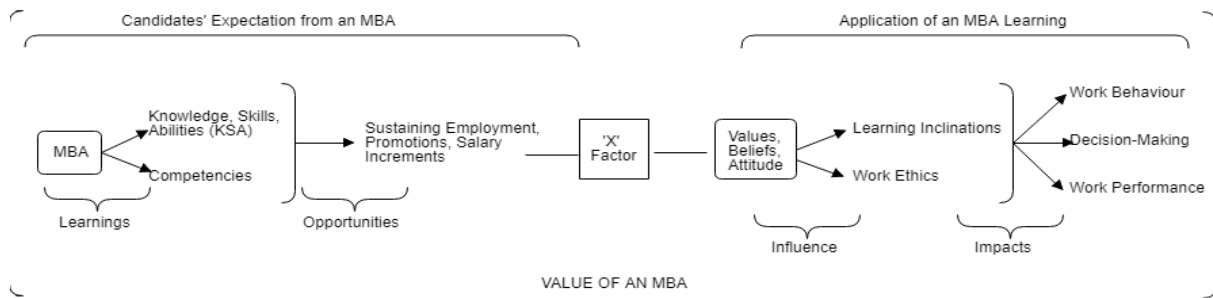
**Figure 5.2: The 'X' Factor: bridging the what, why and how of the MBA education**

Table 5.2 My interpretation of the 'X factors' for all 14 participants with quotes from the interviews.

**Table 5.2: The value of an MBA for the 14 participants of this research**

| Participant | Value of an MBA |
| --- | --- |
| Karolina | 'I would never talk to an engineer or a doctor, nothing more than just socially.' |
| Selina | 'It's fun, very expensive bit of fun.' |
| Kristine | 'It's not just years of experience, it's how you think and how you interact with people - a whole bunch of people from different areas, who were previously scattered, all booked together.' |
| Salec | 'Coming here and being exposed to people who've come from different fields where they apply different thinking, has just been fantastic.' |
| Bowman | It's all about the context that it's learning about yourself, your abilities, capabilities, weaknesses, vulnerabilities and how that can be used in a business, in a leadership context - how you can relate to two other people.' |
| Karina | 'Interpersonal dynamics—people from different institutions, different backgrounds, different cultures, different personal experienced and expectations, different ways of doing things and different values that they bring to the program - fundamentally different people from me who're motivated by fundamentally different things and values; a generalist tool kit that would help me wherever I want to go rather than tying me to a particular path.' |
| Coleen | 'Got as much from the conversations as what we got from the theory - listening to experiences in a real hotbed environment of professionals facing similar and |

| | different challenges, allowed me to see alternatives and different ways of doing things. It made us think differently, fast-tracking years of experience.' |
|---|---|
| Marina | 'MBA is a good, generalised scope. It kind of bridges you to get to a lot of things, whether it's consulting or management, it's a good bridge to get into different areas, more commercially savvy and just better in vocabulary and presentations, more professional.' |
| Maddie | 'Expand her tool chest and develop that thinking around that it's just not her. It's working with people to get a shared vision and fostering the development of people.' |
| Melanie | 'It's about empowering others to do things rather than being hot-headed and irrational and dictating terms to how it's not about control.' |
| Vonnie | 'The MBA is taught by professional people who know what needs to be taught.' |
| Charing | 'Engage herself with people and learn from them who're managers at the same level, have academic preferences, academic writing, higher understanding, more thinking, more than basic.' |
| Graisam | 'Reflecting on a lot of things like logic, teamwork, patience and how to jump out of the comfort zone - the parts, angles and different ends are the perspectives that I never looked at previously.' |
| Halim | 'Students are professionals with a lot of experience. Even the lecturers come from private experiences or even the government experience, or maybe they had their own business before they started teaching. They share their own business experiences; they share what happened in their business relating it to the theory that he or she is currently teaching in class; a practical and real-world explanation.' |

Three main things seem to have emerged from situating each of the 14 participants in the conceptual framework (see Table 5.2): *networking, lecturers' professional backgrounds and lecturers' teaching approaches.*

## 5.6 The participants' MBA experiences

Intriguingly, for some participants, *networking, lecturers' professional backgrounds and lecturers' teaching approaches* helped them alter their ways of thinking and making decisions. Conversely, for others, these same factors did not help much.

### 5.6.1 Networking

The participants highlighted how, in their MBA, an opportunity to meet people from different domains helped them recognise their tunnel vision. Discussing work, they understood the issues they were experiencing from different perspectives, from working in a completely different field altogether and handling similar issues in a completely different manner. Nowicka (2015, p.105) argues:

> the processes of transfer are yet neither straightforward nor automatic
> or assured. Transfer is artefactual to social interactions and these take
> place in and through reference to the field which changes in time. To
> research transfer, we need to consider time and the reflexive capacity
> of social actors involved in the transfer.

This sheds light on participants' suggestions regarding how their critical thinking evolved because of the in-class discussion with peers, paving the way for them to reflect on their self- and other-centredness (e.g. Rokeach 1973). Vonnie's suggestion for how MBA students need to stick with a little group they are in their MBA subjects and spread themselves across different groups in different subjects helped me identify the catalyst to their evolved thinking, akin to Nowicka's (2015, p.21) argument on how reflexivity helps people declare their outlooks and how these evolved in the new socio-cultural context. Vonnie suggested that she developed *friendship groups* (see Section 4.23.1). Her idea behind creating these groups

was *not to* establish a give-and-take relationship but to foster friendships that did not have greed as the central motive (see Section 5.5). Reflecting on her time in the MBA program, she indicated how beneficial it would have been for her if networking had been the first course introduced and taught in her MBA. This suggests how creating a classroom environment where experienced people can learn from each other and share their experience becomes a catalyst for their evolved thinking, akin to Bourdieu's (1977) and Nowicka's (2015) arguments. If this kind of social learning becomes ritual and routine, it 'could be one of the greatest benefits' of an MBA in-class learning environment (Mintzberg 2019). This is one reason why the MBA candidates felt confronted concerning their beliefs, but later felt an MBA to be a safe place to share and learn. This sort of social learning encouraged them to learn from each other, which became an X factor of their MBA education throughout their MBA journey, bridging their KSACs with their value systems. This seems to be one reason why participants were willing to take risks in their MBA studies even when they identified themselves as risk averse. It clarifies why values are often conflated with other social psychological phenomena and why it is essential to acknowledge 'values' as a verb (Hitlin & Piliavin 2004). Only then can there be a possibility to understand why people state that they value (verb) a person, action, or activity, and how they express a *deeper meaning* associated with that entity. Unless and until an MBA environment is created to understand the process through which 'values operate within and across interactions' (Hitlin & Piliavin 2004, p.362), creating psychological safety might be quite challenging. And yet, most of the participants acknowledged psychological safety in their MBA …they just couldn't transfer it to all their work relationships.

5.6.2 Students' learning inclinations and lecturers' teaching approaches

Recalling her MBA class environment and her experience with quieter students, Karolina blamed her lecturers for "not going that extra mile". She asserted that not putting

people on the spot and asking casual questions, such as what *they think*, would have made the quieter ones speak. However, Karolina's lecturers did not engage all the students in class discussions. Instead, the students had a choice (see Section 4.9.1). This may explain why Selina just sat with her laptop doing office work in a few of her MBA courses (see Section 4.9.2). This appeared to be the anticatalyst in Selina's efforts to do the readings and prepare for class discussions. The lecturers' (not-so-popular) teaching approaches supposedly negatively influenced students' disengaged behaviour and gave the students the impression that the lecturers did not make enough efforts to create an engaging learning environment in their classes. From the participants' perspectives, as 'the spiral of learning from experience' did not exist, they did not '"learn how to learn" by consciously following a recursive cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting' (Kolb & Kolb 2009, p.297). This sheds light on why increasing concerns about teaching 'have provided grist for high-profile media features and scholarly journals', which has brought heavy scrutiny to the purpose of business schools themselves (Jain & Golosinski 2011, p.64).

Although Selina considered herself a terrible student in hindsight, not preparing for the class discussions seemed "the most doable thing". On the other hand, Kristine did not blame the lecturers for their teaching methods. Instead, she blamed the students for not preparing for the class discussions. Kristine worked out early that if she did not do the readings and the work in advance, she would be lost in class. For example, one of the lecturers helped her escape from her tunnel vision only because she approached the lecturer and not the other way round (see Section 4.9.2). This argument is in line with McCormack's experience that the MBA lays a foundation for learning, but it cannot teach 'all the ins and outs of everyday business life' as those are largely 'a self-learning process' (McCormack 1984, p.9). This also shows that Kristine is a 'thinking style person' who prefers to prepare in advance by reading about material

to be covered in the course (Kolb & Kolb 2009, p.322). However, inclining more towards Selina's viewpoint than Kristine's, Salec observed how 95% of the students were intensely engaged because they had paid a large amount of money. Thus, Salec did not blame the students, but lecturers' inability to create an environment where "students could match their *wavelength*." This sort of environment made the students feel that they were just ticking a box by passing a course. This sort of experience made Salec drop one of his courses. It is quite important to note the similarity between participants concerning the psychological safety that these students did not experience with their superiors at work and with the lecturers in their MBA. Although the findings (see sections 4.8, 4.13, 4.16, 4.17) established that the participants felt safe in their MBA, dropping a course without consulting with the lecturer suggests otherwise. Could this be why students in Harvard 'stomped their feet when lectures became boring', especially in Copeland's class, as he was a 'notoriously poor lecturer and a victim of foot-stomping protests' (Mintzberg 2004, p.23).

Comparing the two lecturers who taught the same course, Salec pointed out how one left him to learn all by himself and figure out who he was, while the other pushed him to reflect on his learning. Although Salec had to make efforts in both classes, the latter lecturer's approach to driving learning helped Salec understand his work behaviour (see Section 4.9.3, 4.19.2). Similarly, comparing his FOL lecturer with another lecturer, Salec identified the latter as lacking a reflective approach to learning, which made Salec disinterested in learning from the course over a period of few weeks. Bowman rode in the same boat as Salec and found that his FOL lecturer's interest in engaging him helped him realise how he did not reconsider his views before making them public. This made Bowman understand his work behaviour, which he considered a transformative event in his MBA journey. This highlights a shift in Bowman's approach to learning – his readiness and willingness to be engaged with the lecturer.

In contrast, Selina found neither subject discussed by Salec to be transformative—she felt the complete opposite; that is, no growth. This shed light on how Salec and Bowman wanted to learn how they could be better managers (*will to manage*), which enabled them to reflect on their learning. At the same time, Selina perhaps misinterpreted the *will to manage* with the *zest for business*, thus despising her lecturers' theoretical self-learning approach, preferring 'yes' and 'no' answers instead (e.g. Livingston 1971; Mintzberg 2004). However, this was not straightforward. It presented a dilemma regarding whether the lecturers' teaching approaches or the students' learning predispositions were responsible for the students' misinterpreting the will to manage with the zest for business. For example, although both Karina and Selina disliked a few lecturers' teaching approaches, they both had different reasons: while Selina disliked those lectures because they did not give her yes–no or right–wrong sorts of answers, Karina did not connect with the lecturers because the discussion was about yes–no and right–wrong answers (see Section 4.13). This suggests that the same approach that acted as a catalyst in Karina's development worked anti-catalytically for Selina. This may be why Selina did not learn how to tap into 'the energy of people' (Mintzberg 2004, p.16) and continued to focus on the one best way instead (Mintzberg 2004)—right and wrong being the most compelling and important aspect of her MBA education.

Not seeking prescriptive answers enabled Karina to identify shared growth, whereas, in the absence of prescriptive answers, Selina lost confidence. Conversely, Coleen asserted that some of the lecturers' challenges made students think differently in class. Nonetheless, she opined that if the lecturers were not engaging enough, they must not back down and make lecturers aware of their dissatisfaction - like Harvard students stomping in Copeland's class (Mintzberg 2004). However, Selina opted to stay silent instead, opting not to share her

dissatisfaction with the lecturers. It might have played a critical role in Selina's presumption that lecturers were not open to criticism. It suggests that even though students might be dissatisfied with lecturers or their teaching approach, they might remain enrolled in the subject (like Selina, unlike Salec), feeling disinterested. The hesitation could be because of their conclusion that lecturers might label them 'the annoying ones', negatively affecting their exam results. Perhaps it may be consistent with the classroom environment being safe. It could be the students' internal environment that is unsafe.

Concerning the same lecturers in the same subjects that Salec did not favour and Selina despised studying with, Coleen enjoyed those typical conversations. However, her rationale for enjoying the difficult conversations was her *affinity with the lecturer*. While Salec and Selina felt dissatisfaction, Coleen found the conversations engaging. This suggests that while Coleen's wavelength matched that of the lecturer, neither Salec nor Selina experienced the same affinity. Recalling her class environment, Coleen indicated that the students who preferred black and white, right and wrong, yes and no answers remained disengaged in classes with abstract discussions. Thus, while those conceptual discussions pushed Coleen to step out of her comfort zone, Salec dropped the course and Selina lost confidence. Like Coleen, Melanie was also happy to learn from lecturers who preferred more nuanced discussions. However, she could develop an affinity with these lecturers only when they bridged the course content with her job. This suggests that Melanie was looking for resources that would enable an easy transition of skills and knowledge that she would learn in an in-class environment to what she would use in her work setting (Panitz 1995).

For example, in FOL, Salec uncovered how he and his colleagues were blaming one of their team members without understanding their concerns, perhaps making the team member

feel the same way Salec felt with his boss (see section 4.8). Salec pointed out that his revelation occurred because his FOL lecturer discussed his own work issues, not just similar problems experienced by other managers (a case study view). This suggests that Salec suspended his existing beliefs about his work colleague and entertained his lecturers' provocative ideas, which reshaped his thinking. This is what education could be about (Mintzberg 2004, p.249). Kolb and Kolb (2009, p.297) argue that, 'the spiral of learning from experience …can help learners "learn how to learn" [and] by consciously following a recursive cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting, they can increase their learning power'.

This supports Halim's preference to discuss his own work issues—which he identified as his own case study—rather than hypothetical ones, and why Bowman preferred to discuss ideas with practitioner–lecturers rather than pure academics. Although this sort of statement is quite vague, it relates to why Coleen's wavelength did not match that of her lecturers when there was a lack of focus on applying concepts. Although learning theories sit within conceptual frameworks that can help individuals make sense of their and others' learning (Christensen et al. 2012), Selina complained of not applying theories enough. Although Bowman was able to question the lecturers and had no problem sharing his ideas in class, Selina and Maddie found self-nominating to speak in class intense and scary. Marina opined that with students like Selina, Maddie and herself, lecturers might need to change their teaching approach and ask the questions from students directly without giving them the option to self-nominate. She identified this approach to make students discuss their ideas in class a *military-select* approach. She opined pushing students to talk is essential, or else they will not try (see Section 4.17.1). This suggests that their learning ability was stifled by a fixed self-concept, whereby they told themselves that they could not learn (Kolb & Kolb 1990, p.297). This is one reason why Marina only engaged and participated in discussions if she was asked to speak in class. For example,

Marina's accounting lecturer encouraged students to self-teach; that is, read the content, do the practice questions and then teach the subject. Marina chimed in and engaged with the class discussion, but when it came to the finance course, Marina did not feel like she had learned much because the lecturer delivered all the content via lecture slides. Although this suggests that Marina had a preferred learning approach, the lecturer's slide-based teaching did not help her continue developing 'sophisticated strategies for intentional learning' in line with her unique talents (Kolb & Kolb 2009, p.297). Thus, this overload of information to a great extent brought the lecturer's credibility into question (e.g. Karolina, Marina, Karina, Coleen, Selina, Salec) (see sections 4.9.2, 4.9.3, 4.19). Thus, to foster deeper thinking, it is essential to keep in mind the goal of achieving 'reflective thinking status', which includes 'the role of the lecturer, student interaction and course design and content' (Hay et al. 2004, p.172).

### 5.6.3 Non-practitioner academic lecturers *v*. practitioner–lecturers: trust in a lecturer's background, not in the lecturer

For Selina, a lecturer's style of teaching content was crucial. For her, discussing theoretical concepts at the start gave her clarity, but she wanted the lecturers to provide real-life examples—*examples of their own experiences* and not someone else's. This notion of being taught by practitioners suggests that students like Selina experienced a disconnection from lecturers who were not practitioners in their fields. This fits Donham's remark that he had 'no theoretical knowledge of business' and his faculty had 'little practical knowledge of business. It was a difficult problem to fit the two together' (Gleeson et al. 1993, p.17). Based on this notion, Selina felt that her lecturers could not understand her work situation and what she was going through at her workplace, which developed her non-trusting 'mindset' towards pure academics. However, lecturers who had field experience or were running a consultancy could give examples and Selina would take those at face value, while a pure academic with a similar

case study view made her switch off her learning 'mindset'. Although she understood that academics have their own teaching methods, she found practitioner–lecturers much more engaging and not overly theoretical (see Sections 4.24. 4.28). Selina and a few other students held the belief that when it came to learning theories and practising those at work, for them, it came down to their trust in the lecturer—'absolutely one hundred per cent'. For example, lecturers who were partners at KPMG made more sense to students than did pure academics, *just* because they were at KPMG (see Section 4.9.3). This fits Harvard's Donham College's faculty's belief that cases would be 'most valuable when they encouraged students to abandon the search for theory and to learn how to make realistic and difficult decisions on their own' (Gleeson et al. 1993, pp.31–32). This attitude led some participants—especially Selina, Salec and Marina who associated trust not so much with a lecturer or their teaching ability, but with their background and ongoing work affiliation—to reject theories as inappropriate and/or impractical when introduced by non-practitioner academics; with practitioner–lecturers, it was the opposite.

Although 'theories and ideas have done much to strengthen the management practices' (Ghoshal 2005, p.75), Selina so loudly condemned them that it felt as if only lecturers with field experience and not pure academics could help her learn. She found the latter overly focused on content and less on her life experience, "dumping" too much content on her. According to Selina, practitioner–lecturers showed her how they deciphered that dump in their work, while pure academics could not. It highlights the business community's criticism of MBA programs over-emphasising theory rather than practice, raising concern on the way theories are taught (Klimoski & Amos 2012). This type of learning environment led Selina, Salec, Karolina and Marina to 'write off' a few MBA subjects and feel as if these sorts of lecturers were "lecturing at them", without considering their view of how theories were

discussed in class and whether they are able to apply the theories at work (see Section 4.9.2). If lecturers teaching theoretical concepts are 'overwhelmingly casual or functional in their modes of explanation', students might not grasp the underlying importance of learning the concepts (Ghoshal 2005, p.79).

Karina pointed out that practitioner–lecturers could discuss the degree to which they themselves did things (e.g. negotiation) in their daily work and how good they thought they were. This helped the participants relate what they did at work with how their practitioner–lecturers tackled similar issues in their workplaces and acted in similar circumstances. The participants felt as if the practitioner–lecturers were willing to challenge positions, which made the participants believe that all the ideas they needed to solve their work problems exist in those classes and that they were the smartest people. This could be a reason behind Gupta et al.'s (2007) criticism of MBAs as egomaniacs, thinking they know the answers to all the questions (McCormack 1984). However, the participants did not consider themselves egomaniacs. Instead, they believed they were the smartest people who were taught by smart people (practitioners), which led Bowman to acknowledge that the practical application of the concepts was one thing and going through the live scenarios in some of his MBA classes, that's where the value was. These light bulb moments made the students see the value of an MBA because the practitioner–lecturers could walk them through and talk about what mattered to them, making it explicit and visible to the students concerning their organisations. This highlights Kolb and Kolb's (2009, p.298) experiential learning cycle, which defines learning as, 'the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience' (Kolb 1984, p.41). This made it easier for students to understand how to deal with people from different institutions, backgrounds and cultures, with distinct personal experiences and expectations. Karina

especially saw the different ways of doing things and values that students brought to the program, which made them identify such lecturers as outstanding, building on something with a real plan and presenting some of their information from work (see Sections 4.12, 4.13).

Coleen suggested that this sort of class environment, where both peers and lecturers were experienced professionals, pushed her and others to think differently, to see alternatives and be open to different ways of doing things. Instead of just dwelling on problems in one way or through a prescribed case study's eye. However, with pure academics, although they could learn different techniques and write about it as a part of an assignment, for some reason, it did not help them much to put that learning into practice at work. Thus, the participants felt that they might not move from amateur to master level unless a practitioner–lecturer taught them. This shows how paving 'the way by placing learning about learning' into their educational programs' agenda (Kolb & Kolb 2009, p.297), business schools and/or the MBA lecturers can plan their courses. They could consider 'the kinds of learning space they are creating and the appropriateness of these spaces for the students in their course and/or for the material being taught' (Kolb & Kolb 2009, pp.321–322). One of the alternative perspectives could be to introduce practitioner-lecturers in MBA programs. It would benefit students at least in two ways: first, practitioner-lecturers are likely be up-to-date on the latest tools in their field (Mickey 2013 cited by Kross & Guo 2019, p.3) and second, they are direct members of the community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). However, 'the issues of theory versus application emphasis, what we choose to teach, desired student skills, and the practicality of academic research are continually debated by academics and practitioners' (Stern & Tseng 2002, p.225). This brings an interesting issue of practitioner-lecturers more than likely lacking formal pedagogical training (Kross & Guo 2019).

5.7 A disconnect between academic subjects

MBA programs offer a variety of subjects in different areas of work, some of which are highlighted in previous subsections. Although the participants felt that each subject had something to offer—either theoretical or technical—it was only based on anecdotal evidence. For example, Karina felt one of her subjects was irrelevant to her as she could not relate her learning to other subjects. It made her develop an attitude that she would not get value from deep engagement in this subject. Similarly, Selina felt as if she was gaining understanding of different facets of her work but still could not establish the links between those facets at work. Unaware that an MBA is a business education and not so much an education in management, Selina thought that doing a *Master of Management* (MoM) would have been better (see section 4.7.1). At least, she could have had an opportunity to improve in one specific area of study and understand its relationship with other facets of her work. It suggests how Karina and Selina had paid 'voluntary attention', which was determined by their 'interest in the object of attention' (Kolb & Kolb 2010, p. 301)—in this case, the subjects they had studied in the MBA. According to James (1890), this sort of attention and interest in the object of attention creates a continuous ongoing flow of experience (Kolb & Kolb 2010, p.301), which is more or less along the lines of 'my experience is what I agree to attend to' (James 1890, p.403). This suggests their interest in a few subjects and disinterest in a few others served as the 'very keel on which their mental ship was built' (James 1890, cited in Kolb & Kolb 2010, p.301). For example, for Selina, SM was the highlight of her MBA. However, she did not know how SM learning related to FOL and MCO, and vice versa. This made Selina consider all her subjects in isolation - not knowing how she could have used her knowledge from one subject to make sense of concepts in others and see all the subjects collectively in the context of her work, she left those subjects aside, only aiming to pass the exam. This resonates with McCormack's

(1984, p.12) criticism that 'a master's in business can sometimes block an ability to master experience'.

Conversely, Kristine gained a comprehensive perspective of a whole range of facets of her work, although she discovered that she could not join all the pieces together unless she applied these facets from her MBA at work. Kristine uncovered during her MBA journey that if she would not have started her MBA and learned concepts, she would not have known what she did not know (see section 4.5). It was only when she started applying the concepts from her MBA at work, she discovered what she really enjoyed – "broader stakeholder management". Kristine was able to understand her work area better, but she also understood how different work areas were interconnected and that she could assist people from work areas outside of her own – something that she did not know until she applied concepts from her MBA at work. She uncovered her narrow-mindedness and discovered her learning-by-doing attitude (see section 4.5). This is where Kristine learnt the craft of managing and honed it through practice and experience, and not just by sitting in her MBA classroom (Mintzberg 2004). Kristine concluded that although she had a better understanding of different facets of her work, she could not claim to be either an architect an accountant a marketer or an economist. However, at work, she could talk to all those people and bring all those areas of work together. This suggests that even though an MBA might give a person the edge over those with standalone business and management degrees (e.g. MoM), we cannot assume MBA degree holders have mastery in these areas of work. Thus, holding an MBA does not equate with possession of expertise in different organisation facets. This suggests that while Kristine was able to link different concepts from various courses to her work—which increased her knowledge base—she could not do so when it came to connecting the concepts. For example, the systems thinking course allowed Kristine to learn to see connections between different

facets of her work across politics, federal and state government, but only with theoretical subjects and not so much with subjects like Accounting and Finance (see section 4.6.2). Although it could be argued that MBA programs 'provide a general grounding in business concepts and techniques, specific skills and specialised knowledge' (Murray 1988, p.72; Menez 2014), unless students are able to connect different theoretical concepts, they may remember the concepts in their MBA studies, but it wouldn't necessarily mean they could do the same 5 years later (Ference & Ritti 1980, p.648).

Similarly, Coleen obtained several new ideas from her MBA subjects, but identified a disconnection between soft and hard subjects. Coleen identified subjects such as FOL, MCO and systems thinking as soft subjects, while subjects such as finance, accounting and economics were hard subjects. Coleen learnt various soft skills (e.g. a reflective 'mindset'—keeping a check on her first impressions; see section 4.12; 4.13) through soft subjects, but could not identify any soft skills that she might have learnt when it came to hard subjects (Rubin & Dierdorff 2007). According to her, it was all about the content and rules (e.g. Taylorist view; Taylor 1911, 2004). Thus, for her, any connection between soft and hard subjects was missing. Technical subjects made her disinterested because of the impression that once it's right, it's right—she could not grow anymore. This suggests that although the MBA program adequately covered the requirements for managerial competency (hard skills/technical), soft knowledge (e.g. managing people) gained from these subjects remained the weakest, similar to Rubin and Dierdorff's (2007) findings. Although Coleen could apply these subjects in isolation at work, not being able to figure out how she could use her inter-subject knowledge better to understand the connections between aspects of her job, she did not consider her MBA a success. Although Coleen identified a significant change in her thinking and found her MBA a useful study that expanded her knowledge base, that soft and hard subject disconnection prevented her from

maximising her gain from an MBA. This could be a reason why Coleen did not see a big difference between her undergraduate business degree and her MBA (see Section 4.13, 4.14.1), as both relied too heavily on technical approaches. This made her conclude that despite the opportunity to gain knowledge from all her individual subjects, because of the missing inter-subject link, the taught courses were not integrated across the entire degree (Segon & Booth 2010). This prevented her better understanding the work she did and identifying other areas in which she was involved and how they were linked together. Vonnie experienced the same in her MBA – not a big difference between her undergraduate and MBA courses (see section 4.21). This suggests that the disconnection did not encourage critical thinking and analysis, and failed to provide Coleen with a holistic understanding of the world of business. Like, Coleen and Kristine, Marina concluded that attempting to identify interconnections between concepts from different courses and how they could be applied at work collectively was not something central to their MBA. This highlights the perennial problem with course design and content, which is crucial as they must foster deeper thinking by encouraging critical thinking and analysis and 'not rely too heavily on technical approaches which tend to encourage rote learning' (Hay et al. 2004, p.173). Here, the lecturers' role in student learning, students' inclination to learn and participate in class discussions, and course content and design that facilitates such discussions becomes important.

Like other participants, Marina categorised her MBA subjects as hard and soft and did not connect the two. For example, subjects like MCO and accounting provided her with some guidance, which helped her self-learn many topics and make connections herself. Nonetheless, because of the nature of how finance was taught, she felt very isolated when she tried to apply the concepts from other subjects. She found she had improved specific skills and competency in various functional areas, such as marketing and management, accounting, finance, business

law and strategic decision making processes (Menez 2014), but emphasised how this did not mean that she was competent in applying those concepts at work. This illustrates why this conventional outlook, that 'by virtue of their education, the MBAs were[are] the best people' to manage different areas of business remains contestable (McCormack 1984, p.12). For example, Marina argued that even though on paper having an MBA degree looked impressive, students found *a few subjects a waste of time* and developed a 'mindset' to criticise the taught content in every class instead of learning from it (see section 4.19.1). Given Marina's natural inclination to look for templates when starting new projects (e.g. designing or creating a new brochure), she detested class discussions that were open-ended (see section 4.15.2). This suggests that for some students, 'compartmentalizing is mostly a conscious process of putting some emotional distance between' themselves and the situation they are in (McCormack 1984, p.59). Anderson and Escher (2010, pp.40–42) state that although they are 'fans of business education' and have no doubt that their training and their degrees are of great professional value, they acknowledge 'the friction of business school culture can rub the vision away and bury it' among the business cases. This disconnection between the hard and the soft subjects may prevent business schools from realising their visions. This may make them wonder 'why they are even there'. It is a paradox - having an MBA is impressive and looks good on a résumé, but some students seem to be suggesting that much of its content is a waste of time. In such a compartmentalised academic environment, it seems as if business schools invite students to focus on the *hard subjects*, like finance and accounting, instead of the *soft practices*, like leadership and ethics (Anderson & Escher 2010).

From the participants' perspectives, they experienced that the *hard* subjects were taught only as rights and wrongs, while the soft courses focused on helping them understand their assumptions. Maddie identified them as closed and open subjects. For example, while doing

the systems thinking course, Maddie experienced independence, while accounting felt like a chore – mandatory subjects, where she had to make an extraordinary effort to study. She felt the *closed subjects were really dry* while *open subjects* required deeper thinking. This sort of 'mindset' made Maddie categorise accounting in a different league from systems thinking and when she tried using the knowledge from open subjects in accounting, it made her feel fatigued. Although MBA programs 'equip students with dandy tools to hang from their toolbelt, the lessons to be learned are too often limited to functionality rather than long-term purpose' (Anderson & Escher 2010, p.48). Still, MBA programs are considered the flagship offering of business schools and for most institutions, their raison d'etre' (Rubin & Dierdorff 2013, p.126). Even though the kudos of achieving an MBA degree has declined somewhat over time (Goldgehn & Kane 1997). It would have been a better learning experience for Maddie if she could have carried accounting around with her all day, thinking about it; she could only do this with subjects like MCO, FOL and systems thinking. However, like many other participants, she was left on her own to integrate different theories and models and concepts with given tasks (Mintzberg 2004). Gosling and Mintzberg (2004, p.19) write, 'but they never do'- on their own, the students might feel overwhelmed to make connections between different theoretical concepts from different subjects. This does not mean that an MBA does not offer a broad knowledge base. The problem is the rare encouragement 'to seek a unifying theme' among different courses (Anderson & Escher 2010, p.48). This indicates how the bridge between the open and closed subjects, or hard and soft subjects is broken.

Vonnie confirmed that her experience with subjects like OB [MCO] and FOL was fascinating and memorable, which was not true for management accounting. She believed *people brand themselves as finance or accounting and so on*, favouring specialising at a particular organisational function, instead of focusing on learning general skills (Hunt & Speck

1986). Studying subjects such as MCO provided her with a deeper perspective on how she could carry out different learning at work. However, when applying these MCO concepts to other subjects, such as accounting, although Vonnie did not detest management accounting, she could not understand how to use and apply her MCO thinking in the course. She felt lost. This type of 'curriculum signals that the course is more a stand-alone discipline than a foundation for the rest of the curriculum' (Anderson & Escher p.49). Discussing marketing courses and business statistics, Vonnie felt that the latter was so detached from her work that she could not practice it at work, eventually labelling it 'unrelatable' to work. Although she found a direct link with what was taught in her marketing course and found the content relatable, it seemed as if she could never practice business statistics in her marketing job. It shows how MBA programs give its students' knowledge of various work facets - shareholder value in finance, on empowerment in MCO, on customer service in marketing, but it also shows their lack of focus on knowledge application (Gosling & Mintzberg 2004).

Similarly, for Halim, although his FOL and MCO courses helped him develop a reflective ability to view his work holistically, subjects like finance and accounting helped him gain the confidence to converse with technical teams at work. Even though FOL and MCO helped Halim understand how it was not all about *him* and more about *us* in his organisation, he could not use his reflective ability from these two subjects to understand the accounting side of his work. Like Kristine, as Halim did not have an accounting or finance background, he had to rely on self-learning. Thus, these sorts of technical subjects did not allow him to learn how to relate the taught content to his work situation, which was the opposite of his experience with subjects like MCO. This is where MBA programs are criticised for being 'rarely holistic' (Segon & Booth 2010, p.157). Halim could talk to his technical team members, make sense of his company's financial data and develop an ability to read its annual report (see section 4.27),

but he had little room to think outside the box. He could recognise what he did at work in his accounting subject, but when he reflected on why he did it and what he could do further to solve business issues in his organisation, he found himself restricted to thinking only within the accounting realm. This implies that 'the curriculum is the effect, not the cause, of what ails the modern business school'. Rather than blaming the curriculum outright, Bennis and O'Toole (2005, p.96) point towards the 'dramatic shift in business schools' culture.' They suggest that 'when applied to business—where judgments are made with messy, incomplete data—statistical and methodological wizardry can blind rather than illuminate' (p.99). Until this changes, MBA students might not understand the importance of inter-subject connections in their MBA programs. Suppose business schools want to 'make significant headway in improving the practice of managing'. In that case, they need to bring this false image of their MBA program as a holy grail and a magic wand or a Superman cape and a Swiss knife into line with what their MBA actually provides its students—mastery in business administration is a choice that rests with MBA students alone (Mintzberg 2013, p.16). They can continue their quest to receive a piece of paper at the end, but without looking for ways to learn new knowledge by unlearning what they know, their efforts will bear no fruit.

The chapter explained how the participants carried an expeditioner 'mindset' to their MBA and some, during their MBA, started shifting their psychological outlook towards what Amundsen describes as an explorer. Plato dealt with his subject matter by teaching students how to think for themselves or, more fundamentally, that they must think for themselves and a world of knowledge for them to discover (Lesser 1982). This shows how participants started their MBA journeys focused on the values of achievement and self-gratification (Schwartz, 1994). Later in their MBA, they explored and even discovered greater knowledge (e.g., Universalism, Benevolence and Conformity; Schwartz 1994). However, not all participants fit

into Plato's teachings. According to Lesser (1982, pp.390-391), Plato is "most concerned to convince the pupil that he needs to learn, and to teach him the general principles of how to learn and how the world of knowledge is structured: if he can come to know this, he can apply it to anything." Here, Selena seems to have not understood these general principles and thus, she felt as if she did not know what she learnt and how she could apply her MBA learning at work. On the one hand, Bowman, Karolina, Kristina and Maddie were in line with Aristotelean objectivity, having developed a set of views to develop "a likely answer to the problem or, finally, the right answer' (e.g., values of Conformity and Security; see table 2.2) (Lesser, 1982, p.391). On the other hand, Selena seems to have remained with the Platonic style, which may lead students to "ponder on the questions without having any real wish to discover" the answers (Lesser, 1982, p.392). Lesser (1982, p.392) argues that even though for each, Plato and Aristotle, a particular style predominates, "the main teaching vehicle normally has to be Aristotle's: otherwise sufficient information cannot be conveyed."

Management is not a clear cut occupation with either an established body of knowledge and operating principles or a clearly specified set of tasks of the type which we might expect to see in other parts of a society's occupational division of labour. This presents particular problems for the study of how people make the 'transition' into managerial work and how managers learn and develop (or are 'developed') when in a managerial post.

(Watson 2001, p.221)

What is the purpose of education, I wonder, when I think about an MBA and consider my participants' thoughts? Although I have attempted to understand what these experiences mean to my participants, my focus on how these relate to an MBA led me to a paper written by Martin Luther King Jr (1947, pp.123–124). In 1947, King wrote in the *Maroon Tiger* that 'education has both a utilitarian and a moral function'. King engaged in the 'so-called "bull sessions" around and about the school' and found that most college men have a misconception about education's purpose. Though this assumes that King's purpose is correct, he found that most college men, whom he identified as 'brethren', think that education is all about equipping them 'with the proper instruments of exploitation so that they can forever trample over the masses'. Simultaneously, he found that others still thought that 'education should furnish them with noble ends rather than means to an end'. Based on these findings, King articulated multi-fold functions of education: first, utility and second, culture. King concluded that 'education must enable a man to become more efficient, to achieve with increasing facility the ligitimate

[sic] goals of his life'. Though another end is to identify which goals are legitimate (i.e. higher education as axiological).

This thesis' findings provide insight into the participants' expectations at the beginning of their MBA and how those expectations relate to their MBA experiences.

The participants pursued their MBA for various reasons, with most inclining to either change their career trajectory or expand their knowledge base or look for promotions. It is unclear if any of the participants wanted to pursue an MBA with a goal to develop their 'mindsets'. What is clear is that their work environment was a catalyst in their decision making to pursue an MBA. This sort of escape mechanism (if I call it this) from their work environment suggests that before starting their MBA, for the participants, finishing an MBA and securing the degree was more of a means to an end than an end in itself.

King's ideology of how education needs to train people for critical thinking made him appreciate that thinking incisively and thinking for oneself is very difficult, which made him question whether education is 'fulfilling its purpose' (King 1947, p.124). For example, all participants other than Selina appeared to have developed a degree of reflective 'mindset' sometime during their MBA journey (see Table 5.1). Further, their notion of how their work could be understood through the lens of black and white, and right and wrong transformed into knowing how life and work are all about perceptions, yet perceptions are not universal. Keeping in mind King's philosophy, Selina was the only one who kept dwelling on aspects of learning as black or white, yes or no, right or wrong. It suggests that she could not 'sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal and the facts from the fiction' (King 1947, p.124). King asserts that 'if we are not careful, our colleges will

produce a group of close-minded' people. He cautions, 'be careful, "brethren!" Be careful, teachers!' (King 1947, p.124).

Selina's continued closed-mindedness could be associated with a lack of managerial experience. Like other participants looking to escape the work environment, Selina attempted to learn the concepts from her MBA but failed to apply those at work when other participants could. For example, Karolina, Salec and Bowman found their perspectives are not always right and having a listening ear and extending help by accommodating team members would only make their work relationships stronger. As they had a team to experiment with this learning, Selina did not have the same opportunity, being the sole contributor to her work. It relates to why Mintzberg (2004) argues that business schools cannot make managers in a classroom environment. The students required to have some pre-requisite knowledge and experience to learn what is taught. It requires students to have some taste of being a manager in the first place. Considering Selina lacked this opportunity at work, she appears to have chosen to pursue her MBA at the wrong time in her career (not in a managerial role), making her the wrong person to learn what was taught in the MBA (a lack of managerial experience) (Mintzberg, 2004).

On the other hand, although the other participants found themselves in a better state to practice their MBA concepts at work, some felt contrived applying concepts from their MBA when maintaining relationships with their bosses. The MBA classes being too psychologically safe created unsafety for the participants at work, is one of the main findings from my thesis. The participants, including Selina, reported that they do not feel judged in their MBA classroom environment, so they are happy to share their ideas without considering the possibility of being judged by their lecturers or peers. Although this type of environment, often called a *safe space*, has been assumed to encourage participation (Boostrom 1998), it also

shows how being too protected can result in another form of unsafety, where participants are shielded from receiving and engaging in critique (Holley & Steiner 2005). Participants were able to establish a similar non-judgemental environment within their work team but failed to replicate it with their bosses at work. Although the psychological safety in their MBA helped them share their thoughts with or without prejudice and discuss and learn from each other, they developed a 'mindset' of "safety in openly sharing without consequences", which caused them frustration at work. This indicates that 'the utility of striving for safety is rarely questioned nor are possible drawbacks examined' (Holley & Steiner 2005, p.49).

On the one hand, their MBA class environment helped them learn how establishing psychological safety could help them develop a collegial team environment among their subordinates and, to an extent, control it as well. On the other hand, this sort of absolute psychological safety and control in their MBA misguided them into assuming that they could replicate this collegial learning environment at all levels of their work structure. Not understanding why they failed even after multiple attempts, they either started ignoring their bosses or reluctant to speak up for fear of consequences or making decisions without consulting them. This misreading was a by-product of an "over safe" psychological environment that participants experienced throughout their MBA.

The findings and discussions presented in Chapters 4 and 5 illustrate how the participants during/post-MBA displayed stimulation, self-direction, benevolence and security, which I did not find analysing their pre-MBA life experiences (Schwartz 1994; see table 2.2). Several participants remained bundled in their existing values of instrumentality, power and achievement, which they continued to hold onto and dearly throughout their MBA journey (Schwartz 1994; see table 2.2). My participants tended to begin their MBA with a 'mindset' of

self-centred instrumental gratification, status and prestige, controlling people (power) and enjoying competitive personal success (achievement) (Schwartz 1994; see table 2.2). Sometime during their MBA, some participants found their 'mindset' transformed from risk-averse to risk-taking (stimulation). They showed considerable alteration in their work behaviour, looking away from outward-in approval (waiting for feedback) and leaning towards inward-out autonomous thought and action (self-direction) (see Table 2.2 and 5.2).

At the start of their MBA journeys, several participants, including Salec, Bowman and Coleen identified themselves as people who were right almost all the time. Yet, they displayed tolerance and concern for others' welfare (universalism). During his MBA, Bowman learnt to show self-restraint towards expectations of others (conformity) and followed an approach to listen and act in ways that suited his team members. Instead of doing what he thought was the right way of doing things (adamant in his pre-MBA ways of dealing with people) or getting things done through people (benevolence) (Schwartz 1994) (see Section 4.18.1). Selina, however, continued focusing on instrumentality, self-gratification, and achievement (Schwartz 1994). It saw Selina ending her MBA journey with more questions than answers to those questions. It makes me wonder how long this piece of string is - participants who started their MBA journey for similar reasons ended up experiencing their MBA in different ways. Their subjective expectation that an MBA would provide them with better job opportunities and increase their chances of securing a promotion or even a career change was not as straightforward as simply securing that piece of paper at the end. Although participants equated such assessment to their instrumental growth, some participants remained at the same level at work without any significant change in their knowledge to do their job any better. It shows Mastery of BA is not conferred automatically with graduation.

In the MBA, the participants were introduced to concepts from different functional areas of work (e.g. Finance, Accounting, Marketing) and business areas (e.g. Systems Thinking, FOL, MCO), which strengthened their KSACs and provided them with some understanding of their different work facets. But they found themselves left hanging on their own to make connections between these concepts and make sense of how they could integrate the knowledge from these functional and business subjects in their work. It appears that there can be a disconnect – missing connectivity between MBA subjects. Although the evidence is anecdotal, some participants citing the disconnection regretted doing an MBA over Master of Management. Even though courses like FOL, MCO and Systems Thinking existed in their MBA, some participants reported difficulty applying the concepts from these subjects to others (functional or business) and vice-versa. Participants were able to reflect on what was taught in these three subjects, but they couldn't remember enough to use it to their advantage when it came to other subjects they were taught. Some considered FOL and MCO to be life-changing, while some failed even to understand the purpose of these two subjects. They felt overwhelmed to make connections between different theoretical concepts from other subjects, which prevented them from identifying their MBA's holistic value.

The students reported their lecturers had a role to play in their experiential learning. The lecturers' teaching approaches (e.g. PowerPoint slides or no slides at all or group discussions) and the notion of being taught by practitioner-lecturers over academic lecturers (non-practitioners), whom participants identified as "pure" lecturers, was fascinating. The students trusted lecturers who were practitioners. The findings revealed that while participants trusted the examples and the content more when they attended the classes taught by practitioner-lecturers, they questioned pure lecturers and even felt disinterested in their classes. It showed clearly in Selina appreciating one of her lecturers who was a practitioner and

condemning others who were not, to the extent that she even questioned their teaching processes. It raises a question of the learning spaces that the academic lecturers could create to ensure learning - to ensure the *un*trusting 'mindset' disappears from their classroom setting. Amidst carrying the *un*trusting attitude towards academic lecturers, the participants discovered the primary value of their MBA for them - networking.

The students reported considering networking to be a factor in their learning. Experiencing learning the same concepts with people from diverse work areas helped them discover how they can see one problem from different perspectives and how their work problems are not so unique after all. Ability to gain insights into how similar work issues are dealt with differently by peers allowed them to learn what worked and what did not work in different work settings. This sheds light on participants' suggestions regarding how their critical thinking evolved because of the in-class discussion with peers, paving the way for them to reflect on their self- and other-centeredness (Rokeach 1973). Examples from Bowman and Salec show just that.

Considering the many different learning and evolved 'mindsets' persisting in the view that MBAs are necessarily better than non-MBAs in all work factors would be problematic. Certain X factors (i.e. networking – learning from peers, trust in practitioner-lecturers teaching, psychological safety) helped most students reflect and develop their 'mindsets', which together formed the holistic value of their MBA for them (see table 5.2).

Identifying these phenomena and understanding my participants' worlds was a challenging process. Although the research methods used in this research are not new, I combined them to explore the relationship between the participants' personalities, 'mindsets',

and expectations from their MBA. I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to understand their perspectives and the reasons for their viewpoints. I developed Integrated Dialogue to reveal the phenomena behind those reasons and views. The method of breaking the interview transcripts into small sections, developing narratives and identifying different themes, and developing integrated dialogues to situate participants in a fictional setting allowed me to combine the interview quotes and my interpretation of those quotes. It helped bring the participants' worlds and their collective world, as I imagined them, to the reader. I found that unless I brought the participants' worlds and the imagined collective world to the surface, the phenomena would remain blurry, both to my readers and me. Presenting the findings as integrated dialogue in a story environment and differentiating the participants' spoken words with my interpretation of those quotes helped me clarify the co-construction process. It allowed me to illustrate the themes in a way that highlights the participants' worlds and at the same time highlight explicit links between participants discussing similar and different themes. I did this to do justice to IPA's idiography – focusing on individual participants and their stories and not trying to generalise their thoughts, ideas and experiences.

After completing the integrated dialogue, I realised how important it was to be explicit about the aspects of the interviews that I experienced as a researcher. Without acknowledging and interpreting the interview experience in addition to the interview transcript, it was challenging to discover/uncover phenomena. Without explicitly linking the individual and collective (see chapter 4), although I could discuss the participants' ideas in their interviews, I could not differ why participants said what they said. Instead, it appeared as if I was colouring my participants' worlds through my perceptions of what they said. First, the dialogical method allowed me to discover themes by interpreting the participants' phenomena in real-time. Second, I interacted with my readers by adopting an approach that considers themes I

discovered and discussed and the participants' viewpoints about these themes (Hyland 2005). Presenting these research findings dialogically allowed me to create a separate and interconnected image of each participant, who was not only involved in discussing their world but knowingly or unknowingly was also interpreting their world at the same time (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997, p.3). This would hopefully minimise doubt over how I framed the subjective arguments in the first place. What I found, how I saw it and why I saw it in a particular way is the strength of the integrated dialogical method.

6.1 Contributions

The thesis contributes significantly to the MBA literature by exploring the potentially problematic mindset about what an MBA can offer. The literature shows that MBA holders are subject to being questioned about their ethical standards and work behavior, but still, an MBA continues to be considered a brand and a preferred or go-to degree for employees seeking career advancements or even a career change and employers seeking to employ graduates. It is a product of the weight employers give MBA graduates compared to non-MBA graduates with regard to KSACs. The findings suggest that an MBA graduate is likely to possess more KSACs because of exposure to various areas in their degree. However, such exposure does not make that graduate an expert in those facets of work. Employers are advised not to accept MBA holders on the basis of their qualifications alone, without determining each individual's particular characteristics and potential. The literature argues that an MBA is preferred over other business and management degrees, but that an MBA education does not create ethical leaders. This thesis, discussing both these ideas in-depth, contributes to the literature by exploring why an MBA should not be considered a preferred degree simply because it introduces students to various work facets. Coming back the earlier point that MBA holders' are subject to being questioned about their ethical standards, MBA programs were not designed

to create ethical leaders. The findings suggest the responsibility to focus on ethics and moral responsibility in the world of business and how this can be developed in an MBA class environment lies with the students and the educators alone.

The thesis also contributes to the literature by identifying elements (the 'X' factor) that play a pivotal role in creating a reflective classroom environment—encouraging students to develop a reflective capability to understand their decision-making mindset. It identifies seven phenomena:

1. Supposed right-and-wrong-people and right-and-wrong-time to do an MBA.

    a. The gap between knowing-doing.

2. Psychological safety: an unsafety from being too safe.

3. The MBAs' perspectives: how long is a piece of string?

4. A destination only, or a preparation for the 'real' journey ahead.

5. A pseudo-philosophy.

6. The participants' MBA experiences:

    a. Networking.

    b. Students' learning inclinations and lecturers' teaching approaches.

    c. Non-practitioner academic lecturers v. practitioner–lecturers: trust in a lecturer's background, not in the lecturer.

7. A disconnect between academic subjects.

These seven phenomena can assist stakeholders to focus more on the individual and their learning than on securing the piece of paper (from the graduates' perspectives) or employing the piece of paper (from the employers' perspectives).

The thesis also contributes to the literature on values and their relationship with MBA education. It discusses how values affect how an individual interprets the world and how their value system, if evolved (e.g. Rokeach 1973), enables them to develop their mindset (e.g. Dweck 2008) and use it to their own and others' advantage. Although the participants started their MBAs with the idea of securing a piece of paper for worldly gain, without much thought about gaining new knowledge or advancing existing knowledge, some realised that their MBA is about learning about themselves, uncovering their own values (e.g. Schwartz 1994) and the need to develop and progress at work. The findings show how encouraging students to reflect on their value systems (e.g. Socrates Circle—an MCO class activity) allows them to gain a more profound sense of their knowledge base, enabling them to understand their work issues/situations more wholly (e.g. creating psychologically safe team environments at work). The thesis contributes to this body of literature through interdisciplinary research showing how to make sense of the MBA literature by considering the psychology and sociology literature.

The thesis also contributes to the philosophical aspect of qualitative research in general by emphasising that such research involves not only examining existing knowledge but also questioning that knowledge and digging deeper into certain aspects that are often only superficially addressed (e.g., why people say what they say and whether they know what they have said and why). Introducing the integrated dialogical method to interpret phenomena and present the intangible (e.g., embodied elements) aspects explicitly to the readers contributes to the methodological literature. Acknowledging that the rigour of qualitative versus quantitative studies is often questioned, the thesis identifies how qualitative researchers often omit embodied elements (from their interview experience) from their analysis and focus only on the words of their interviewees. This could be due to researchers not feeling confident in understanding what body gestures mean or not finding ways to bring those experiences to the

surface. The dialogical approach contributes to qualitative methods in that they can capture intangible aspects (e.g. embodied elements) from an interview. This thesis explicitly shows the reader the stages of interpretation and meaning a researcher associates with the words of their participants to ensure that rigour in qualitative studies can be demonstrated and doubts about a researcher's qualitative findings are minimised. The integrated dialogical method does not claim to unfailingly make qualitative research rigorous, but attempts to assist readers in understanding that what 'I have done is meaningful in its own right and my interpretations are not any less rigorous than the research that uses numbers to signify the research output'.

6.2 Implications

At least four types of stakeholders would potentially benefit from the findings of my thesis – MBA aspirants, business schools, MBA lecturers, and the business community (including employers).

The findings suggest that students tend to decide to pursue an MBA primarily to secure a higher salary, promotion or change their career trajectories. However, later during the MBA journey, students often realise that their initial expectations of MBA study was misplaced. This creates a catch-22 situation both for business schools and MBA aspirants. For example, if aspirants knew what to expect regarding the reflective style of MBA learning that many, if not all, PE MBA courses encourage, bearing in mind their initial instrumental focus on better jobs and promotion, aspirants may be discouraged from enrolling, however much they would have valued their studies eventually. So, business schools need to take care when recruiting students that they do not over-simplify their -and the candidates' own – view of what represents a 'wrong' student (Mintzberg 2004). In other words, discouraging applications who have the potential to flourish, by messing with their expectations would be extremely counter-

productive. So, to minimise this issue of student enrolment, business schools would need to ensure recruitment processes are sensitive, recognising and valuing diverse initial motivations and expectations of aspirants. This could involve one-to-one discussions with aspirants and providing networking opportunities with alumni to discuss the nature of the MBA, what challenges the alumni encountered during their study and what they think (post-MBA) they could have done (pre/during-MBA) differently to maximise their learning. It requires a certain level of shared reflection. If aspirants are not prepared to engage, they would be more likely to experience what Selina went through. However, his would not necessarily be the case for all such aspirants – not all would be the wrong people to start an MBA.

When considering the learning experience offered by MBA programs, business schools need to reinforce the need for students to reflect on and apply their learning during each course. One way to do so is to reinforce the need keep a journal of work issues for in-class participation, perhaps through a formal element of assessment. Students, keeping a journal of their work experiences (e.g. issues that are unresolved, challenges that need deliberation, frustrations that they are unable to get rid of) and discussing those experiences in class would allow business schools to address what students experience at workplaces. Additionally, this would help lecturers introduce and connect theoretical concepts that participants of this study, like Halim, loathed, to students' work experiences. In this way, students would be encouraged to use knowledge gained from their MBA in the workplace. By making this a regular exercise would allow business schools and MBA lecturers to be practical with theoretical frameworks and possibly forge a trusting relationship between students and MBA lecturers, which some participants of this study lacked.

The research findings present an opportunity for business schools to reflect on their current student enrolment strategies for their MBA programs. Knowing the experiences that Selina went through in her MBA, identifying potential MBA candidates' work experiences (not just work knowledge but managerial experiences), their expectations from/of MBA, and their learning inclinations could benefit students and business schools. Business schools could run weekend study retreats for prospective students. Although there would be economic implications to business schools, this exercise gives students a chance to discuss their expectations and what they want to achieve from their MBA with lecturers and peers. This could help avoid what Selina went through in her MBA. By scheduling the retreat in the weekend, most students would be benefitted. Business schools could also introduce a pre-MBA certificate program, similar to the Imperial College of London, or even a pre-MBA short course that incorporates a FOL-type course to prepare its students to understand their potential gain from their MBA. It may assist their students in exploring what could be an obstacle for them to get the best out of their MBA. It may present MBA lecturers with an opportunity to understand what their students expect and are looking to gain from their MBA, and for the students, what the MBA entails.

Business Schools could decide whether tailoring their MBA programs to focus on presenting opportunities for students to develop themselves into accountable and ethical beings, in addition to teaching and examining the KSACs, is beneficial in preventing their MBAs from ending up in the role of Darth Vaders (Anderson & Escher 2010). It appears to be one of the reasons why business community blame business schools for not creating leaders. Business schools may employ the services of their MBA graduates, involving them in developing their MBA curricula – using their MBA experiences and expectations to uncover areas that require radical or incremental or planned changes. Knowing that these are university

courses and theory is an inseparable part of the education system, alumni would be able to shed light on their experiences post MBA, which may provide an opportunity to business schools to address academia's concern regarding how their MBA programs facilitate knowledge and the link between education context and different work settings (Benjamin & O'Reilly 2011). It may also provide an opportunity for business schools to holistically integrate subjects across their entire MBA degree (Segon & Booth 2010) if that is what a business school plans to do.

As this opportunity does not provide a straightforward way to create an engaging classroom, lecturers may want to work on the principle of reflective practice. The findings reveal that a higher level of reflection is critical for effective learning and fostering more profound thinking (Hay et al. 2004). Thus, MBA lecturers may want to collaborate with their business school to develop their MBA program and/or course content, keeping in mind the goal of achieving 'reflective thinking status' (Hay et al. 2004, p.172). Every academic has a vision and ways of imparting knowledge to the students. My recommendations, at least some, would present an opportunity to MBA lecturers to reflect on the dynamic relationship between their role to impart knowledge, fostering deeper thinking in their students, and designing courses to facilitate that thinking. While continuing to use slides or choosing other teaching approaches is, of course, a lecturer's choice, understanding how their method fits student expectations and affects students' learning capability/inclination is essential. Developing teaching practices to suit student needs would help MBA candidates move away from a myopic view and narrowly focusing on their learning attributes. This would assist lecturers in educating students on how their MBA is neither designed to provide them specialisation in one business function (Hunt & Speck 1986) nor to give them a magic wand at the end of it. The findings reveal that teaching theoretical concepts without explicitly showing how concepts from one course could be utilised to understand the content of others may hold students back from understanding the

interconnections between different facets of their work. Although other business disciplines are difficult to integrate because of the siloing that goes on in modular education, it could be silently playing a catalyst in students developing such a myopic view of an MBA and loathing theoretical concepts, as Halim did.

My findings give employers something to think about—a chance to inspect their views, if they believe that all MBAs are superior to non-MBAs with respect to their knowledge, skills, abilities and competencies. In appreciating the limitations of an MBA degree, the business community might understand how an MBA is not a magic wand. It may encourage some employers to step back from either blaming business schools or holding too high a regard for the piece of paper or MBA certification and preferring MBA qualified manager as a short-cut to identifying some level of commitment to improvement and learning, instead, moving forward to shift their focus towards *the individual* possessing an MBA degree. Focusing on the attributes of individuals who may have an MBA degree, instead of considering all MBAs having mastery in business administration by default would assist employers in assessing the worth of a prospective employee. Employers could focus on an individual's application of the acquired KSACs and their developed value system instead of the piece of paper or—as one of my participants, Karolina, described—Superman's cape. To achieve this, perhaps, employers could invite their prospective employees to participate in simulation exercises that require critical thinking, capturing their analytical tendencies to understand better what they would gain from employing the individual with an MBA degree. I recommend this to employers because the literature is divided when it comes to acknowledging whether hiring MBAs assist organisations in delivering superior business results (Staude, cited in Jordan 2004). As per my findings, this may not be valid for all MBAs.

The notion of an MBA degree being too psychologically safe and becoming a potential block to students learning how to deal with superiors at work is one of the significant findings from my thesis. Researchers could investigate how business schools run their MBA programs and the role lecturers' teaching methods play in students experiencing psychological *un*safety at work. Here, researchers could explore MBA students' in-class experiences and investigate how they learn in class and apply their learning at work. It would require researchers to undertake a longitudinal study to observe MBA classes and interview participants face-to-face. This would help researchers to uncover gaps between *knowing* and *doing* and identify factors, which on the one hand, play a catalytic role in their learning, but on the other hand, may act anti-catalytically when it comes to applying those learning to different facets at work. It is essential to understand that the meaning of psychological safety or safe place here is a little different to other educational contexts. Psychological *un*safety suggests a very different context, where if you are too comfortable in class, you are not critical of each other, so you are not learning criticality (Holley & Steiner 2005). This could address the issue of an MBA being *too safe* that it makes the work psychologically unsafe for students, similar to what Bowman, Salec, Marina, Melanie and Maddie experienced at their workplaces with their superiors.

6.3 Suggestions for future research

There is much scope for future research to investigate each of the themes uncovered in this study. Each theme tells a story and going deeper into each would enhance a researcher's understanding of how people view an MBA.

I recommend researchers to investigate how employers expect MBA graduates to differ from non-MBAs. This might be the next step in bridging the gap between what business

schools offer and its relevance to the business community's perceived needs, especially, concerning their criticism of business schools not producing ethical and responsible leaders.

Although this research focused on candidates and alumni from only one MBA program, not all students were Australian born. Some were naturalised citizens, some were permanent residents and others were on student visas. Cross-cultural differences and difference in their status would arguably have had a significant impact on their expectations and learning inclinations. Researchers doing cross-cultural research into MBAs, using a similar approach to my study, would be able to investigate the relationship between cross-cultural students' preferred ways of learning and an MBA in-class learning environment. This could be the next step in understanding why *the MBA* (i.e. the notion that all MBAs are same and MBA programs that business schools offer, offers clear and consistent learning experiences and outcomes) does not exist and what constitutes *Mastery in BA*. Delving deeper into this notion of *the MBA*, research comparing different MBA programs in universities in Australia (and other countries), investigating aspects, such as admission policies, teaching approaches, integration of courses, and so on help identify aspects that are too specific to individual business schools to be generalised.

Also, I recommend further research into the value of MBA studies, exploring aspects of MBA programs that assist students to develop and reflect on their tacit occupational knowledge, such as applying concept from MBA at work. This would help explore factors that contribute or pose obstacles to their *personal* learning spiral (Kolb & Kolb 2009) ideographically. Understanding such factors would further inform us how *one size fits none* and that neither MBA programs nor MBA students could be generalised as the same. This

research could be aimed at understanding how *mastery of BA* could be assessed and how it is so different from being conferred Master of BA.

Researchers could use a similar integrated dialogical method to enrich their qualitative analysis, to dig deeper into their participants' ways of narrating stories and their stories (embodied elements) that inform the stories they narrate (verbatim). Fictionalising integrated dialogue would assist researchers in addressing their ethical dilemma of presenting their analysis as facts (Alvesson 2010). I have drawn from ethnographic fiction (Watson 2000), which shows that my integrated dialogical method goes across different methods. Fictionalising contexts and dialogues potentially allow exploring complex, sensitive and ethically problematic areas where it would almost be impossible to write it like it is. Because if it can be written like it is, it will essentially identify people in a potentially compromising situation. For example, investigating or researching sensitive ethical issues or working with confidential individual or organisational information.

6.4 Concluding Remark

From the findings and discussion, it has become more apparent that MBA applicants, candidates and graduates value their degree in very different ways. First, it is not the same for all MBAs and depends on their value systems and preferences. Second, the degree, or certificate, does not automatically bestow or guarantee mastery of Business Administration. It is only a piece of paper to show that the possessor has been through and passed a program of study designed to offer the opportunity to learn more KSACs than non-MBAs. Yet, at any given point, this does not necessarily mean that the possessor has conceptual skills to apply those KSACs in their work any better than do non-MBAs. Reprise:

Who am I to say what is right,

As I am not the one who decides.

I do know that someone does.

Whether it is you or whether you want me to do,

It doesn't matter.

What matters is, how are we doing it.

*7.0 Reference List*

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# 8.0 Appendix

## 8.1 Sample Participant themes

### Selina:

| Pre-MBA Mindset | Learning Oriented; Entrepreneurial need; Procrastinator; Process and People Oriented; Lacking Confidence; Example from work – looking for confirmation if others doing the same |
|---|---|
| Rationale to do an MBA | Stagnant Business Growth |
| Expectations from an MBA | Advanced Degree; Open New Doors; Expand Specialist Knowledge from Generalised MBA |
| Pre to During MBA | Interview Weeding Process; Not paying attention to understand MBA; Wrong People in her MBA Mindset |
| During MBA Mindset | Panopticon Outlook – A case of MBA for Millennials vs Traditional MBA; Mean Outlook; Learning – Wants to learn but don't know what to learn; Dependency on Others – Need Approval – Spell out her learning – Missing MBA Voice; Focused on Teaching Style than the Content – Engagement; Relevance (related to work) and Convenience (taught in summer school); Trying to Remember than to understand; Dislike Abstract Concepts; Learn by repetition; Cannot make connections between courses – No Systems Thinking; Can't do politics – Differentiating work and MBA; Challenging Environment vs Seeking new knowledge; Catch-22 – Pre-set Expectations; Complacent Due to Lecturer |
| Negative Work Environment – Effects on Attitude/Mindset | Continuing Lack of Confidence; Lack of Freedom and Autonomy; Different thinking didn't matter – Following Environment; Group Think and Disengaged – Lazy Mindset |
| Negatives of MBA In-Class Environment | Diverse Knowledge and expertise – a preconceived notion; Reasons for known but unknown – Intensive vs Normal MBA – No Immersion; Generalist MBA did not help expand Specialist Knowledge – Too Broad; Positive but not-so-positive; Confusion – MBA is a factory but claims to teach innovation – I want to think differently but I want to know specific answers to my domain; Too less time to absorb too much; Class Size; MBA is about alike thinking and not about Innovativeness; Can't think outside the box; 50 years old literature – a struggle and irrelevant |
| MBA Expectations vs Reality: Overall Understanding | Generalist and not Specialist Degree – Lack of electives; Applied Subjects - Not so Advanced - Bachelors vs MBA; Positive of having Business degree – undergraduate; Pre-Requisite Knowledge - Bachelors helped for a month; Grounded knowledge in Bachelors – positive MBA experience; Become a Different Person vs Did not – Magic Wand; Disconnect between course content, preparation material and in-class discussion; Disconnect between MBA and work; Learning from Industry Experts vs some pure Academics; Application in real world vs academic pursuit |
| Learning Experience: In-Class Learning Environment | How a theory cannot fit a situation missing; Diverse Experience – Subjects - Applied Subjects - Positive Experience; Softer Subjects - Positive Experience (Strategic Management, Marketing, FOL; Softer Subjects - Not-so-Positive Experience (Fundamentals of Leadership, Managing Contemporary Organisations); Issues with MCO - Application of theories – MCO vs SM – Lecturer's personality and its influence on her learning; <br> Diverse Experience – Students – Positive (Diverse Student Backgrounds and work domains; Not-So-Positive – Lack of prior Knowledge in Peers; Negative – Micromanagers in her group; Horn Effect); <br> Diverse Experience – Lecturing Style/Learning Style: Positive – Involvement In-Class Experience; Positive – Slide + Interactivity; Not-So-Positive - Slide Based, Lecturing-at-you Experience; Halo Effect - Lecturer's personality and Harvard Influence; Horn Effect – Lecturer's Personality and lecturing style; Both Horn and Halo - Fake situations = real exercises if taught by industry experts but not when academic teach the same. |
| Issues during MBA | Known but unknown - Don't know how to apply MBA learning at work; Unknowns –Tacit Knowledge – Confidence backwards; Safe Environment- MBA too safe vs Work unsafe; All MBAs think alike vs not in current MBAs; Lecturers - Industry Experts vs Academics |
| During to Post MBA - Expectations from remaining MBA | Lead to starting own business; The Main Learnings |
| During to Post MBA Mindset | Continuing the Mindset - Remembering than understanding – Doubt on absorbed enough; Change in Mindset; Balcony and the Dance Floor – Coping Mechanism; Independent – Looking for a career/stability; Critical – Reflective - Learning what to and not to do; Know but Don't know – Don't know how to apply - Can recognise learning but only if told to use. |
| Positives of MBA | Networking and Relevance to her Business – Foundation to Start a business; Strategic Thinking (40 years old theory – appropriate and relevant |
| MBA Mindset | moving from changing corporate environment to considering what to do |
| Continuing Problem with an MBA | Self-Application of concepts is the key; Cannot Recall concepts to apply at work; MBA – Too Safe – Same people at work, same in MBA – life is same everywhere |
| People's outlook towards her choice to do MBA | Commitment and Sacrifice (Giving up Weekends) |
| Effect of her work environment on her MBA learning | Judging her MBA peer comparing his ways of working to her company's |
| Advice | Need pre-requisite knowledge in business; Need to self-learn and apply concepts at work; Reasons to do MBA are important – 3-Letter word on resume or to learn |

## Bowman:

| | |
|---|---|
| Pre-MBA Mindset | Effect of war on the way of thinking; Change in outlook – Engineering to People Management; People-Oriented – Systems Thinking |
| Work Environment | UnSupportive of Ideas; 1950s – Disconnected from people – about schedule, cost and budget; Effect of Work Environment on Learning in MBA |
| Expectations from an MBA | Manage People - Motivate Engineers – Different Personalities and Behaviours; Balance Knowledge Base |
| Rationale to do an MBA | Growth - Unable to maximise learning – expand into a business sense; Move up the Ladder – Long Term Plan; Following Managers – Tick a Box; Cognitive Dissonance – Extrinsic (work) vs Intrinsic (growth) |
| During MBA Mindset | Emotional – Reflective – Learning from Failure; Disarming Self- Being Vulnerable to learn – A Choice; Anti-Social, Introvert – No Friends to finding comfort, extrovert in developing network |
| Change in Mindset | Blaming self to empathising with staff – Applying Theories; Linear to Non-Linear approach to manage people – Did what was right but didn't know how to do it before; Criticising to Accepting Staff; Open to Learning – Accepting Ideas and forming relationships; Learning from others' experience and it's OK to making mistakes – Tray got full; From riding on vast global experience to being honest to self and acknowledging he is not an expert; Narrow Minded to Broadening the Mindset – Realising arrogance and resistance to learn; From Being Reactive – Jumping in to Reflective – being an observer; System has failed to the problem was own frustration with the system; Always learning – Co-Construction |
| Expectations vs Reality | Get the right and wrong to learning the hard and soft skills; A Tick Box to be a better Human Being; Conventional Thinking to Expanding Perspective; Went in for wrong reasons (tick a box) but came out with the right ones (better person); Safe Environment - From learning by being told to learning from own and others' mistakes; Technical Subjects – Cut and Dry (Closed) vs Open Subjects – an opportunity to disarm self; It's not about grades and HD but about learning and sharing experiences |
| Learning | Learning from Lecturers; Learning from Subjects - FOL and MCO (Balcony and the Dance Floor – Moving from task-oriented to realising what focus on people mean); FOL (Jumping in Opinion Oriented to Taking a back seat and giving people space; Class Environment Learning - A Sand Pit – Safe to fall; Learning by listening and not speaking; Gaining Confidence – Psychologically Safe; Light at the end of tunnel - Learning how to be Adaptive to toxic work environment; Light Bulb Moment - Balcony and the Dance Floor to observe self); MCO (What Makes People Tick; Negotiations – Hands on Experience; Learning from Peers/Students; Broadening Mindset – open to non-engineering Ideas |
| In-Class Learning Environment | Case Study View – Finding same problems as his in peers organisations; Hands-On; Safe Environment; Safe Environment – Change in Mindset |
| Main Learnings from an MBA | Realising learning style; Waiting for Instructions learning to learning from engaging and sharing knowledge; Understand People Management – Work and MBA – Diversity; Over-Critical to- Emotional Intelligent (More from Soft than Hard Skills); Rearranging beliefs - Unsafe Work Environment – follow the norm to Safe Environment – emotionally intelligent; Arrogant know-it-all to realising arrogance stops learning; Learning to say no – Not being compliant and complicit if not aligned with thinking; Keeping a check on self – repetitive to observant and shutting up – Breaking the loop; Empathy – Focus on Self to Relating things to people |
| MBA Achievement | Trust and Relationships |
| Application of MBA learning at work | Tacit Knowledge – Balcony View – Joining the Dots; Providing Safe Environment to staff – Trust; Socrates Circle to create Dynamic and Efficient Environment – Employing People Engagement Skills – Realising what make people Tick; Changed Mindset and Attitude towards self - Applying the better person at work – Reluctance for receiving comments but happy to give one vs accepting he is an idiot that way; Applying at work – Balcony view to observe self |
| Values | Trust; Empathy; Other –Centered; Forgiving; Appreciative; Soldier |

8.2 Face-to-face Interview Guide

The following interview schedule is a guide with key and supplementary questions. If participants do not provide in their answer response to a key question, the matters addressed in supplementary questions, then supplementary question(s) are asked before moving onto the next key question.

KEY: How would you describe a Master in Business Administration degree?
SUPPLEMENTARY:
- Could you share your experiences from your work environment?
    - What led you to decide on pursuing an MBA? Any examples that you may want to share…

KEY: How is/was your learning experience as an MBA student?
SUPPLEMENTARY:
- Could you share your experiences from your classroom environment?
- How did you find/are you finding your MBA experience in relation to what made you pursue an MBA?

KEY: How do you see yourself now (as an MBA or pursuing an MBA) in comparison to your earlier non-MBA experience? Any examples that you could share…
SUPPLEMENTARY:
- Could you share any specific information that you would have thought to gain from an MBA?
    - Did you? An example that you would want to share on what and how you gained this?
    - Why do you think they are important? Any examples that you may wish to share with me?

KEY: Think of a time when you thought about going back to education life once again, that is pursuing an MBA. How would you describe your situation then?
SUPPLEMENTARY:
- What was the situation? Would you like to share it with me?

KEY: How did/do you see yourself learning in your MBA degree?

SUPPLEMENTARY:

- Any examples that you could share that may shed light on your learning process?
- How did you decide that you learnt what you intended to from an MBA degree?
  - What did you think you would learn in an MBA?
  - How was it similar or different to what you thought before starting your MBA degree?

KEY: Could you reflect on your experience before an MBA, during an MBA and/or after an MBA?

SUPPLEMENTARY:

- What changes did/do you experience in your life?
- How did/do you identify these changes?

KEY: What advice would you give to people in a similar situation as you were once, which led you to decide on an MBA degree?

SUPPLEMENTARY:

- How do you think your advice would benefit those people?
- Could you share any particular advice about cautioning those people about an MBA?
  - Could you share any examples on how did/do you identify specificities that made you caution people?

8.3 Participant Observation Samples

8.3.1 Sample 1 – Typed on Laptop

Date: 2019 - Course: MCO

- One group started exchanging views on how the other MBA class was not straightforward. Not so sure how to use theories and apply those.
- Very quiet students – staring at the PowerPoints slides
- 4-5 students on a table – laughing and drinking coffee
- Few students (4 out of 24) making notes, rest just looking at the slides.
- Most students crossed legs with left hand on face or neck
- Students smiled and looked at each other when lecture announced he wouldn't discuss the readings explicitly.
- A student asked if lecture could be recorded at the time when he travels for work – Lecture agreed and also suggested meeting for 30 mins to discuss the key points.
- "Damm!" a student animatedly said when lecture stated that don't form group with people you already know.
- Agree to get breaks between class
- While lecture enquired what they want to gain from this course. A student enquired what a lecture wants to gain from it.
    - Lecture replied" lots of arguments. No one right way.
- Student clarified: how much depth do lecturer wants them to go to in individual assignments.
    - Lecture replied: Not direct quotes; your understanding.
- Rule of class: All phones inside – Students obliged.
- Discussion on video homework – students aid: creative, style behaved by machines
- 3-4 students vocal in sharing their ideas, rest happy to sit back and witness the discussion.
- Discussion on efficiency, rigorous structure – very few with value in it (lecture)
    - Slowly more students started sharing their ideas
- In respect to rigorous structure and rules, lecturer asked what people do in this situation. Students unanimously responded: "finding ways around rules" – following with laughter and change in posture.

- A student continuously challenged the lecture on what video was all about – disagreed on most what lecture said.

- Mostly students nodding head when lecture asks if they understood. Very few (same 4-5) students continue sharing ideas.

- Lecture asked: what is happy to work in an ambiguous situation – 4 students raised hands out of 24 in total.

- A student asked what lecture would do in an ambiguous situation.
   - Student started chatting with each other

- Group discussion:
   - Students leaning forward – discussing slide notes
   - Some students sharing their personal lives – talking about work, family – sharing what they do
   - Sharing situations @ their work place, cracking jokes, making people on the table laugh.

- Class setting
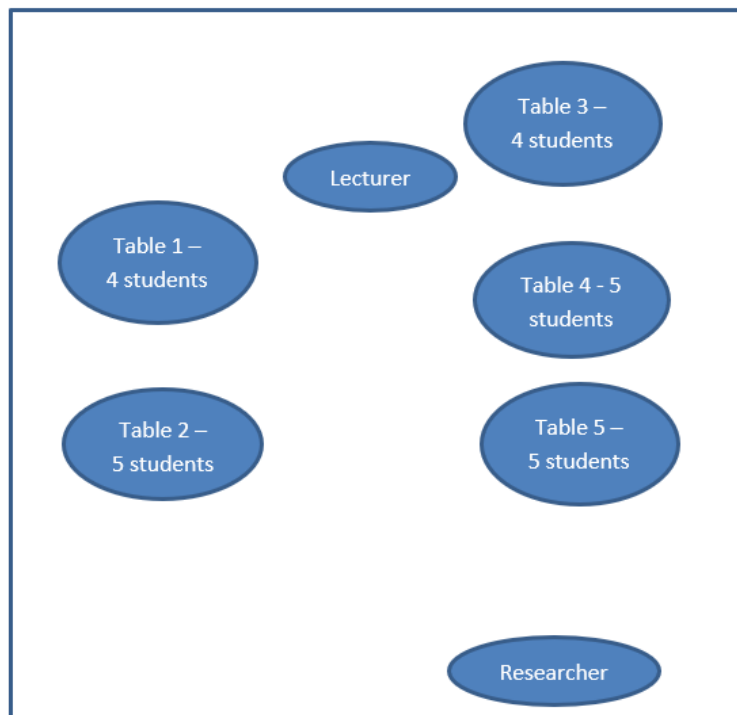


- Table 2: Students generally take effort and initiative and try to be spokesperson for the group

- Table 5: Waiting for other peers to start; one student started and talking about isolation

- Table 4: A student initiated discussion – works in GFS – regulation & uncertainties

- Table 1: Smiling at each other to take charge, no one took initiative still asked directly. Talking about freedom – good old day – without (unsure what the word was).
- Table 3: All quite responsive, sharing ideas from their experiences.
- Students sharing their views on 'S' of PESTEL
  - Table 1: Social Media; human Services, Globalising
  - Table 5: Better communication. Sharing his experience to children from Perth to Adelaide while he travels
  - Table 4: Changes in Thinking, how people have grown up, bringing ethics to social issues – asking questions
  - Quite attentive to listen to the views of other students on these issues – heads turn towards table 4 when a student said: yes but what you do?
- A girl on table 1 is quite soft in her voice, cannot hear – students on table 2 laugh and talk to each other smiling whenever she speaks.
- A student writing everything – drawing PowerPoint in notes while others just sit crossing legs appeared to be listening.
- A student asked for clarification when something isn't clear enough
- Attractive slide – model on industry 4.0 appeared on screen and student changed their posture, left what they were doing and looked at the slide, crossing their hands.
- A student asked "what organisations do when industry 4.0 let them down, e.g., leak, security issues?"
- Discussion on driverless cars – most students nodding only
  - 12 students did not share at all
- Lecturer asked to raise hands on what they do to manage contemporary organisations:
  - Three perspectives of class
    - Stop - 8 students
    - Don't stop – 1 student
    - Let go and worry later – 10 students
    - 5 students did not raise hands
- A student said "trust is a big issue"
- Two students wiping eyes, face a number of times – turning head left and right

- Lecturer introduced an example of introduced wolf in a system – wolf introduced, less animals eating grass destroying ecosystem, less water drinking in that area and so on.
  - All the students attentive, started sharing their ideas, left what they were doing earlier.
  - One student starts making notes, other students join in
  - Two perspective – one – a student stuck with how a predator is in the system and it is not good for the system, while another student carried a view that wolf is introduced to set a balance.
- Discussion on sensitive issues – only a couple of student share their views – e.g., child prostitution
- Balance shifting from talkative students to silent ones: Half class vocal and half just raise hands but no more sharing their ideas.
  - But 6-7 students no change – neither raising hands nor sharing ideas; neither with class nor among peers around a table.
    - Looking at roof
    - Start to swing chair pushing with legs
    - Thinking pose – left hands on head or hands crossed
- Table 1: There is a female student who was quiet throughout the class but spoke on issues concerning the elderly and how they are mistaken and what that mean.

**Break now – 6.30 pm**

- Group 1 stays in the class
  - Discussing views introducing each other
    - Who they are? What they do?
      - "I am very open…." A student said
      - Already started discussing assignment
- A student came and asked me "how many observations you have done. Do you have experience? How are you seeing the energy level?"
  - I responded back: This is the 1st class. I may see something like that after 4-5 classes.
  - He said: "you might be hoping to find energy level, so asked".

- Table 5: a student who always raises hands before sharing his ideas (same student with predator concept) stayed back, talking to another peer on the table
  - What he does?
  - Discussing challenging steps to unknown – agreed by each other
  - The other female student discussing quite only with him but did not utter a word in class/group discussion.
    - Appear to be quite comfortable 1-1 but not so much 1-many
    - Same appears to be the case with a number of other students.

**Class resume – 6.45 pm**

- Lecturer introduces a game: Think a number between 1 and 100 and keep it secret, close your eyes and now form a circle in an ascending order (group as a whole class).
  - Only one student asked for clarification. Rest started going at the back of the class to start on this exercise – how do you make a circle in ascending order.
  - Lecturer asked how much time they might take – some said 2 mins, some 15 and some half hour.
  - All student following instructions of whispering into the ear of a person the number and trying to figure out where to stand. Can touch but cannot open eyes.
    - Some students formed their own circlet within a circle.
  - No one took any lead, everyone trying to figure out for themselves where they need to stand – individual rather team work
  - Few opening eyes, breaking rules and shutting it when lecturer looks at them
  - 2-3 students tagging along others rather trying to find their own way.
  - Some students around 8 minutes in the exercise, stop moving and stand where they are.
- After the exercise lecturer pointed 5 mistakes in student position (9 minutes)
  - Student responded:
    - Communication main thing
    - Organisation main thing
    - Would have eventually done it

- - Need to be accurate, immediate and quick
    - Succinct lecture said in addition
  - After returning to their respective tables, two students said: "anyways, we did right" other said quite helpful exercise.
- A student provided his feedback on the activity:
  - "I lost track of activity because of my conscience of touching people. I was aware of my number but conscious of my hands touching people. So may be a different activity would have been better or may be in week 10 would be more comfortable".
  - `Lecture commented – how important to understand focus on one thing takes the focus away from the whole.
  - Another student said that they had no collective motivation – may be $100 extrinsic reward.
- Lecture asked the students to discuss the ideas on this activity within groups.
  - Some students sharing and have a laugh while some are quiet and just looking at other people speak
  - Some students are linking this activity experience with their own work environment – pay rise, direction and so on.
- Few making notes while most just chatting
- I noticed how students are more vocal after the exercise. Few students who did not engage in discussion earlier are now discussing while only 2-3 students continue to stay silent.
- Lecture said: people are very good at collecting data that match the hypothesis but very bad at collecting data that doesn't match the hypothesis. Donnella Meadows said if the data doesn't match the hypothesis, check the pattern, what's wrong with it.
- Lecture encourages student to identify if what Donella Meadows says is correct, what you are experience in your work place rather than saying its interesting.
- Students linking discussion with work experience & sharing their perspectives
- Two students constantly discussing their own – dim voice.

- Lecture drew a model on the whiteboard in line with student comments. Looking this model, all the students' project attentive body language, straight back, hands either on the table or folded and sitting upright. Sharing their ideas, bringing all different types of ideas from a number of directions. Students mentioned cut profits while other suggested it's quite reactive.

- As soon as lecture brought up Newton in the discussion, everyone looked up and stopped what they were doing. Lecture was talking about Newtonian way of thinking. Example of a car made students alert.
    - Real life example excited students – started sharing noise level increases in class.

- 6 students continue to be quiet, no interaction at all – there is at least 1 student in every group (5 groups in total).

- Lecture asked for volunteers for another activity – 4 students actively raised hands while the other two got pushed by the lecturer as no one else raised their hands.

- This game:
    - Inner circle – 8 students to discuss two topics
    - Outer circle – remaining 16 students. A pair observing 1 inner circlet student

- Inner circle made the seating in a way that it is male-female-male-female and so on.

- 2 students who were pushed by lecturer to volunteer, one took initiative and started the discussion (female) while the other (male) sat silently looking at the floor but later started discussion his ideas but very quickly became the centre of another student's arguments.

- Outer circle pair (1) started making strategy on how and what to observe while other outer circle pairs sat with their notebooks open, while some pairs did not carry anything in their hands.

- One from table 5 who always raised hands to ask questions took the lead and start the discussion in the inner circle – on Newtonian way of thinking.

- But interrupted by a student from the outer circle asking lecturer what should he observe – "body language", he asked?

- Inner circle students quite open in discussing among 8 of them. Having kind of an environment of discussing in work – round table discussions

- Some outer students make rules of observation and others just watching inner circle.

- A student said: "work more on distinction circle so look like that" – similar thinking?

- As the student who was quiet and looking at the floor started discussing and confidently sharing his ideas, the guy who always raise hands before answering, started targeting him and denying everything he said. For example, he said everything is Newtonian way of thinking, listening to this, that student mentioned no there are other things. Similarly on two-three different occasions similar arguments persisted between the two. Always clarifying what is question.

- He continued to find what not Newtonian – successful organisations is endures – profit and so on…

- Rest of the inner circle finding what is Newtonian – Not for profit also not for loss as well.
  - Discussion carried to: adaptability, meet social needs, cannot predict next, human problem: so to know.

- The student who got targeted now switch to facilitator role: asking other inner circle students what they think on every topic and if students asks him any question(s), he respond back by saying, "good question, what you think". At first students laughed but then the questions slowly faded away.

- Although students are quite open to agree and disagree with other inner circle students but I notice a female student listening to another female student talking at a stretch and slowly her right hand went up to the right side of the forehead and leaned back stretched legs and left hand on the stomach and making small eyes and shaking head left to right – seemed confused with other females student's answer.

Later during feedback session with the outer circle pair, she stood up look at the other female student and laughed and pointed outer circle pair towards her.

- Outer circle giving feedback to inner circle student they were observing
  - Some focusing on how he/she spoke while some going into intricacies of what he/she should have done, while others more into what they would have done and why and these are my thoughts on what you have discussed.
  - Inner circle students quite good in listening, enjoying the feedback session, laughing and joking and also discussing matters outside of the class – family and weekend plans
- Two students given responsibility to summarise the activity
  - One said: "some dominant personalities in a group who took lead and started as 1-1 and then disseminate to others
  - Another said: "a student wanted to share her ideas but then kept holding her back. I saw her taking her right hand forward and opening her mouth but then rescinding the hand and sitting quietly.
- The air became quite light at the end of the activity. It is the end of the lecture around 8.05 pm. Students are seen to be standing in casual positions – swaying body front back, leaning on the table and laughing.

A student came to me and suggested how I can make my research more intriguing by looking at first years as well. He is happy to participate in f2f interviews. Another student asked for personal help.

8.3.1.1 Immediate Summary of 8.3.1 Observation

The first observation started with all the students including the lecture agreeing to participate in my research. I sat at the back of the classroom.

The start of the lecture was quite disintegrated. Quite understandably as not many students knew each other (I thought) as they were not interacting on their respective tables (around 5) rather they were just listening to the lecture. Few students suggested what they want to achieve from the course. The following quotes are taken at that time when students were describing what they intend to do in an MBA:

- Better managing space – better manager. I want to get more used to industry – engineering professional
- I am looking for be challenged and have my own interpretation about the class perhaps a bit of perspective look at things in different was and experiment to see how I can use it in my work place.
- Want to know how to work with group
- Lecture explaining how it's a cross cultural class with 4 generation
- Want to tackle things that might be so straightforward to understand – expand my awareness
- Learn to improve change positions change companies and how companies work

There were few students who were quite vocal and shared their ideas. Mostly these students sat nearer to the lecturer, but many (out of 24 in total) sat silently.

The first half of the lecture (1.5 hours) was more lecturer interacting with students, explaining them topics and theories and so on. Similar to the start, few students spoke their mind while rest just watched others speak. There was a student who constantly raised hands, sort of indicating he wants to say something. Rest shared their ideas without such indication. There were two quite interesting events:

1. A female student sitting right at the front of the class did not utter a word until a discussion started on aged people. She defended them and argued how aged people are taken wrongly more than often.
2. The male student who raised hands before answering a question or sharing his thoughts was unable to understand what lecturer meant by an example of introducing wolfs in a

system and he constantly suggested "but there is a predator in the system". After being repetitive, a female student lead the discussion and tried to tell him that it is about balance rather than only predator.

These two observations are quite interesting because, students tend to share their ideas quite forcefully if they already believe in something or had a first-hand experience (point 1), while some students see different ideas in a same conversation (predator and balance).

However, the energy level remained sort of same (quiet) until lecturer introduced an activity (choose a number in your mind between 1 and 100 and form a circle with eyes closed in an ascending order by only talking to the person by physical touch). I could see how comfortable few students were in getting at the back of the class and starting with the activity but there were few who were quite careful rather focused on physical touch than the activity itself. There were students who had their hands inwards trying to touch other students via shoulders, while many just went ahead and tapped on the shoulders, hands, head, waist (well, eyes were closed). The exercise went for around 12 minutes and students seem to enjoy the activity as they laughed when they opened their eyes and whispered to each other how challenging it was or fun it is. Suddenly the environment I felt was quite different to the first hour. The energy level was up and people were more composed in sharing their ideas with the class and among each other. When I say composed, I mean the body language was more relaxed (hands on the head, leaning forward, hands in pockets and clapping and laughing). This continued after the break.

After the break, students were more open to say what they had in mind without much consideration of others approval. There was more voice, more energy in the room (I felt) but there were those 6 students who never spoke a word. They seemed interested in group discussions. By interest I mean, they left what they were doing (on their laptops, notebook) and leaned on the table with both hands on the table folded inward but then I did not see/hear them speak at all.

Another activity at the end made it look mundane and interesting as well. Mundane because similar to the last activity people seemed to enjoy but then there were few who spoke and few who didn't. During the exercise though, things started changing. With changing I mean, the discussion turned personal. A male student who raised hands earlier targeted another male

student and said everything opposite to what other student said. For example, the class was discussing Newtonian way of thinking. While one said what he believed was Newtonian, the student with raised hands said with examples this is not Newtonian. The other male student head dropped, left side of the lip going sideways and hands resting on the legs. When another student asked what he thought, he turned on the other student and said what she thought.

There were more bodily expressions that I felt were conveying how students felt than words that were spoken. Without prior arrangements, team started to form, and some students taking sides and started putting other ideas down while some tried to push the shooting down of their ideas not by words but by body language (hands on the head, crossing legs, leaning backwards and making their eyes small and shaking their head sideways).

The students who were observing each individual student in the inner circle when time came were quite open in their feedback. Telling what they should have done differently, what they did, which they dint like, or liked. What they would have done in the situation but when the lecturer asked in the beginning for the volunteers, only 4 went straight away, 2 took time and 2 were pushed.