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**What if the grass is greener? Engaging with academic career options during times of change. (0147)**

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## **Introduction**

Changes across higher education mean that ongoing academic employment can no longer be an assured or indeed desired future for doctoral graduates. There is evidence that some early career academics are choosing to step off the tenure/permanence track in order to transition to careers outside academia that may be seen as more secure and having a healthier work-life balance (e.g., Huisman et al, 2002; Mason et al, 2009). Whilst we know relatively little of the ways in which doctoral students perceive and navigate the transition from PhD to initial careers (McAlpine & Turner, 2012), a picture does emerge showing that PhD students are often uncertain of their future career paths, and may opt to enter academia through a combination of convenience, idealisation and happenstance (e.g., Bieber & Worley, 2006). Our ongoing team-based research, begun in 2006 in Canada and 2007 in the UK, explores the nature of academic work and academic careers amongst doctoral students, post-PhD researchers and new lecturers in the social sciences. We use a longitudinal biographical perspective, given our interest in conceptualizing the idiosyncratic nature of individuals' histories and expectations and how such histories and intentions shape engagement in academic work (Pearson et al, 2011). Identity is viewed as a "biographical and growing understanding of who one wants to be and is becoming" (McAlpine, Turner & Amundsen, 2011). Whilst individual agency is privileged, this approach recognises the influence of structural constraints and unexpected opportunities. Drawing on Sfard and Prusak's (2005) work on investigating learning as a culturally shaped activity, I adopt their underlying premise that narratives are participants' identities as created by stories. As such the narratives tracked during this longitudinal study incorporate the constancy of an individual's biographical identity combined with a sense of ongoing change.

## **The Research**

In 2007, social science doctoral students and post-PhD researchers were recruited to participate in the UK cohort, initially for 15 months with the understanding that thereafter they would be invited to continue. Each provided biographic data, activity logs, a pre-interview questionnaire, and participated in an interview. Of the 25 completing this round, 11 agreed to continue, and have so to date. Of these, nine are female and two male; five were doctoral students at the start of the study and six postdoctoral researchers. After five years, one is a doctoral student, three are postdoctoral researchers, three have secured long term academic posts and four are working in professional fields. At commencement, they varied from mid-20s to mid-50s; nearly half were international with a number using English-as-another-language; many had family commitments. Participant data are organized by individual case and each year team members write case summaries to capture key events, relationships, difficulties and learning reported for that year. This approach preserves a focus on the individual whilst enabling cross-case analysis. For this paper, the interviews were

read in chronological order for each participant, noting where options other than academia arose and how these were positioned in relation to past, present and future career options.

### **Participants' imagined alternatives to academic life**

In this paper I draw on the accounts of participants from the UK cohort when actively seeking or engaged in paid academic employment. Some participants had a clear preference to remain in academic work; thus Elizabeth, at the end of a fixed term contract, imagined the positive aspects of working in a shop, her sister's role. Catherine, an older worker concerned with job security and research funding, did not imagine alternatives beyond the possibilities of moving to another institution, and Paul, with further qualifications to pursue before being able to secure an academic post in his home country, imagined a possible future in a government post. CM, remained focussed on a research career yet imagined a move away from academia to secure a return to her home country. Most ambivalent were Chef, frustrated with workload issues, who spoke of the possibilities of pursuing her craft-based hobby as a career, and Jennifer, who wondered if returning to her previous role as a business consultant would offer her greater influence. All six of the participants outlined here imagined a range of futures. Whilst the opportunity structures presented post-PhD represented challenges, even participants such as Jennifer and Chef, with considerable career success and academic job security, retained significant "grass is greener" visualisations.

### **Discussion**

This approach provides an opportunity to explore the evolving ambivalences of social scientists as they negotiate their capacities to learn what it means to be an academic in the light of their changing personal circumstances, experiences of academic life and their imagined futures within and beyond academia. Sfard and Prusak (2005) argue that significant personal narratives consist of two subsets: the actual identity, stories of the actual state of affairs and the designated identity, consisting of narratives of what is expected to be the case. They contend that "learning may be thought of as closing the gap between actual identity and designated identity" (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). It may be that the state of recent flux across the higher education sector has created uncertainty regarding the designated identity for academics, which makes it difficult for early career academics to close the gap between their actual identity and a shifting, designated identity – that is, to learn quite how to be an academic. It is possible that early career academics' talk of imagined alternative lives outside academia – engaging in "the grass is greener on the other side of the fence" visualization – may be a strategy that enables them to gain a sense of agency in order to renegotiate their engagement with higher education in a way that enables them to learn how to be an academic in a time of change. Overall, this study contributes a more nuanced understanding of early career academic identity development and the ways in which individuals develop a range of approaches to build their careers and their biographical understanding of what it means to choose an academic career.

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