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Constructing academic identities: between the academic career and the academic trajectory (0155)

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Abstract

Making a distinction between the ideas of academic career and academic trajectory, this paper analyses the construction of academic identities as an interplay between institutional structures and academic agency. Following Archerian theory, *academic career* represents the constraints that the university imposes on academics whereas *academic trajectories* involve academics' hopes, concerns and practices. Using a qualitative approach in which two Chilean universities participated (a teaching oriented university and a teaching-and-research university), the data were gathered through documentary analyses, interviews and focus groups. The results suggest that although institutional structures are powerful in shaping academic careers, to a greater or lesser extent across different types of university, academics are able to find spaces to pursue their professional hopes projects and so advance their own trajectories.

Introduction

Being an academic today involves diverse identities in liquid contexts (Bauman, 2000). On the one hand, the construction of identities depends on structural forces that condition but do not determine these identities, and, on the other hand, it responds to the concerns, projects and practices that academics themselves pursue (Archer, 1995; 1996;

2000; 2007). Structures and agency and the constant interplay between these two give rise to academic identities that are continuously evolving.

A research question that emerges is: To what extent do academics find a space to pursue their own academic projects and to what extent are academics restrained by structures? To answer this question, a distinction between *academic career* and *academic trajectory* will be deployed.

Framework

We define *academic career* as the formal transit that one academic has through his/her life in academe. It has a temporal component characterized by formal mechanisms that allow academic mobility through hierarchical positions based on established criteria, standards, procedures and compensation systems. Through such mechanisms, an institution indicates and evaluates an academic over time. Each institution creates its own mechanisms that respond to the aims it pursues (institutional project) such that *academics careers* will vary according to institutional goals, values and rules.

Academic trajectory, meanwhile, involves academics' own hopes, concerns and practices (Archer, 1996; 2007); it is the space that academics can create and stretch to pursue their own academic projects. There is interplay, a space of interaction between the institution -as structure- looking to its academics in order to preserve and advance it (the institution) as a corporation on the one hand and the academic(s) -as agent(s)- wanting and working to fulfill their own self-realization on the other hand.

Method

A case study was conducted in Chile with two universities: a teaching oriented university and a university that is teaching-and-research oriented. Documentary analysis plus twenty interviews and two focus group were conducted in each university with academics from different disciplines, years of academic experience, gender, roles (teaching, research, management) and different conditions of employment.

Results and discussion

In the teaching oriented university, academic career is a new concept. Until recently, most of its academics had teaching functions and they

had a short-term and part-time contract to conduct this task and so there was little prospect of individual advancement. However, two years ago, the university incorporated a hierarchical scale among those academics with a permanent contract. In parallel, some academics with PhD degrees were contracted to conduct research with funds provided by the institution. In this university, institutional structures define academic roles and there is little space to conduct activities other than those ones defined as important by the institution.

'This institution needs teachers...some of them can hold doctorates and might want to conduct research but that is not a crucial thing, first of all these academics are contracted to teach' (interview)

According to the collected data, most of the academics are aligned with institutional goals and they consider teaching practices as the most important function in this institutional context. Consequently, most academics here are engaged with the teaching function and invest their time, energy and effort in it. In the following fragment, the academic refers to a pedagogical innovation with which she is pleased; her *academic trajectory* makes sense from her teaching.

'I am focused on practical knowledge and I created a special workshop in which my students reflected on the role of equalitarian education... we dedicated several sessions to discuss about this and we developed critical thinking...it is tiring to plan this because of the amount of activities but, in the end, it is worth it' (focus group).'

In the *university that is both teaching and research oriented*, *academic career* is defined in a much broader way, around teaching, research and service, such that academics should conduct tasks in all these fields although increasingly weight has been put in research productivity. These academics face a larger variety of options (compared with their private university colleagues) and have some room to manoeuvre as between multiple tasks. Thus, some academics are devoted to teaching, some others are more focused on research, some other do both and some others are in management positions. However, decisions are far from being straightforwardly 'free' although some space for agentic responses may be observed.

In this university, the degree that academics hold is becoming a key issue: no new academic will be appointed nor will embark on an *academic career* without holding a PhD degree. And, at the same time, it is expected that the newly contracted holders of doctorates will contribute to the university's scientific productivity by obtaining funds for competitive projects and by publishing papers in well ranked journals. In other words, *academic career* depends on this kind of productivity. These requirements are stronger in some disciplines (Sciences) while academics from the soft applied sciences conduct little

research being their *academic career* subjected to teaching and management functions.

'I work for the School of Business and Administration and few academics here do research... I wish I could research one day but my main task is teaching...' (interview).

But despite all these structural dimensions, these academics manage in practice to reflect their *own* concerns and projects, their *trajectories*. Some academics prioritize tasks according to their personal interests (by 'stealing' time from some activities or by reconciling their private and academic life):

'Although I like teaching, I enjoy doing research so I organize my schedule in order to devote at least three afternoons to conduct my research and write my papers' (interview).

Conclusion

Academic career and academic trajectory are two sides of a coin. Both run in a parallel way seeking to widen their own space and to push back or even dominate the other's territory but one does not exist without the other. Although *academic careers* are powerful in shaping and restricting academic identities, to a greater or lesser extent across different types of university, academics are able to find little spaces to pursue their academics projects and interests and not to succumb to structures.

References

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