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Experiencing higher education as an academic practitioner: negotiating academic identity (0240)

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This paper explores what it means to be part of the higher education community as an academic practitioner. It is based on research addressing the nature of academic work and how it is perceived to have changed in recent years. There are many official accounts of what constitutes academic work; selection criteria, workload planning and promotion criteria all act to define particular kinds of academic. But in the current higher education context, it is important to understand how academics actually make sense of the competing pressures of teaching, research and administration and how they act to construct for themselves an identity that both makes sense to them and also meets institutional requirements. Understanding how academics manage the complex balancing of activities on a daily basis provides the possibility for change in the future.

There has hitherto been surprisingly little research published that critically examines the formation of academics as researchers and as teachers. Research has not yet explained why some new academics, having completed a doctorate, do not develop as researchers as expected. Indeed, Brew and Boud, (2009) have suggested that the doctorate is not effective in developing independent researchers. Further, while considerable attention has been given in recent years to how to prepare academics for teaching undergraduates, there appears to be resistance to engaging in teaching and research development (Brew, Boud & Namgung, 2010). Clearly more work is needed to understand what leads to resistance in taking up teaching development and how these constrain or enable action.

The research builds on studies that have examined how academics experience and understand the nature of research (Åkerlind, 2008), and studies of academics' responses to research selectivity exercises (Lucas, 2006). Such work indicates that how universities position individuals (e.g. as research-active), influences how academics see themselves and how they act.

The project is conceptually based on Archer's (2000) view that social situations are ambiguous and present a complex variety of conflicting opportunities for growth, development and the pursuit of various personal objectives. It is individuals' reflexive awareness, expressed in the form of 'internal conversations' (Archer 2007, p. 2), that links the person and society. Individuals interpret the situations they are in as constraining or enabling action.

Method

This qualitative research project builds on a large-scale survey of academics within 6 Australian and 6 English Universities, which has already been reported. Semi-structured interviews with 23 mid-career academics have been carried out and transcribed. Purposive sampling has been used to select academics with 5-10 years' experience beyond their doctorate/first appointment in three broad disciplines from three Australian and three English universities. Interviewees were identified as those who, in the survey, indicated a willingness to be interviewed.

The interviews have explored:

1. How academics in different disciplines, different research-intensive university environments and the different countries think about and act upon perceived constraints and opportunities for development in their context.
2. How academics come to position themselves in relation to research and teaching. What has influenced this positioning.
3. How academics in different disciplines, universities and countries form their identity as a researcher and/or teacher. What narratives they tell about the formation of their particular

academic identity.

Questions focused on how they see themselves as an academic, how they became the kind of academic they are, critical incidents in their career, perceived personal and structural influences in their current role, what constrains and what enables teaching and research decisions in their context and their future aspirations. Resulting data is analyzed firstly in terms of Archer's (2000) four modes of reflexivity, then in terms of key themes and variations that emerge in each of the three disciplinary areas. The metaphors used in the interviews are also used to build narratives illuminating the internal conversations that act to define particular academic identities. This paper focuses on the initial analysis of interview data.

Findings

Initial findings based on the pilot and early interviews have shown that some people begin their academic career with an ideal model in mind of what it means to be an academic and how they can transverse through academia. This may pose a problem when faced with a real job. It seems that what people enter with and what they want to do determines how they struggle to hold on to the sense of self they develop. Preliminary interview data shows how people respond to new challenges.

Archer (2007) talks about how individuals negotiate constraints and enablements. Archer suggests that people develop an internal conversation in which they interpret the structural constraints in their day to day lives. Academics are continually balancing the freedom they have against particular personal, institutional and structural constraints. Initial analysis of the interview data suggests that the influence of the resultant 'causal mechanisms' can be, as Archer would suggest, mediated by academics, alongside consideration of the range of influences on their lives, as they develop their particular path. So for example institutional or departmental restructuring may affect academics' workload, how they view their work and the possibilities for particular chosen activities, which may be positive or negative.

Academics appear to develop a narrative of themselves as an academic. One such is the Hero narrative where the academic presents themselves as succeeding against the odds. Another narrative is the Imposter narrative. The sense of insecurity expressed by interviewees helps to tell this story. We will expect to find other narratives as the analysis of data proceeds and these will be discussed at the conference.

One of the key structural issues for academics is time. Sometimes lack of time appears to be a real structural constraint and sometimes it appears to be how the individual agent negotiates their workload. The teaching timetable can be viewed as a structural constraint but teaching time may be negotiated, for example, to do research in a later semester. For individual agents, there appears to be a delicate balance between creating one's own world or being constrained by structures and other agents.

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