Gender, Early Career Academics and the Performance of Self at Academic Conferences

This paper revisits a study originally conducted in 2003 on gendered conceptions of speaking at academic conferences and events, asking the same interview questions as in 2003 to a group of early career academics in contemporary academia who recently attended a one-day conference event for early career academics. In doing so, my aim is to compare and contrast views and experiences of this very public aspect of academic life and work, comparing the data from academics in my previous study – the majority of whom were on permanent contracts - and those of academics and researchers just beginning to (or aiming to) gain a foothold in academia today.

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the difficulties facing early career researchers attempting to gain a foothold on the academic career ladder in the UK and across much of the 'Global North' (see e.g. Thwaites and Pressland, 2016). Fixed-term and zero-hours contracts have become all too commonplace, with the competition for 'permanent' academic posts seemingly greater than ever. Of those on fixed term contracts (35.5% of all academic staff on employment contracts in 2013-14), the vast majority are in the more junior grades (Leathwood and Read, 2013).

Academic culture has been shown to be extremely hierarchical and inegalitarian: as Harris (2005) notes, the university 'was and remains a site of exclusion, elitism and power' (p. 424). It is an arena where many are or become marginalized from the security of the 'centre', often reflecting/reinforcing wider social inequalities such as those based on gender, social class background, and 'race'/ethnicity (see. e.g. Mirza, 1995; Reay, 2004; Leathwood and Read, 2009). Moreover, the increasing dominance of neoliberal policies and practices in the HE sector has led to steadily increasing pressures on academic staff to 'perform' in ever more publicly accountable ways. The global financial crisis in 2008 has only exacerbated pre-existing trends. Moreover, gendered constructions of work, care and the division of labour in both public and private spheres can result in particularly damaging consequences for many women staff (e.g. Harley 2001), as well as the stresses (or threat) of working on fixed term, insecure contracts in the academy.

Wrapped up in the dynamics of performativity is the pressure not only to deal with personal doubts about authenticity in the role of academic, but increasing levels of anxiety in relation to *being seen to be* authentically 'excellent' in the role by others, producing the required outputs but also seemingly doing so confidently and 'capably' (Leathwood and Read, 2009). This includes the particular aspects of 'presentation of self' required when presenting at conferences and events. Writers on language have argued that the most favoured and valued styles of communicating in academia – both in 'professional' speaking and writing – is assertive, unemotional, and confident (Harding, 1991; Martin, 1997; see also Farr, 1993; Francis *et al*., 2001). Academics are also encouraged to act individualistically and competitively in order to 'make a name' for themselves and present 'their' views and

opinions in favour of others (see e.g. Doherty 2000). Although academics are widely judged by their *written* communication, particularly in the forms of journal articles and books, their facility in utilising academic language orally (for example at interview, or in presentations given at conferences) is also important in terms of their own self-conception of their 'authenticity' as a member of the academy, and how their worth is judged by their peers.

The competitive/ aggressive culture of speaking in the academy can be particularly uncomfortable for those that feel they do not 'fit the mould' of the classed raced and gendered construction of the 'ideal' academic (Stanley, 1995; Ahmed, 2012; Jones et al., 2014). The first study I will be discussing here, conducted via email interviews in 2003, investigated 52 men and women academics' views on speaking and writing (for a discussion of email interviewing as a methodology see James, 2015). The 2003 study found that whilst two thirds of the sample stated they generally felt confident and comfortable when speaking at lectures or seminars, descriptions of feeling nervous or uncomfortable were more often recounted by younger women academics and younger academics of working-class origin (Author 2003; 2005). Many described how they would aim to 'cover up' nerves and discomfort in order to be able to present in the 'favoured' academic style that positions the speaker as the calm, confident emotionally-detached 'expert' that, as Davies has pointed out is at the heart of the masculinised conception of the professional (Davies, 1996).

Nevertheless, the cost of such emotional labour – particularly at moments of higher perceived threat to self-presentation such as the traditional 'question and answer' session – leads to a questioning of the usefulness and appropriateness of 'traditional' cultural practices and styles at academic conferences, and the favoured ways of 'performing' the 'expert academic'. Moreover, this paper will present an analysis of new findings from a 'revisiting' of the original study, where I will be asking the same questions to a contemporary group of early career academics (at the time of writing the study is awaiting institutional ethical approval so will be conducted in early autumn of 2017). The dynamic of age was one that I paid less attention to than gender and class in my original analysis, but one that seems ever more pertinent now at a time when the path towards a stable career in academia is ever more fraught, and media opinion pieces contain such memorable assertions as 'Academia has to stop eating its young' (Yazdanian, 2015).

The paper will thus conclude with a discussion on the implications of this 'revisited study' for our understandings of the contemporary dynamics of one particular aspect of academic culture – the conference presentation – assessing the ways in which such arenas can work to exacerbate conceptions of marginality and insecurity – or perhaps work to support or mitigate against such feelings – for early career academics beginning the process of negotiating the nebulous 'rules of the game' of academic work and life.

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