

G1.1 Beaumaris Lounge Thursday 6 December 9.00-11.00

'Fast professors' in Canadian academe: negotiating the research funding imperative (0492)

Sandra Acker¹ *University of Toronto, Canada*

This paper is about the *fast professor*, the alter ego of Berg and Seeber's (2016) *Slow Professor*. 'Professor' is used in the North American sense, as a synonym for 'academic'. Over the past several decades, neo-liberal trends have altered the everyday/everynight (Smith, 1987) working practices of academics. For many, research is an all-encompassing imperative (Gumport, 1991), structured around the twin goals of publishing prolifically and securing external grants.

Here I discuss the quest for research funding, drawing on an exploratory study of ten mid-career education scholars, located in five Canadian universities. It is part of a larger project on the social production of social science research. In Canada, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) is the main source for social sciences research support. While some participants acquired numerous and ever-larger SSHRC projects, others struggled to access funding. For most, slowing down did not appear to be an option.

Background

At a recent Canadian conference, 'Slow Professor' T-shirts and mugs were on sale at the book exhibit, suggesting that Berg and Seeber (2016) have tapped into a widespread longing for solutions to unmanageable workloads. Critics of the concept of a slow university (e.g., Martell, 2014; Mendick, 2014; Vostal, 2016), see 'slow' as more of a mirage than an oasis, arguing that the speedy pace of academe is anchored in global changes and capitalism, as well as reflecting inequalities among academics who are variably positioned socially and materially (Hey, 2001; Read & Bradley, 2018).

Interest in the temporal rhythms of university work expanded in the 2000s. Books (Gibb et al., 2015; Vostal, 2016) and journal articles (Hartman and Darab, 2012; Gornall & Salisbury, 2012; Menzies & Newson, 2008; Mountz et al., 2015; Shahjahan, 2015; Spurling, 2015; Ylijoki and Mäntylä, 2003; Vostal, 2015a,b) address these issues. Pioneering research in Finland identified four time perspectives: scheduled, timeless, contracted and personal time (Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003). More recently, Morley and colleagues (2018) identify contradictory consequences of Swedish *fika* (scheduled coffee breaks), while Read and Bradley (2018) describe 'waiting' as a pervasive aspect of academic work.

Many of these accounts come from the UK, where government action since the 1980s has intensified competition and performativity. This paper is significant because of its location in Canada, which retains strong unions, a functioning tenure system, a fair degree of university autonomy, no centrally-directed research assessment exercises and apparent high levels of academic satisfaction (Author reference 1; Weinrib et al., 2013). Yet even in Canada, 'fast' academic culture supersedes 'slow'.

Method

The mid-career academics had achieved tenure between 2004 and 2014. Ages of the six women and four men ranged from 41 to 50. All participants had been involved in externally-funded research projects, and all but two had held at least one SSHRC grant. Our intention was to secure a range of perspectives rather than to be statistically representative.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews of around 90 minutes, conducted between 2015 and 2017, explored experiences and issues related to research leadership, supports and development. Key themes were identified through provisional coding, after which the researchers returned to the transcripts and coded selectively (Charmaz, 2010). This paper highlights research funding and institutional support.

Findings

'Having a SSHRC' is a proxy for being a respected Canadian scholar, a 'symbol' (Amy). '[SSHRC grants] are at the heart of everything I do' (Susan). In many institutions, that every academic should have a SSHRC on the go was a *doxa*, an unquestioned truth (Bourdieu, 1977; see also Polster, 2007).

Being strategic meant that participants crafted proposals according to what they imagined SSHRC to 'want' (Author reference 2). Almost everyone had experienced an unsuccessful application. Tales were told of how the same proposal received wildly different evaluations from one year to the next. When asked why an application had been unsuccessful, the usual answer was 'I don't know' (Jennifer). The response was often just to keep going, keep reapplying. Participants 'work all the time' (Nicole), 'seven days a week' (Heather).

Behind the scenes were not only rejections and resubmissions, but an investment of self in performativity: '[the job] has no mechanism for telling you stop, none at all' (Michael). Successful and productive participants appeared apologetic as they explained in dramatic terms why their productivity may have been limited: relationship breakup, parental death and illness, their own illness, turbulence in the workplace. Only two expressed any interest in 'slow'.

Institutional and external supports and hindrances shaped research work. Research-intensive institutions geared up to support SSHRC grant applications. One faculty of education provided staff to draft budgets, a consultant to edit proposals, a web site to showcase successful submissions and a 'SSHRC boot camp'. SSHRC requires that costs be minimized, and that academics themselves, with student assistance, perform most or all of the labour (Author reference 3). SSHRC does not provide teaching buy-outs. Participants typically juggled teaching, supervision and service along with their research. Those in less research-intensive institutions had larger teaching loads, fewer administrative supports and intermittent access to student research assistance: 'for years I've tried to get students at [University] and I couldn't get any' (Kevin).

Conclusion

The academic culture, in Canada as elsewhere, rewards 'fast' rather than 'slow'. There is always more work to do and no upper limit to potential accomplishments. At five years past tenure and age 44,

Michael has held three SSHRC grants and several from other sources and is applying again. Nicole currently holds four grants. Can they keep up this pace for 20–25 more years?

Disciplining the self is evident, as participants talk about working all the time and difficulties in finding boundaries (Gornall & Salisbury, 2012; Ylijoki, 2013). They also display pleasure in immersion (Hey, 2004; Vostal, 2016). How can we slow down, if all around us are speeding up? While the CVs boasted of accomplishments, the interviews contained ‘behind the scenes’ stories of illness and disappointment. While it might appear that the fast professors oppress themselves, their choices are constrained.

References

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Author Reference 2

Author Reference 3

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