255 Who do you think we are? Social representations of academics among academics and other professional groups

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

We investigated how different social groups perceive academics using an established mixed methods approach to identify *if* and *where* there are misconceptions. Participants (*n* = 408) completed an online Free Association Task where they provided five words or expressions that came to mind when presented with the word 'academic' or a priming vignette where the implied ethnicity or gender of the protagonist was manipulated. We used Social Representation Theory to identify the central, stable elements of the perception of academics that vary by professional group (*e.g.,* Student, Other Profession) or prime (gender / ethnicity manipulation). Results show that for all professional groups *Research* is central, however, *Teaching* is absent from the central core for Academics and Students. We also find the association of *Societal Contribution* varies according to professional group or priming condition. We discuss the implications of these findings on the profession of Academics and Higher Education more broadly.

Full paper

We examined how different social groups perceive academics using an established mixed methods approach (Cristea et al., 2020) to identify *if* and *where* there are misconceptions about the academic profession. We want to know whether society's perception of academics is keeping up with academia's evolution to ensure our teaching, research and scholarship is *accessible*, *trusted*, and *engaged with* by the wide range of stakeholders that academics and Higher Education Institutions (HEI) engage with (*e.g.,* prospective students, professional service staff, charities and third sector, non-government organisations, corporates, schools, governments, government agencies, peers, employers, local, national and international media outlets, health professionals, the public, recruiters). We need to understand how perceptions may vary according to different social groups if we want to change the perception of academics as *distant from the public*, *inaccessible*, and *hidden away* in their *"ivory towers"* (Buckley & Du Toit, 2010; Serdaroğlu, 2020; Sever, Ozdemir, & Jobson, 2021).

We use Social Representation Theory (Moscovici, 1961) to identify the central, stable elements of the perception of academics and the peripheral, flexible elements that vary by social group. Social representations are a form of social knowledge and express a group's shared values, norms, and attitudes towards a specific social object (*e.g.,* academia; Moscovici, 1984). They are formed through the various modalities in which people imagine, define and represent the social reality surrounding them and are shared by people belonging to the same culture, community, social category, or group (Rateau, Moliner, & Abric, 2011). We may conceive of them as societal or cultural representations (*e.g.,* ideology, collective representations), or as organised individual representations that update each time individuals identify themselves with a specific social group (*e.g.,* students versus academics).

Participants (*n* = 408) completed an online Free Association Task (Abric, 2003) where they provided five words or expressions that came to mind when presented with the stimulus word 'academic' or one of five priming vignettes where the implied ethnicity or gender of the protagonist was manipulated (*e.g.,* Dr. Jane Smith or Dr. Adebayo). Participants provided additional justifications (di Giacomo, 1981) about provided associations to ensure correct interpretation. Prototypical analysis (Vergès, 1994) identified the central, stable elements (high frequency, high importance associations) of the perception of academics and the peripheral, flexible elements (see Figure 1) that varied by professional group (Academics, Students, Non-Academic HEI employees, and Other Professionals) or prime (implied ethnicity or gender of the protagonist).

Prototypical analysis by professional group (*e.g.,* Academics, Students, Non-Academic HEI employees and Other Professionals) demonstrates shared central elements of *Research*, *Knowledgeable* and *Dedicated* for all groups (see

Figure 2). While *Research* falls within the central core for all professional groups, *Teaching* is considered peripheral for Academics and Students; it is frequently associated but rated low in importance. Other Professionals were the only group to recognise *Societal Contribution* as central. *Societal Contribution* was associated with low frequency and low importance by Academics while Students and Non-Academic HEI participants rated it as important on the few occasions they made the association. In line with other research (Buckley & Du Toit, 2010; Sever et al., 2021), we also find evidence of issues around gender inequality with *Male* being negatively associated as a central element by Academics.

Prototypical analysis by priming condition (*e.g.,* 'Academic', Higher Education (HE) Professional, Dr. Adebayo, Dr. Smith, Dr. Jane Smith or Dr. John Smith) demonstrates shared central elements of *Research*, *Knowledgeable*, *Dedicated* and *Intelligence* (see Figure 3). *Teaching* is a central element for all priming vignettes, but not with the prime 'Academic' suggesting the importance of priming teaching within the vignette for it to be recognised as central. *Societal Contribution* is a central element for priming catefories of HE Professional, Dr. Adebayo and Dr. John Smith but not for other primes (*e.g.,* Drs Jane Smith or Smith, or 'Academic') implying the perceived gender or ethnicity of the protagonist affects the perceived contribution they make to society.

To our knowledge this is the first time Social Representation Theory has been used to understand the perception of academics. In addition to providing a theoretical framework for the interpretation of results, identification of the central and peripheral elements associated with each social group can provide strategic value. Greater *equality of opportunity within* as well as *greater impact beyond* the Higher Education Institution can be achieved by using these findings to tailor communication to be inclusive and directed to the wide range of stakeholders that academics and HEIs engage with.
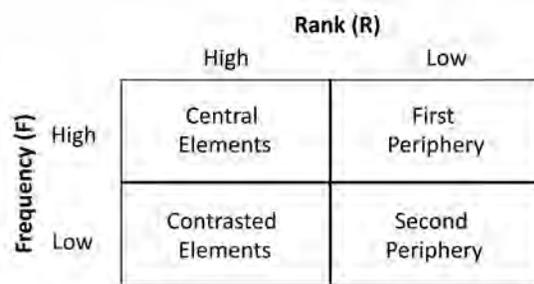

Figure 1: Structure of the associations following prototypical analysis. Associations are allocated to a quadrant on the basis of their frequency (rows) or rank (columns).
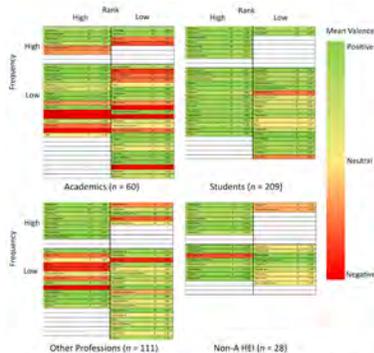

Figure 2: Prototypical analysis by professional group (Academics, Students, Other Professions and Non-Academic working in Higher Education (Non-A HEI). High frequency associations are on the upper row of each table (low on the bottom) and highly ranked associations are in the left column (low on the right). Central Elements (high frequency, high importance) are located in the top left quadrant of each table. Associations are also colour coded to indicate the mean valence (positive or negative).
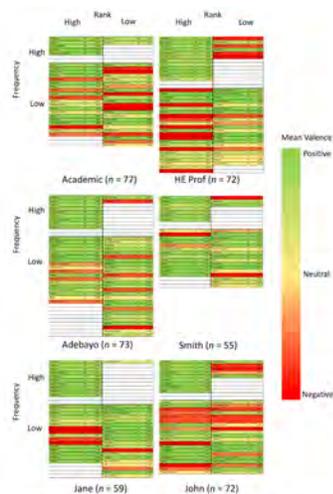
Figure 3: Prototypical analysis by priming condition (Academic, HE Professional, Dr. Adebayo, Dr. Smith, Dr. Jane Smith, Dr. John Smith). High frequency associations are on the upper row of each table (low on the bottom) and highly ranked associations are in the left column (low on the right). Central Elements (high frequency, high importance) are located in the top left quadrant of each table. Associations are also colour coded to indicate the mean valence (positive or negative).

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