

## **“Trying to sit on a broken chair while pretending it’s not broken”: Academic Teaching Staff and their Metaphors of ‘Belonging’.**

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### **Research Domains**

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### **Abstract**

This enquiry used creative approaches to investigate academic teaching staff and their narratives of 'belongingness' at university.

Seven academics from UK higher education settings took part in two interviews. In the first interview, each participant was invited to form a collage using everyday objects or images to tell the story of their professional journey. The second interview explored their experiences of belonging and 'not-belonging' in more depth.

The analysis of the interview data employs not only a narrative approach but also multimodal metaphor analysis, since the objects chosen by the the participants potentially give rise to new meanings previously unarticulated in words.

Findings indicate the use of powerful imagery to represent participants' experiences of belonging and not belonging in the Academy, revealing nuanced and complex facets of 'belonging' that go far beyond traditional binary perspectives, with implications for policy and practice.

### **Full paper**

The main aims of this research enquiry were as follows:

- 1) To investigate HE teachers' narratives of 'belongingness' in relation to their university employment
- 2) To develop a framework for the analysis of imagery generated within narratives

### **Why 'belongingness'?**

For students to be able to thrive they need to feel they 'belong' to their institution (Thomas, Hill, O'Mahony, & Yorke, 2017). However, such discourses tend to position belonging as

static, uniform and generally positive, failing to take into account the changing nature of university spaces and of individual contexts (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021). Furthermore, much of the literature has focused on how to 'improve' experiences of belonging for students without looking at higher education institutions as a whole, with little attention being paid to the experiences of belonging and 'not-belonging' of academic teaching staff. This study therefore focused on HE teachers' own stories of belonging in the Academy, in counterpoint to those of their students.

### **Approaches used**

A creative approach to data collection was employed in this small scale, qualitative study. Seven participants across four UK universities were invited to create collages of everyday objects to explain how they came to be in their current roles, with follow up interviews to explore key points in more depth.

As well as narrative analysis, *visual* (Pauwels & Margolis, 2011) and *metaphor* (Forceville, 2008) analyses were adopted to see if the collages created by the participants gave rise to previously unarticulated meanings in their stories of belongingness. The difference between this research compared with previous studies involving metaphor analysis is that here, the analysis was applied to imagery that arose from the research, whereas earlier work on metaphors has tended to focus on imagery that existed prior to the research, for example, in the Arts or in advertising. The study also contrasted with other creative and narrative enquiries, where visual data has been used to prompt further speech rather than as a source of data in its own right (Mannay, 2016).

### **Findings**

The narratives offered by the participants indicated a complex and nuanced picture of 'belonging', with individuals actively choosing, at times, when, where and how to belong, and not-belong, supporting the idea that belonging at university is enacted' in multiple ways (Ajjawi, Gravett, & O'Shea, 2025), only this time for staff, rather than students. The study also highlighted ways in which certain 'bodies' are construed as 'outsiders' in the Academic space, typically along the lines of gender, race and disability and the intersections of these (Oliver & Morris, 2020), with other factors such as nationality, language and socioeconomic status coming into play for some of those lecturers interviewed. Participants ranged from 'career academics' to those transitioning from practice, that is, 'pracademics' (Griffiths & Dickinson, 2023), while motivations for teaching at a university varied from considering it to be a vocation to viewing it as a means to a different end entirely, simply a stage on a longer journey.

Findings evidenced a wealth of imagery from participants, the analysis of which added subtle and powerful layers of meaning to their narratives. Metaphors relating to belonging and not belonging arising from the data included a pair of worn out boxing gloves, flowers, cheese graters, prayer flags and the stopper from a cut glass decanter, each conveying

different attributes of the university experience for those individuals. The process of eliciting and analysing these alternate forms of expression revealed much about the nature of imagery in narrative research, and how moving beyond words can give rise to deeper, more authentic meanings. It also showed how imagery in narrative can manifest not just as words, but in the form of pictures, objects and 'enactments' or 'reenactments', for example, burying part of a sculpture in detritus; stroking a soft brush or winding a piece of string around a collection of items.

All of this contributed to an understanding of belonging in the Academy that moved from somewhat reductive, initial definitions in the literature towards a wide and varied landscape of experiences and perspectives. What came through strongly, however, is that the erstwhile focus on students' senses of belonging at university forms only part of the picture; we must look to those that teach them, too.