

## **Affects and the Academy: interrupting absences (0072)**

Hey Valerie <sup>1</sup>, <sup>1</sup>*University of Sussex, Brighton, United Kingdom*

### **Abstract**

Barrett argues that ‘sociology is conspicuously inadequate ...Physicality, humanity, imagination, the other, fear, the limits of control: all are missing in their own terms, in their own dynamic’ (2000:19). This blunt judgment could stand as an assessment of the intellectual domain of higher education (studies). Hey, (2004, Hey and Leathwood, 2009, Leathwood and Hey, 2009) suggest how cultural sociology might energise the field of higher education. They note the disembodied nature of higher education discourse yet how the affective is at work in the Academy – in agitated social policy discourses; in audit’s grip over higher education’s governance and in academics ensuing behaviours and commitments. In this present paper, I extend this exploration, to theoretically refresh reimagining the University of the Future. The desiccated policy descriptions which in the main, presently delineate the field could do with disrupting/pepping up (Hey, 2009).

**Keywords:** Gender, emotion, power, feminism, austerity

**Paper:** Inspiring an Affective Sociology of Higher Education

Hey and Leathwood (2009) avoided choosing between the conceptual claims of affect or the idea of emotion<sup>1</sup>, creating space for resonances of the psycho-social too, acknowledging the force of ‘desire’ (Leathwood and Hey, 2009:431). They wished to identify the different scalars entailed in the affective power geometry of higher education. But ‘getting affective’ has from the outset to contend with the Academy’s positing of ‘emotion’ as its ‘Other’. Female academics talking to this concern find themselves reminded of Walkerdine’s critique of phallogentric rationality:

‘a fantasy of discourse and practice in which the world becomes *what is wanted, regular, ordered, controllable*’ is moot here (Walkerdine, 1988 cited in Skeggs, 2002:3 emphasis added).

Feminists are well used to living the suspicion of their intellectual project as emotionally incontinent. Yet, without a newly recognised and re-centred affective imaginary, the Academy, as well as the field which takes it as an object of enquiry, is in danger of disqualifying some indispensable concepts for examining how austerity is already affectively at work recasting academic identity, research agendas<sup>2</sup> and institutional structures.

### **Ambiguous Affects**

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<sup>1</sup> Emotion is considered an individual property, whilst affects are seen as social/circulatory (Ahmed, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Hey participated in an LSE-hosted event entitled ‘The Impact of Impact’ (see THE article on 6/5/2010).

Judith Butler's analysis (1997) insists that our existence demands subjectivation in order for us to become 'legible'. Frosh suggest how dense a hold reason as thought-masculinity has upon male socialisation into disciplinary practices:

the costs and affordances of a male identification with a *position of mastery* works as a powerful regulative demand on the subject (and has described this as) '*both deathly and creative*'  
(Frosh, 1994, p. 74 emphasis added).

Submission spares no one, not even rulers of the symbolic. Does this very affective attachment to power simultaneously know itself as vulnerable? And if so does that play out in institutional and disciplinary spaces as a defensive misogyny? (see below). Secondly, many academics spend their time in a sort of permanent X factor of cut-throat striving and academics have been compulsively 'agentive' in our own aggressive refashioning by audit. Will the intensified competition for resources in austerity's wake stimulate even more performativity? In sum, what affective ecologies do economic cuts construct? It seems likely that women may feel the particular pressure not least when it is disguised as meritocratic 'performance management'. Here deep-seated gender animus can feed off the imperatives provided by the recession - a useful alibi for the misogyny that is already endemic in HE (Morley and David, 2007).

Thirdly, what about affects as sources of resistance? We need an updated 'sociological imagination' because the University of the Future paradoxically needs the resilience of the subaltern, innovative and creative. The feminine is well placed

for such creative endeavour standing slightly 'awry' (Zizek, 1991) from the 'power of mastery'. What other voices and positions are awry to 'mastery' and what would conditions have to be like for their different contribution to effect a decentring of the Academy as 'male, pale and stale'?

We may suffer a cut back on our theoretical ambitions, plagued as we are by the contingencies of the mundane, but thinking within the affective could reveal multiple sources of fear, pride, resistance to animate further resistances and refusals. If fear, for example, is considered as a necessary emotional enforcer of group boundaries – useful for containing others, (Ahmed, 2003) it should also be recognised that people can feel joy and elation, solidarity albeit of a fragile kind. Our place in the academy now and into the future tells on our nerves. If we can share the worst of our concerns anticipating austerity's revenge, we can come together to better define what it is we work so hard for in order to see what we can both rescue and reconceptualise.

The lively debate on the 'impact of impact' is one such renaissance of scholarly rethinking which also crucially too began to offer another way of accounting for what we do (THE, May 5<sup>th</sup> 2010). The struggle for voice, recognition and respect reminds us of how any power system (social class and race privilege) secures key aspects of its reproduction because it is affectively toxic, producing self-dispiriting self-cancelling 'privatised' emotions. The fight for equality is in part a fight about recognising how power is affectively freighted, that the expression of institutional governance may produce systemic personally felt 'affects' which damage as well as provoke, which silence as well as enrage. Conceptualising and socialising these 'ordinary' modes of symbolic violence could become a new spur to equity struggles.

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## **Biography**

Valerie Hey is a feminist with a view of theory that it should be ‘fun’ even if the conditions it is seeking to illuminate are not. She has been engaged in thinking about identity and affects for some time. Since moving to Sussex she has enjoyed a restoration of her intellectual spirits by becoming a member of the Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research. She is currently positioned in a somewhat awkward space as both an instrument of governance – as Head of Department – personifying the multitude of mundane tasks and more byzantine field forces of audit/performativity’s power which pass through this embodiment, whilst simultaneously engaged in thinking with and against these same forces. Along with Louise Morley she has been the convenor of an ESRC seminar Series Imagining the University of the Future which has inspired this symposium.