

## Just 'non-academics'? Research Administrators in Higher Education and Contested Occupational Identity (0128)

Allen-Collinson Jacquelyn, *University of Bath, United Kingdom*

### Background

Whilst research into the organisation and changing occupational cultures of academia has flourished in the last 15-20 years, studies of university staff have continued to concentrate primarily upon academic faculty, with a relative neglect of other occupational groups including administrators; rarely are their experiences included in studies of higher education (Whitchurch, 2006). Research into university administrative staff generally is scant, and even sparser vis-à-vis research administration (Allen-Collinson, 2006, 2007, 2009). The qualitative project\* upon which this paper is based aimed to address this lacuna by investigating the occupational life-worlds of research administrators; an occupational group of some research interest, as its domain of work appears to span the putative academic/administrative divide.

A trend towards greater specialisation in university administrative functions has been noted, certainly since the 1990s (e.g. McClintock, 1998), requiring increasing numbers of 'professional' or 'career' administrators (Whitchurch, 2006) to administer specialist domains. Concomitantly, there has been an increasing blurring of professional-administrative and academic boundaries generally (Corrall & Lester, 1996; Whitchurch, 2006). As a growing, specialist occupational group, research administrators play a key role in developing, supporting, and promoting the research activity of their universities. In the UK, although no national statistics were available when the project commenced, the UK's Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA) now has around 1600 members (ARMA, 2010). The significance of their contribution to university research 'output' is considerable, as the drive by universities to increase 'productivity' in both research and research-degree activity requires not only academic input but also an effective occupational group specialised in germane administrative processes. Despite the significance of their contribution, research administrators' work-worlds remain under-researched, and this paper considers some emergent themes cohering around the multidimensionality and contestation of occupational identity. In the paper, I address three key areas of 'moral exclusion' (Opatow, 1990) in relation to the data: 1) negative labelling; 2) rendering invisible; and 3) stigmatising and blaming.

### The research

Data collection was dual phase: initially, an email questionnaire was circulated to UK research administrators under the auspices of RAGnet (Research Administrators' Group Network), the then UK network for research administrators. The questionnaire sought basic information: including age, gender, qualifications, nature and organisational location of the post (school/department, research centre, central administration, etc.). Respondents were asked if willing to participate in the core, interview phase of the project. A total of 77 research administrators responded, all with at least a first degree, and ranging from those in their first year to those with well over a decade of experience in the occupation. On the basis of returns, criteria sampling was utilised to select interviewees, with snowball sampling supplementing the initial trawl. Semi-structured interviews were subsequently completed with 27 research administrators, based at 19 universities. Twenty-one (77%) interviewees were female, reflecting generally the gender imbalance noted at the questionnaire stage. Interview transcripts were analytically coded 'manually' via theoretical and thematic coding, developed inductively from interviewees' accounts.

### Theoretical framework

The conceptualisation of identity utilised here draws upon the symbolic interactionist tradition, emphasizing the fluidity and negotiated aspect of identities, produced within, and varying according to social context. Of particular salience is the distinction made between *social* and *personal* identities (Snow & Anderson, 1995), used here to distinguish *social identities* as those social actors attribute or impute to

others, whilst *personal identities* refer to the meanings attributed to the self. Brekhus' (1998, 2008) work on the marked/unmarked distinction, to distinguish the 'deviant', stigmatising, non-normative (marked), and the privileging, normative and 'generic' aspects of social identities was also utilised, as was Opatow's (1990) work on 'moral exclusion'.

## Results

As became evident, research administrators undertook variously to 'comply, consent and resist' (Pollert, 1996) in relation to the attempted imposition of particular social identities by certain of their academic and other colleagues. The degree of role improvisation varied widely between individual research administrators for a variety of reasons, including the amount of latitude permitted by the nature of their job, and also according to individuals' occupational biographies and the forms of identity negotiation and 'identity work' (Snow & Anderson, 1995), in which they engaged, including the degree of identification with academic colleagues. Such identification, along various modalities was found to be a salient feature of their occupational identities (Allen-Collinson, 2007). They, however, often found themselves 'marked' Brekhus (2008) as 'alter' by academic colleagues, and subject to certain social exclusionary practices. The ways in which these marked identities were negotiated and contested by research administrators forms the core of this presentation, where the focus is upon three key areas of 'moral exclusion' in Opatow's (1990, p. 1) terms, which emerged from the data: negative labelling (marking); rendering invisible; and stigmatising and blaming.

Research administrators portrayed vividly the challenges of negotiating their marked social identities in relation to both academic and administrative colleagues, and a certain liminal positioning emerged as a salient feature; an ambiguous, uncertain state wherein research administrators felt caught 'betwixt and between'. The ambiguous, situationally-contingent, boundary-crossing nature of research administration was emphasized, where interviewees reported shifting, sometimes rapidly, between work roles analogous to those of academics - e.g. writing research proposals, undertaking literature reviews - to those deemed 'mundane and boring', and described as 'secretarial dross'. Research administrators also found themselves betwixt and between occupational categories, occupational 'hybrids' (Whitchurch, 2006), identifying and identified somewhere between 'mainstream' administrators and academics. Many clearly valorised the ambiguity of this social space with its attendant possibilities for boundary-crossing and fluidity of identity, and this very ambiguity of identity-positioning was construed as a positive and celebrated aspect of their occupational lives (Allen-Collinson, 2006).

## Implications

The study's findings in many ways support Whitchurch's (2006) concept of a hybrid occupational identity. They also take forward Brekhus' (2008) theoretical work on marked/unmarked identities, originally used in relation to analyses of 'race', class, gender and sexuality but found here to have great applicability to the domain of occupations within higher education.

Word count: 983

\* The research team comprised the author and Dr John Hockey of the University of Gloucestershire.

## References

- Allen-Collinson, J. (2006) Just 'non-academics'? Research administrators and contested occupational identity, *Work, Employment & Society*, 20 (2), 267-288.
- Allen-Collinson, J. (2007) 'Get yourself some nice, neat, matching box files': research administrators and occupational identity work, *Studies in Higher Education*, 32 (3), 295-309.
- Allen-Collinson, J. (2009) Negative 'marking': University research administrators and the contestation of moral exclusion, *Studies in Higher Education*, 34 (8), 941-954.

- Association of Research Managers and Administrators UK (ARMA UK) (2010). Cited 9 June 2010; available from: <http://www.arma.ac.uk/about/>
- Brekhus, W. H. (1998) A sociology of the unmarked: Redirecting our focus, *Sociological Theory*, 16 (1), 34-51.
- Brekhus, W. H. (2008) Trends in the qualitative study of social identities, *Sociology Compass*, 2 (3), 1059-1078.
- Corrall, S. & Lester, R. (1996) Professors and professionals: On changing boundaries, in: R. Cuthbert (Ed.) *Working in higher education* (Buckingham: SRHE/Open University Press), 84-100.
- McClintock, M. (1998) Why have an administration?, in: H. Thorley (Ed.) *Take a minute: Reflections on modern higher education administration* (Lancaster: Unit for Innovation in Higher Education, Lancaster University), 1-10.
- Opatow, S. (1990) Moral exclusion and injustice: An introduction, *Journal of Social Issues*, 46 (1), 1-20.
- Pollert, A. (1996) Gender and class revisited; or, 'The poverty of patriarchy', *Sociology*, 30 (4), 639-659.
- Snow, D. A. & Anderson, L. (1995) The problem of identity construction among the homeless, in: N. J. Hermann & L. T. Reynolds (Eds) *Symbolic Interaction: An introduction to social psychology* (New York: General Hall, Inc.), 239-258.
- Whitchurch, C. (2006) *Professional managers in UK higher education: Preparing for complex futures. Interim Report* (London: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education).