

Challenging scenarios in academia: Latin-American academics coping in the UK. (0206)**BACKGROUND**

Although there is much – and increasing – interest in the USA in studies focusing on Latin-Americans in education contexts, indicated by the existence of publications such as the *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, there is paucity of European literature on this population. Yet few of the American studies focus on academics; most examine students. Moreover, many US-based studies employ quantitative data collection and analysis, which has yielded results that might demonstrate what is going on with Latin-Americans (for example, in terms of persistence, acculturation, and identity), but they fall short insofar as they neglect to reveal the underlying explanations for these findings. In contrast, the study reported in this paper is qualitative in nature. Part of my on-going doctoral research, it examines the perceptions of academics of Latin-American origin working at various universities in the United Kingdom, focusing particularly on the context of resilience, which involves coping with challenges and problems faced.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Challenges experienced by the higher education workforce are highlighted in the literature in the field (e.g. Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Evans and Abbott 1998; Taylor, 1999; Deem, 2001, Le Cornu, 2009), revealing a range of potentially problematic issues related to, *inter alia*: professional autonomy, coping with imposed organizational change, competing demands, and work-life balance. Such challenges have been associated with work environments that do not always seem to be very rewarding, at least personally, for those labouring in it: academics. For

instance, Zhang (2007) has drawn attention to various studies across the globe (including in Australia, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States) that highlight the prevalence of occupational stress amongst academics (e.g. from role ambiguity, role overload, unreasonable group pressure, powerlessness and peer relations), which have a significantly negative impact on diverse aspects of their lives, most notably their physical and psychological well-being.

However, as mentioned above, there is a paucity of research on the impact that these challenges have on Latin-American academics (i.e. how negative or positive they are considered). This specific contextual field is under-developed. As a Latin-American myself, I have a particular interest in examining the experiences of my compatriots who live and work in the UK as part of its academic workforce. I therefore made this the topic of my doctoral research. This paper reports preliminary emergent findings from my on-going research.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

My sample comprises 20 male and female academics of Latin-American origin, employed in British universities. The study's objective is to examine these academics' resilience in the context of their working lives. I want to shed light on the nature and extent of their resilient attitudes and the outcomes of these, by examining what kinds of challenges they face, how they cope with these challenges, if there are any resiliency patterns amongst the sample, whether these can be related to identity and cultural issues, and what kind of impact their resilience and coping strategies have on the academics' working lives.

The academics were selected through snowball sampling, which is known to be used when the research population is part of a minority or difficult to find (Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005); this involved one UK-based Latin-American academic 'passing on' the contact details of another academic who would be willing to participate in the research. The

universities where they work are mainly research intensive institutes across the UK and the academics represent different subjects and disciplines (e.g. management, electrical engineering, Earth and environment sciences, and Latin-American studies).

Semi-structured, in-depth, narrative interviews are being utilised to collect data. These facilitate the collection of rich, illuminative data that represent the perceptions of the interviewees, rather than trying to fit data into pre-specified categories. The data are being analysed by combining elements from narrative and inductive/deductive analysis.

FINDINGS /CONCLUSIONS

Emergent findings show that Latin-American academics, in common with many British academics, do struggle to manage their time. Nevertheless they manage to meet deadlines and accomplish other demanding tasks, but with a certain sense of hopelessness and incompleteness, as conveyed by comments such as: “I could have done more”, “I wish I could do more”, “I wish my day was 36 hours long”.

This work intensification issue is evidently related to their capacity to manage processes that range from adapting to new procedures or ways of working, to more specific tasks such as marking exam papers and assignments, answering emails, and drafting and signing letters. For some of the academics (especially men) the challenge appears to be keeping oneself motivated to cope with the requirements of the job, acting responsibly, mostly when doing research and when things become more of a routine. For others (especially female academics) the challenge is more related to presenting a good image of oneself to students, appearing upbeat and enthusiastic when teaching: “Like playing a part in a play” one of the academics from Peru said. This is consonant with the concept of academic labour (developed by Hochschild, 1979; 1983), highlighting the consequences of portraying roles that are attributed to each gender in the

classroom, even when the individual is not feeling like it (e.g. expecting female teachers to be warm and open, and males to be more authoritarian).

Other challenges identified by the sample relate much more distinctly to issues related to overseas nationals working in an environment outside of their native countries, such as being away from their extended family. My sample reported coping with such challenges by positive thinking: focusing on the advantages of having a life in the UK (especially for female academics, who reported a greater sense of gender-related emancipation than they might expect in their native countries.)

I have yet to examine whether the challenges identified are challenging on the basis of their origins or their repercussions. Nevertheless, it is clear from my study so far that whilst working in higher education may bring challenges that are common to all academics, at the same time some of them are left to walk alone along the academic path.

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