SRHE 2012 : Symposium proposal / Working Lives contribution

TITLE:
'Research on academic work matters to the scholars undertaking the study too!'

OUTLINE
Introduction
The five Working Lives (WL) team researchers had different HE careers, disciplinary backgrounds and employment roles. They brought expertise and paradigms from art, education, science, psychology, organizational studies and leadership, cultural anthropology, business and personnel management. The topic developed out of original doctoral research (Gornall, 2004) was qualitative and statistical, of the shifting relationship between academic staff and 'new learning professionals' in HE. Whilst the latter groups were entirely un-researched at the time and thus a 'hard to reach group', academics' changing experience had been documented, in studies from Halsey & Trow (1971) to Fanghanel (2012). However, less attention has been given to everyday working practices and how these might instantiate aspects of academic identity.

What was striking was the optimism and positive ethos of the 'new professionals' in the original study, compared with the gloom and pessimism expressed by academics (Cook et al, 2009). This despair, and its antecedents (whether 'causes' or 'contexts') have been voiced in a number of other studies (Raman, 2000). What we sought to do was open up an exploration, not of the 'big picture' - about policy and wider structural/employment change, but of the 'small picture' of daily life. Academics have had, as we describe it, the 'affordance' in varying degrees, to determine the place, pace and priorities of their work. What were changing were the boundaries of work and workplace, of role, professional group and expected activities. We argue too that they have also been in the forefront of changes that have and will affect many other professional groups in a variety of occupations (Evetts, 2012).

Perspectives
Theoretically, the WL stance was informed by work in the sociology of occupations and professions, the study of employee relations in organisational change, and of issues in classical anthropological studies. This immediately suggested using inductive, qualitative methods (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), and so a series of 'group interviews' or focus group sessions were devised as the best way to provide a 'grounded' basis for formulating questions and topic areas. Second stage data collection, with individuals and groups, involved probing in particular self-organizational strategies around aspects of administrative and computer-based working, and also perceptions of the places and spaces of contemporary work. To stimulate discussion, visual cues were used (Stanzak, 2007), including photographs, in particular of desks, and copies of job adverts; these were not just academic posts but for other, newer, learning-related roles.

Findings
Our main findings concerned actor notions of 'productive work', the importance of 'working from home' as well as the character of 'autonomy' and logistics of 'self-organisation' in academic professional work. Particular discussions centered upon administration, 'unvalued' aspects of academic work, and also the unseen nature of much academic 'engaged' productivity. The mobile context of academic flexible work was also foregrounded, and it was noted how staff actively sought working spaces conducive to their 'productive' work,

even seriously cutting across 'personal time' boundaries in so doing (Gornall and Salisbury, 2012).

Our development as researchers   phenomenological conversations
As the research developed, and our own multi-disciplinarity as a research team blended, inter-professional working (and learning) began to shape what we were doing (Eady et al, 2012; Mauthner and Doucet, 2008). We began to consider the *affective* aspects of academics' relationship to their work (see Neumann, 2006), including its various tasks, relations with other groups/with each other and personal-professional boundaries. However, we were part of this too (Akerlind, 2008): five people in three very different institutions, experiencing change, juggling a demanding and collaborative research project with 'extended' professional landscapes at work. Our diverse backgrounds now provided a fund of resources to draw upon, both theoretically and methodologically. But these were sometimes competing perspectives or unfamiliar paradigms – and sources for dissent.

Using reflexivity (knowledge) in research practice
The power of the realization of the importance of the role of emotion in the study of behaviour (Neumann, 2006) was not lessened in its impact by being such an obvious outcome. It was indicated at the earliest stages, in the strong expressions of negativity and pessimism, and which are often voiced in informal settings such as conferences and interpersonal encounters. It was also indicated in the language of descriptions of what and how the study participants worked – and how we worked. The 'workshop' stimuli certainly had a provocative effect. This emergent signifier led then to an exploration by the team of the role of artefacts (Turkle, 2006) as 'icons' of professional life for these academics, with powerful personal meanings (Key, 2012; Michael, 2012). We applied this to ourselves too (Woolgar, 1988).

The research team worked reflexively, discussing and analyzing group session transcripts whilst also recording their own analytical sessions. We experimented with and in our own group sessions and found the framing of this activity within the ambit of 'autoethnography' helpful (Meneley and Young, 2005; Ellis and Bochner, 2000). This also fitted our prior overarching paradigm. Moreover, given the origin of our early work in applied anthropology, we also wished to address issues of the 'other' in data collection (Mauthner and Doucet, 2008), research and writing/publication. In order to do this, participants in one study would be debriefed, coached and then invited to lead a subsequent data gathering group, thus building research skills and capacity, as well as developing the data pool and stakeholding. This group is now an extended network, a growing community of scholars who are involved in a major publishing project for the work. The experience has prompted greater focus on the issues around collaborative and inter-disciplinary working itself (Mauthner and Doucet, *ibid*), which in many ways, mirrors some of the tensions around individualism and collegiality inherent in the psyche of academic life itself and which are highlighted in our study, as well as in our own academic working lives. All of these issues are familiar in anthropology, our paradigmatic theoretical resource, where discussion of observer stance, participant voice, method, hermeneutics and legitimacy in research are long-discussed and explored here.

992 words

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