

Oili-Helena Ylijoki

University of Tampere, Finland

Happy in academia - The perspective of academic elite (0079)

Programme number: Q4

Research Domain: Academic Practice, Work and Cultures

The societal role of universities has been significantly transformed with the rise of the knowledge intensive economy. Universities are increasingly regarded as an integral part of the national innovation system and, accordingly, they are expected to provide new knowledge and a new workforce for the needs of the economy (e.g. Moverly & Sampat, 2005). At the same time, the adoption of the doctrine of new public management in most western countries has incorporated the values and practices of the private business sector into public sector institutions, including universities. It has been claimed that due to these changes, universities have transformed from a national institution providing a public good to a business delivering knowledge-based services in education and research to diverse stakeholders (e.g. McKelvey & Holmén, 2009). These transformations have impacts also on the micro-level, shaping and moulding everyday work practices, experiences and identities of academics.

Several studies have indicated that academic professions and identities have become increasingly diversified, fragmented and blurred (e.g. Fanghanel, 2012; Henkel, 2012; McInnis, 2012; Ylijoki, 2005, 2013). The traditional notion of an academic as a tribe member socialized into the values, norms, practices, and belief systems of their particular epistemic community and disciplinary culture (Becher, 1989) has been challenged by new, often conflicting pressures and expectations. Henkel (2012, 7) refers to this change as “the breakdown of longstanding conditions for strong, stable academic identities, sustained internally by the structures and cultures of academic systems.” Academics, working increasingly in fixed-term and part-time employment, are said to become, for instance, “managed professionals” (Rhoades, 1998) whose work is no longer characterized by academic freedom, self-regulation and autonomy, but instead by the steering and monitoring of the institutional management (e.g. Gordon & Whitchurch, 2012; Musselin, 2005). Thus, although academics’ responses to university transformations are found to be diversified, the dominant way to account of the changes follows a plot of a misery narrative, stressing the deterioration of academic work and the growth of such feelings as disillusionment, powerlessness, strain and anxiety in work (Ylijoki & Ursin forthcoming).

This paper sets out to explore work experiences in academia from the perspective of academic elite, that is, professors and other senior academics who occupy gatekeeping positions in their field as editors of key journals, members of RAE panels, reviewers of funding applications, members of university recruitment committees and so on. The paper asks how this specific group of academics perceives the transformations in higher education, in which ways these academics describe their work experiences and what being an academic under the current conditions means for them. Furthermore, the paper involves a comparative dimension as both British and Finnish academics are examined, the underlying assumption being, that the UK along with the other Anglo-Saxon countries represents the most advanced market-driven higher education system, whereas Finland as one of the Nordic countries is a latecomer in this respect.

The data comprise focused interviews with 15 British and 15 Finnish professors or other similar senior academics working in social sciences. In the UK the interviews were carried out at two universities, both belonging to the Russell Group, and in Finland, at three research intensive universities in which social sciences have a strong standing. The themes discussed involved interviewees' conceptions of transformations in their work and career, including such specific questions as: Are you satisfied with your career choice? What position does work have in your life? What work-life balance means to you? What motivates you most in your work? What hopes/threads do you have for your professional future? In this paper the interview material is analysed from a narrative framework. In addition, the paper draws upon a temporal approach, exploring the multitude of temporalities embedded in this narrative.

The most prominent storyline discernible in the interview material is what can be called a happiness narrative. This narrative, which the majority of the interviewees rely on, describes work experiences in a very positive light: Academics love their work, they devote themselves to research work in particular, they have great personal autonomy to do what they like, and they do not encounter problems in reconciliation work with other engagements. In a sharp contrast to the dominant misery narrative, also the transformations in the higher education system are welcome since, for instance, they help to get rid of the "thieves" and "idle" staff, to make workloads fair among the personnel, and to raise the quality of performance. This narrative, stressing happiness, luckiness and joy of working like crazy, is stronger among the British interviewees; the Finnish data represents a moderate version of it.

The results are discussed in light of power relations. It is argued that the transformations taking place in higher education are not stemming only from external steering but academics, the elite in

particular, is involved in producing these transformations (see Gläser 2007). Furthermore, the results speak for the power of traditional academic values and norms emphasizing academic freedom, autonomy, and total commitment where there is no separation between work and other life (e.g. Ylijoki 2013). Hence, the happiness narrative includes a strong normative pressure as to what a true academic is like and how a successful academic career should be built. The elite is capable and willing to adhere to this ideal and, in its gatekeeping position, to safeguard and foster it within the academic community. It is also noteworthy that all interviewees were social scientists. This is against the common presupposition that the transformations in higher education pose special problems to social sciences and humanities because many of the current demands – such as the need to establish large, international research projects and to publish in top ranked journals – are in line with the traditional practices of hard fields, not soft fields.

#### References:

- Becher, T. 1989. *Academic Tribes and Territories*. Buckingham: SRHE/Open University Press.
- Fanghanel, J. 2012. *Being an Academic*. London: Routledge.
- Gläser, J. 2007. The social orders of research evaluation systems. In R. Whitley & J. Gläser (Eds.) *The Changing Governance of the Sciences*. Dordrecht: Springer, 245-266.
- Gordon, G. & Whitchurch, C. (Eds.) 2010. *Academic and Professional Identities in Higher Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Henkel, M. 2012. Introduction: Change and continuity in academic and professional identities. In G. Gordon & C. Whitchurch (Eds.) *Academic and Professional Identities in Higher Education*. New York: Routledge, 3-12.
- McInnis, C. 2012. Traditions of academic professionalism and shifting academic identities. . In G. Gordon & C. Whitchurch (Eds.) *Academic and Professional Identities in Higher Education*. New York: Routledge, 147-165.
- Musselin, C. 2005. European academic labour markets in transition. *Higher Education* 49, 135-154.
- McKelvey, M. & Holmén, M. 2009. Introduction. In M. McKelvey & M. Holmén (Eds.) *Learning to Compete in European Universities*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1-18.

Mowery, D. C. & Sampat, B.N. 2005. Universities in national innovation systems. In J. Fagerberg, D.C. Mowery & R.R. Nelson (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Innovation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 209-239.

Rhoades, G. 1998. *Managed Professionals*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Ylijoki, O.-H. 2013. Boundary-work between work and life in the high-speed university. *Studies in Higher Education* 38:2, 242-255.

Ylijoki, O.-H. 2005. Academic nostalgia: A narrative approach to academic work. *Human Relations* 58 (5), 555-575.

Ylijoki, O.-H. & Ursin, J. (forthcoming). The construction of academic identity in the changes of Finnish higher education.