Social precarity in HE: age, seniority, and the lived experience of academic marginality and loss

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Precarity – in particular social precarity – has rapidly grown as a proposed focus of enquiry in social science circles (Waite, 2008). Focusing on both living and working conditions of groups seen as economically and/or socially vulnerable or excluded, it is often associated with changing material conditions in the modern West such as the post-Fordist increasing casualization of labour (see e.g. Hardt and Negri 2004, Tsianos and Papadopoulos, 2006), the recent economic crisis, and political activism mobilized in response to multiple, heightened conditions of social inequality (Gill and Pratt, 2008). The focus has been conceptualized by some as a widening of previous work on social exclusion to include, not only those already seen as marginalized from society, but to investigate factors that may lead to increased risk of certain groups embarking on a 'road' to marginalization that may or may not lead to social exclusion (Gallie and Paugam, 2002). The concept of precarity has also been used in relation to discourses of vulnerability and risk that have been proliferating in the modern West in reaction to cultural fears around austerity, climate change, and the threat of terrorism after 9/11 (see e.g. Butler, 2004, Ettlinger 2007).

Research in the area of precarity has tended to focus on large-scale systems, structures and processes and the ways in which material conditions are engendering/perpetuating precarity for particular social groups, or the ways in which policies and practices are inflected by and engender fears or perceived threats to social stability and security (Ettlinger, 2007). However, there have been calls to include an understanding of how precarity infuses daily living on the 'micro' level. Ettlinger (2007) argues that "beyond effects of specific global events and macroscale structures, precarity inhabits the microspaces of everyday life" (p.319).

Academics are in many contexts a privileged group, despite a relative loss of status in many countries in recent times (Clegg, 2013). However, academic culture itself has been shown to be extremely hierarchical and inegalitarian, where many are or become marginalized from the security of the 'centre', often reflecting/reinforcing wider social inequalities such as those based on gender, social class background, and 'race'/ethnicity (see. e.g. Mirza, 1995; Reay, 2004). In recent years there has been an increasing 'casualization' of the labour force, with a steady rise in the number of fixed-term, insecure, and 'flexible' job positions for academic (and support and administrative staff) (Hey, 2001; Reay, 2004). Again, like many spheres of work, this is gendered – for example, Australia's National Tertiary Education Union estimates that 57% of casual academic employees in Australian universities are women (NTEU, 2012, cited in Rothengatter and Hil, 2013). Such statistics, of course, do not include those who would very much like to be employed in academic positions but who, despite appropriate experience and/or qualifications, are currently unemployed and/or subsisting on very low incomes whilst attempting to maintain an academic 'presence' in their field (see e.g. Anonymous, 2012). Academics who do occupy 'casual' positions in HE are often treated as 'second class citizens' (Hey, 2001; Reay, 2004) and given little support in terms of induction or professional development (Rothengatter and Hil, 2013), as well as, of course, little chance of securing a vacation allowance or contribution towards a pension.

Importantly, such conditions of precarity and exclusion disproportionately affect 'younger' academics, those who have recently gained postgraduate/doctoral qualifications (and often optimistically labeled 'early career' researchers) (see Anonymous, 2012; Rothengatter and Hil, 2013). The aim of this paper is to explore the fears and 'lived experience' of precarity, particularly in relation to age and occupational seniority, as articulated by academic staff who took part in a qualitative study concerning academic life and experience funded by the SRHE (see Authors, 2013), supplemented by additional email interviews conducted for the paper. Academics who specialise in research on higher education were invited to participate through emails circulated to relevant academic networks, and interviews also took place over email (see James, 2007 for the successful utilization of email interviews in educational research studies). Seventy-one academics (39 women and 32 men), at different stages of their careers and from universities across Britain, participated in the study. Our overall approach is poststructuralist, informed by a Foucauldian conceptualisation of audit, feminist research on gendered performativity, and sociological and psycho-social theoretical resources on the affective.

Specific questions addressed in the paper include: what are the experiences and perceptions of younger and/or 'early career' academics in relation to precarity/security in HE? What are the views and experiences of both this group and more occupationally 'secure' staff on academic processes and practices that may mitigate against, challenge or perpetuate conditions of precarity for younger and/or 'early career' academics? For example, what are participants' views of their own departmental/university practices in relation to mentoring/support for younger/'early career' academics, and in relation to the issue of unpaid internships in HE? Finally, the paper will also focus on the articulations of more 'established' staff/ those on permanent contracts, around their *own* sense of security/precarity. What are their thoughts and perceptions in relation to the possibility of (re-)casualisation – or as Archer (2008) notes, following Colley and James (2005) – the process of 'un-becoming' an academic?

In doing so we will also focus on the implications of the study in relation to furthering our understanding of the complexities of the experience or fears around precarity in HE for both 'early' and 'established' academics, and the implications for policy, process and practice in HE.

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