

Creative research strategies for exploring academic identity

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Academic identity has become such a well-established research theme for some of us that it can be difficult to remember that the concept is not always understood by others. This problem was exemplified recently by a PhD student in one of our institutions who proposed “*tell me about your academic identity*” as the first question in their semi-structured interview plan. They were advised to find instead some way of allowing the interviewee to reveal aspects of their identity unconsciously. In this presentation we identify how researchers can explore an individual’s sense of identity using sensitive and less conventional approaches while placing the personal at the centre.

We discuss two strategies that we have trialled and which enabled our research participants to reveal their unconsciously held self-views as well as those consciously held. We contend that this ‘identity work’ (Watson, 2008) is emotional work, since it connects the individual to their lived experiences. This kind of research may be uncomfortable for both the researcher and the participant. We align with Vincent (2004) who argues that rather than avoid the emotional, we should creatively engage with its effect on academic intellectual pursuits. We use metaphor to help uncover what participants might not feel able to express directly or even realise about themselves. Our aim is to produce “an analytic understanding of what is being studied, rather than simply reproducing participant understandings” (Hammersley, & Atkinson, 2007, p. 232).

One strategy employs narrative inquiry. By asking each participant to relate a critical incident in their academic life, we can collect spoken or written material for metaphorical analysis. In most cases, the narrative provides deliberately selected metaphors alongside unconsciously revealing metaphorical language. The narrative can usefully be supplemented by asking the participant to append their own metaphors to sum up the experience they have described. This approach uncovers perceptions of work practices which in turn affect work engagement and sense of identity.

Our second strategy elicits visual metaphors and requires the participants to have some understanding of academic identity theory (for example, Henkel, 2000; Kogan, 2000). The participants, working alone or in small groups, think of themselves as an island which has attributes that define their academic identity. These attributes are viewed as features named on a map of that island. This visualisation, alone, is illuminative. When accompanied by a reflexive analysis written by

the participant, it has the ability to transform a participant's understanding of their role and relationships.

We have found that these strategies can elicit strong emotional responses from participants. For example, some have felt a sense of powerlessness within the academy, others have gained an awareness of misdirected effort or experienced the revelation that their values were at odds with those of colleagues or institution. On the other hand, some participants have felt empowered by having gained an understanding of their place in the academic landscape. Thus, these strategies help to reveal the '*personal, as well as the professional and functional, aspects of higher education*' which this conference seeks to explore.

Indicative References

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