

The powerful and the powerless: academics' identities in a time of change

Angela Brew, Macquarie University, David Bound, UTS, Australia, Karin Crawford, University of Lincoln and Lisa Lucas, University of Bristol, UK

This paper explores how academics respond in higher education cultures and communities to develop identities some of which are powerful and some which are characterised by a sense of powerlessness. It is based on research designed to understand how academics make sense of the competing pressures of teaching, research and administration and how they act to construct identities that make sense to them but also meet institutional requirements. Semi-structured interviews with 27 mid-career academics in England and Australia have been carried out. Questions focused on how they see themselves as an academic, how they became the kind of academic they are, critical incidents in their career, perceived personal and structural influences in their current role, what constrains and what enables teaching and research decisions in their context and their future aspirations.

Using Margaret Archer's different forms of reflexivity, the paper argues that employing particular forms of reflexivity leads some academics to develop powerful strategies that proactively further their career goals, while other forms tend to be more reactive and, in the worst cases, to lead to a sense of powerlessness. Archer suggests that people develop an internal conversation in which they interpret the structural mechanisms in their day to day lives. Academics are continually balancing the freedom they have against particular personal, institutional and structural constraints. Drawing on the analysis of interviews, the paper will elucidate how structural causal mechanisms are, as Archer would suggest, mediated by academics, alongside consideration of the range of influences on their lives, as they develop their particular path.

The analysis has shown that some people begin their academic career with an ideal model in mind of what it means to be an academic and how they can transverse through academia. It seems that what people enter with and what they want to do determines how they struggle to hold on to the sense of self they develop. How they respond to new challenges varies depending on whether they interpret the situations in which they find themselves as constraining or enabling. There is a sense of agency as academics create their own jobs within institutional structures as they see them. So for example institutional or departmental restructuring may affect academics' workload, how they view their work and the possibilities for particular chosen activities, which may be positive or negative.

Within such contexts, academics appear to develop a narrative of themselves as an academic. One such is 'the Hero' narrative where the academic presents themselves as succeeding against the odds. Another narrative is the 'Imposter' narrative which focuses on questions of whether they felt competent to be an academic. The sense of insecurity expressed by interviewees helps to tell this story. A further narrative is the 'Fixer narrative' which focuses on sorting things out and making them more efficient. The 'Poor me' narrative in contrast suggests a sense of powerlessness. The paper will discuss the effects of particular identity narratives on the proactive or reactive strategies that academics employ and the effects of these on career success and wellbeing.