

The uneasy academics: Performing and conforming in the contemporary Ontario university

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Critical literature on managerialist practices in post-secondary education is dominated by researchers in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, where systems for ensuring accountability are highly formalized, mandated by central government and carry punitive consequences. Although Canada is sometimes seen as deviating from global trends and, indeed, has some unusual features such as provincial responsibility for higher education, its universities are not exempt (Metcalf 2010; Newson & Polster, 2008).

Our research considers how academics in the Canadian province of Ontario do their work under contemporary conditions in which universities are permeated by discourses of quality, accountability and performativity. Our approach has roots in the writing of Michel Foucault (1977) on governmentality processes. Foucault provides us with a language with which to understand regulatory systems as surveillance mechanisms that normalize conformity and self-discipline. In addition, a feminist perspective alerts us to organizational micropolitics related to gender, race and other social divisions and the implications of audit cultures for marginalized groups (Morley, 2005).

This paper focuses on in-depth, qualitative interviews conducted between 2011 and 2013 with 24 academics in education, geography, political science and sociology in 10 Ontario universities. We used purposive sampling to aim for a balance of men and women, of ethnocultural minority and non-minority individuals, junior and senior career points, and university types. While probing a number of aspects of academic work, we concentrated on performance, accountability and quality, so that we could place our findings in the context of international trends. Here we are especially concerned with what participants had to say and how they felt about 'performance' and how it affected their academic identity. Many do complain, sometimes emotionally, about 'meaningless restrictions' but are they 'screaming in a 20-mile zone'? Do they feel powerless, are they resisting dominant discourses, or are they largely indifferent?

Ontario has seen a number of policy changes in the past half-dozen years intended to heighten university accountability. Most faculty participants said little about provincial initiatives and were unfamiliar with the 'quality assurance' discourse as applied to academe, yet expressed disquiet over certain aspects of their work situations, especially around performance-related aspects such as annual reviews (which sometimes carried salary implications), student course evaluations and their implied consumerism, and a perceived narrowing of criteria around doing acceptable research and securing grants. Gender and career point played a role in shaping participants' narratives.

Our study is one of the few in Canada to focus on the micro-level in considering how academics have actually responded to the trends that have been so prominent in critical literature on the contemporary university. Individuals generally claimed deep satisfaction overall and many voiced an awareness of their privileged position. Nevertheless, a strong sense of unease

permeates the data. While only a minority of participants point directly to government initiatives or global trends, they are aware that academic life is slowly moving into troubling territory.

References

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