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Becoming or unbecoming: contested academic identities

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Abstract

For some decades now, higher education has been undergoing considerable change, driven to a great extent by the marketisation of knowledge, vocationalism, managerialism and state intervention (Barnett 2000). Despite the duration of the changes it is perhaps surprising that the old problems of identity-conflict among academics have persisted, and even new academics are confronted by the old issues. This paper examines the literature of identity, including particularly its professional and organisational dimensions, before looking in detail at academic writing exploring academic identity itself. Having found the dimensions of the problem, it then suggests a number of avenues for research, which can help inform the decisions of individual academics, guide policy in higher education, and give direction to inquiries about other professions as well.

Introduction

Changes in the structures and scope of higher education in recent decades, in the UK and abroad, have had profound and even disruptive effects on the nature of academic life. Among the changes have been widening participation, which has extended the reach of higher education in the population at large; the internationalization of student bodies; the expansion of research-degree provision well beyond traditional research-led institutions, and the commercial imperatives for universities to general revenues from research and enterprise activities. These changes have had impacts not only on the economics of higher education but its effects on society. They have also, as this paper shows, led to much research and reflection about how academics view their roles, set their allegiances, and identify with their work.

Research suggests (see Baruch & Hall 2004; Navis & Glynn 2011) changing organisational conditions create role conflicts (in this case, for academics) that have and continue to unsettle both individuals and the organisations in which they work. The role of an academics has extended significantly as organisational changes have become established, requiring academics to contribute to institutional research and development, enterprise and community partnership as well as learning and teaching. Involvement in this diverse range of groups and activities often presents an overlap, which has implications for the identities of the staff involved (Gordon & Whitchurch 2010). Delanty (2008) argues, pressure to perform a variety of roles whilst participating in a number of groups leads to an individual developing multiple (sometimes conflicting) identities. There lies the potential for incongruence between self-identity (an individual's personal identity), the collective identity of a group and the demands of the organisation. He adds, universities 'do not easily articulate a collective identity that is capable of acknowledging the numerous identity projects that arise within it' (Delanty 2008:126) often resulting in identity conflicts. For clarification, an identity project, according to Giddens (1991), is one that has no end point, being continuous and reflexive; representing an on-going effort to make sense of who we are (Geijsel & Meijers 2005).

The contemporary field of academia is a contested one involving a continuous struggle with the representations its agents have of it (Archer 2008; Delanty 2008, Gordon & Whitchurch 2010). Organisational members may well have opposing views about what it means (or might mean) to be an academic and hold various conflicting interests and identity constructions. This paper examines emerging literature on academic identity. It sketches first the landscape of higher education. After a brief survey of key aspects of identity theory, it explores the pull of organisational and professional pressures on identity, and then examines what academics have written about academic identity itself. It concludes with a discussion of possible avenues for future research and a discussion of the potential impact both for career development in the sector and for organisational and public policy that might develop from such research.

Changes in HE and their impact on academic identities

Over the last two decades, significant changes have taken place in higher education (HE) in the UK and elsewhere in terms of its nature, scope, aims, value, policy, governance and pedagogy (Findlow, 2012:117; Barnett & Di Napoli, 2008). A new set of business imperatives have resulted in universities becoming more financially driven (Deem et al., 2007) whilst placing greater emphasis on cultural change and managing academics and academic work. This approach is far removed from the traditional view of universities as communities of scholars researching and teaching together in collegial ways, led by academics as opposed to managers or chief executives (Billot 2010, Barnett & Di Napoli, 2008, Deem et al., 2007).

A number of forces have led to the transformation of the contexts within which universities operate. One of the most significant is the 'massification' of HE driven to some extent by a changing population with more varied aspirations and from newer professions and occupational groups seeking recognition and status (Henkel, 2010). Pressure has also come from governments requiring more direct inputs into the economy and society from HE which has led to the introduction of 'non-academic' programmes such as social work, nursing, business studies and teaching (Findlow, 2012). One of the consequences of extending the reach of universities in this way was a change in the culture of the student population and a shift from elite (privilege) to universal participation (obligation).

These changes are a response to internal and external pressures brought about by a variety of influences. For instance, global competition between universities has highlighted the need to build institutional reputation in a bid to improve competitive positioning and attract students from around the globe (Billot, 2010; Archer, 2008). Furthermore, significant operational changes have been introduced across the HE sector, triggered to some extent by reduced government funding and the subsequent financial pressures placed on individual institutions. This has increased the demand to compete for research funding from the Research Excellence Framework[1] (REF) (Scott, 2010; Winter 2009; Delanty, 2008; Becher & Trowler, 2001). Similar developments have occurred in other countries.

While research reputation has undoubtedly become a priority within HE, the requirement to generate income has also permeated the role of academic staff encouraging individuals to secure independent commercial ventures. For growing numbers, academic work is internally

[1] The UK Government introduced the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) to assess the quality of research conducted in universities and HE colleges in the UK, to provide the basis for allocating funds and to ensure the competiveness of UK research by improving the quality and level of output. In 2008 it was modified and renamed the Research Excellence Framework (REF), becoming more rigorous, transparent and formalised than before.

scrutinised, both administratively and academically, with pay progression and job tenure being performance dependent. Archer (2008:386) contends this recent shift in priorities has created 'new forms of relationships, knowledge and academic labour' and the concept of the 'corporate' university, according to Archer (2008); Henkel (2010, 2005); Dent & Whitehead (2002), has the potential to disrupt what it means to be an academic and what constitutes academic work. What it means to be an academic is interesting in itself and Williams (2008) invites us to question whether or not academe can be considered a profession and if so, where the professionalism of academics may lie? He also asks, are academics professionals as discipline experts or as educators? Taylor (1999:116) attempts to address these questions stating,

> *'traditional understandings of academics' sense of professionalism are neither fixed, nor closed …[but are] … social constructions – partial, patchy and incomplete'.*

Adding to the complexity of understanding the role and identity of academics, Baruch and Hall (2004:6) suggest changing conditions often lead to a greater awareness of identity and how 'this may be shaped by individual academic interests or by the interests of the institution'. Gabriel (2010) expands on this stating, the intense pressures to perform have rendered academic identities fragile while Delanty (2008:126) goes further suggesting, 'identity is perceived as in crisis'. Reconciling this potential disconnect in a more corporatized environment is, according to Churchman (2006) and Billot (2010), part of the challenge for organisational members. Clearly, a significant redefinition of the academic profession has taken place leaving some organisational members struggling with the 'regimes of performativity' (Archer, 2008: 392) whilst attempting to make sense of who they are and the multiple roles they are to assume.

This paper argues, academics are a special case of workers but with similarities to many other occupations (for instance, lawyers, doctors, accountants), in particular where the content of work is not purely prescribed by the organisation. Further, the role of an academic is understood to possess a 'significant domain of discretion' at the individual level and is thought to 'require a stronger sense of moral dedication than most occupations' (Sullivan 2000:673). Thus, academics tend to be closely linked to other professionals as generally their moral values are closely tied, their core values are stable and their commitment to the public good remains undiminished (McInnis 2010).

It seems there are a number of dimensions to academic identity and understanding the interplay between them may provide further insight regarding the conflicts academics face.

Identity theory

Identity has, according to Gioia (2008, cited in Gioia et al., 2013:125) become an emerging topic of interest, possessing 'the requisite mystery that characterises all great domains of study' and 'resonating with people in organisations and those who study them'. He adds,

> *'It constitutes the most meaningful, most intriguing, most relevant concept we deal with in both our personal and organisational lives. Identity is about 'us' – as individuals and as organisational members – and it enquires into the deepest levels of our sense-making and understanding'.*

According to Jenkins (2004:4), identity refers to 'the definiteness and distinctiveness' of an individual (or object) and at its core 'involves two criteria of comparison between persons or things: similarity and difference'. Identity is understanding who we are and who other people

are (Coupland & Brown 2012, Jenkins 2004) by focusing on what we have in common with others as well as what sets us apart. It is worth noting, too, that identities are not pre-established but are created within specific contexts (Delanty 2008).

Identity is regarded as a reflexive process (Ybema et al., 2009; Jenkins, 2004) or in Giddens' (1991:32) terms, a reflexive 'project', one that is continuous with no end point involving an interaction between self-definition and the definitions of oneself derived through others through an on-going process of negotiation (Delanty, 2008, Jenkins, 2004). Thus, a key project in which every human being engages is that of producing both for themselves and for others, an identity (Watson 2008). Ybema et al. (2009) add, such social definitions (and re-definitions) are often framed (within an organisational context) through prescriptive professional discourses relating to appropriate or desirable role behaviour as well as shared beliefs. They go on to say, the social processes involved in identity formation are complex, recursive and at best transient, resulting in:

> *'a socially negotiated temporary outcome of the dynamic interplay between internal strivings and external prescriptions, between self-presentations and labelling by others, between achievement and ascription and between regulation and resistance' (Ybema et al 2009:301)*

Identity should be regarded as a process of 'being' and 'becoming' according to Jenkins (2004:5) and he adds, much contemporary work regarding identity pays limited attention to how it 'is worked, to process and reflexivity' or to its social construction. He says, 'understanding these processes is central to understanding' the concept (2004:5).

Identity can be interpreted in different ways using varied terminology to convey its meaning (Billot 2010). Our sense of self (identity) represents an on-going effort of making sense of who we are (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005), emerging from a personal, ethnic and national context, being socially constructed over time (Delanty, 2008). Its construction, according to Billot (2010), Geijsel & Meijers (2005) and Ybema et al (2009) occurs on a continuum, linking the past with the present and future, involving processes of negotiation between social actors and institutions, between self and others, between inside and outside. It is therefore continually evolving, drawing on a subjective interpretation of our individuality in the context of activities undertaken. Identity can therefore be learnt and re-learnt (Billot, 2010), in process, renegotiated and revised (Brown & Lewis, 2011, Jenkins, 2004, Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Henkel (2000:14) expands further stating it is reflective of contextual understanding and the sense of self, comprising an 'organised endeavour' in which self-identity is continuously reconstructed. Henkel (2000) adds, although dynamic, identity requires continuity as it plays a part in both personal and working lives, influencing the way these are managed. It seems then, the identities people create are effects of both structure and agency, aspired to as much as they are subscribed, regulated, resisted, negotiated and accepted (Alvesson & Willmott 2002), 'playing out different forms of discursive domains and temporal spaces' (Ybema et al., 2009:303) although 'the nuances of these relationships are, and will continue to be, contested' (Coupland & Brown, 2012:2).

A salient strand of identity theory considers self-identities as narratives or life stories (Giddens, 1991, Ybema et al., 2009), differentiating between two key aspects – personal identity (where assumptions are made regarding an individual's uniqueness) and social identity (understanding of individuals as members of social categories). Coupland and Brown (2012:1) state, identities are 'worked on by people as they author versions of themselves' using narrative, storytelling and everyday interactions to illustrate how they experience,

shape, and reconstruct the situational 'realities' they inhabit (Ybema et al., 2009). In doing so, 'an iterative process is seamlessly created combining dramaturgical performance with self-narration' (Ybema et al., 2009:300).

As discussed, every individual has their own self-identity (a private notion of who they are) and Watson (2008) suggests they frequently possess one or more social identities (ways in which other people define who they are). He adds, self-identity and social identity are,

> *'inevitably and intimately interconnected, not least because the ways in which we see ourselves and the ways others see us both tend to be framed by discursive elements taken from the same cultural 'resource bank' (Watson, 2008:100).*

Further, identity, being both emergent and negotiated through interactions with others, involves a degree of sense-making work. In other words, the two aspects of our identity – the public and the private – do not automatically inform one another, we have to make sense of whom and what we are for ourselves and for others (Watson, 2008).

Ybema et al. (2009:300) suggest individuals follow a variety of 'inter-textual identification processes' which enable the construction of the 'self' and the 'other' in relation to an individual's social environment. Thus, identity acts as a bridging concept between the individual and society (Ybema et al., 2009:300) enabling the construction of personal identity as a human being and public identity as a social actor.

Social identity and the self-concept

Social identity theory (SIT) claims individuals have a tendency to classify themselves (and others) into various social categories such as age, gender, organisational membership, religious beliefs (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) with individuals using different categorisation schemas. Social identity is explained by Turner (1982:18) as; 'the sum total of the social identifications used by a person to define him- or herself'. He claims social categorisations define an individual by including them in some categories whilst excluding them from others creating the notion of an 'in-group' and 'out-group'. In so doing, these categories reveal what a person is and is not creating an 'us' and 'them' divide (Kenny et al., 2011). Turner (1982:31) provides further insight suggesting social identity is; 'the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership', thus implying a psychological identification or feeling of attachment exists (Kenny el al., 2011). Turner (1982) argues, in any given situation different parts of the self-concept may be at work resulting in different self-images being produced. Thus, it could be suggested that social identity may at times function to the exclusion of personal identity, implying that salient self-images may be created primarily on the basis of group membership.

Turner (1982) suggests perceptions of the self and others may be influenced by group membership more in some contexts than in others. The adaptive function of cognitive structure mediates between the environment and behaviour, thus, as part of the cognitive structure, the self-concept is presumed to do the same in certain situations. According to Kenny et al, (2011) social identity theory (SIT) assumes individuals engage in some forms of cognitive distortion during the identification process resulting in stereotypical generalisations being made. Further, they contend, due to the complexity and range of perceptual stimuli available and subsequent information overload, individuals have a tendency to 'gloss over' facts in order to create convenient categories with which to potentially associate themselves. They add; individuals also have a tendency to underemphasize differences within the 'in-group' (we all think the same way) and over-emphasize differences in the 'out-group' (they

are nothing like us). Turner argues the cognitive output of social identity appears to be related to intra and intergroup behaviour implying social identity 'is the cognitive mechanism which makes group behaviour possible' (1982:21).

Levels of self-representation
Individuals seek to define themselves in terms of their immersion in relationships with others and within larger collectives, deriving much of their self-evaluation from such social identities (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Greenwald & Breckler, 1985). As previously discussed, there is a distinction between the personal self – those aspects of the self-concept that differentiate the self from all others – and the relational (or social self) which includes all aspects of the self-concept that reflect affiliation to others or significant social groups. Both personal and collective identities are social extensions of the self but differ in whether the social connections are personalised bonds of attachment or impersonal bonds derived from identification with a symbolic group or social category. Examples of interpersonal identities are those arising from intimate dyadic relationships such as parent-child, lovers and friendships, but they also include identities derived from small, face to face groups that are basically networks of such dyadic relationships (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Collective social identities however, do not involve personal relationships amongst group members, suggesting a depersonalised sense of self, away from the perception of self as a unique individual (Turner et al., 1987). The distinction between personal and collective identities involves affective and cognitive categorisation processes, the difference being determined by the level of inclusiveness (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

Collective identity, according to Luckmann (2008), is generated through past and present collective experiences. As in individual identity formation, 'unsuitable' or 'undesirable' elements of past and present events are selectively glossed over and past collective experiences 'dressed up' creating myths of heroes and villains. This deliberate (though subjective) process of selection creates the canvas upon which present collective identities are represented (Luckmann 2008). However, Coupland and Brown (2012:2) suggest in an attempt to classify ourselves in this way we sometimes inadvertently end up over simplifying, distorting and stereotyping. Luckmann (2008:278) advocates communicative construction of collective memory, is the most important element of the social construction of reality. He further asserts these constructions are:

> *'not limited to the social representations of countries, cities, nations or states; social movements, institutions and organisations also have their 'mythical' soft core of collective identity'*

Berger and Luckmann (1966) add, identity is formed by social processes and determined by the specific social structure in which it is maintained, modified and reshaped. It emerges from the dialectic between individuals and society, which means that it is shaped in the interplay between the subject and the context (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), being both multidimensional and changeable (Gioia et al., 2008).

As discussed, social identity theory argues an individual's social identity is affirmed through social comparison and that the comparison is between in-groups and out-groups (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Turner 1982; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kenny et al., 2011). These writers contend the social categorisation of individuals into distinct groups leads to intergroup behaviour where individuals favour in-group over out-group members. Day et al. (2006:601) state:

'While identities are shaped by individual values and beliefs as well as organisational culture and positioning, it is argued that identity impacts on an individual's sense of purpose, self-efficacy, motivation, commitment, job satisfaction and inevitably, effectiveness'

This is of particular significance to organisations as the awareness of belonging to one group as opposed to another may result in individuals demonstrating intergroup discrimination or competition.

Organisational identity

Watson (2008) contends the extent to which people embrace particular social-identities or 'personas' as an element of their self-identity varies from person to person and from one occupational group to another. For some individuals who work as managers, doctors or academics, being a manager, doctor or academic is relatively central to whom they perceive themselves to be. For others it may be peripheral. Arguably, for the majority, their occupational identification is just one part of their life and their notion of self. It is therefore necessary to fully appreciate the interplay between public and private 'identities'—the dialectic between the internal and the external aspects of identity work.

The concept of identity work describes the activities individuals undertake to create, maintain and display personal and social identities that sustain a coherent, desirable self-concept (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Identity work is therefore both intra psychic and social by nature (Kreiner et al., 2006) and involves individuals creating, protecting and modifying their views of themselves and seeking social validation for those views. It is through this process that individuals are able to sustain a sense of personal agency, continuity, coherence and self-esteem (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010).

Identity work is an on-going process although more deliberately and intensely undertaken during specific junctures and transitions (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010; Delanty, 2008). For example, in circumstances such as working for a new organisation, starting a new role or experiencing identity threat, research suggests individuals negotiate a balance between their occupational and personal identities (Kreiner et al., 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). In contemporary work environments this is particularly prevalent as individuals are forced to confirm or adapt their self-concepts vis-à-vis fluid social configurations and multiple discourses (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Crafting and maintaining a coherent identity has therefore become more problematic than in the past (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002).

Giddens (1991:1) supports this notion suggesting modern institutions have changed radically 'from all preceding forms of social order in respect of their dynamism, the degree to which they undercut traditional habits and customs, and their global impact'. He further asserts such transformations have significantly altered many aspects of our personal experience of day to day social life as institutions are interconnected with individual life and therefore with the self. Giddens (1991) argues new forms of self-identity are emerging that are not only shaped by contemporary organisations but contribute to the shaping of those organisations. Therefore, in the post-traditional order of modernity, self-identity, which is a reflexively co-ordinated project based on maintaining a coherent, yet continually revised biographical narrative, takes place in the context of novelty 'as filtered through abstract systems'. (Giddens, 1991:5). Indeed, Watson (2008:122) asserts,

'Work organizations are particularly appropriate settings for the deployment of the sociological imagination and for attempts to understand how, in modern times, people

deal with questions of who they are and who they might become. In organizations, people are required to take on various corporate personas. These personas are likely to differ from the ones that they adopt in other parts of their lives and, indeed, may come into tension with them. But they are also personas which the individual is required to adapt and change as global, societal and organizational circumstances change'.

Earlier in the discussion, social identity theory was examined highlighting how individuals see themselves in relation to the different social groups to which they belong (Turner, 1982). Kreiner & Ashforth (2004) suggest self-identifications are self-descriptions based on the perceived overlap between individual and group identities. They go on to say the concept of social identification in the workplace has become a focus of interest particularly in connection with how organisational members define themselves in relation to what the organisation is perceived to represent (Kreiner & Ashforth (2004) and their sense of professional distinctiveness.

Professional identity

One's sense of self is embedded in the way a professional role is enacted and when roles and responsibilities alter in emphasis, so the individual's sense of distinctiveness will also shift. Thus, it could be suggested professional identity develops where the institution and the academic interact (Briggs, 2007). The notion of professionalism underpins the formation of professional identity, particularly in areas associated with vocation or calling (Sullivan, 2000). However, when external regulation threatens the knowledge and expertise of professionals there is a tendency to suggest an undermining of professionalism and the loss of professional identity (McInnis, 2010). Professionalism is generally characterised by the level of self-regulation and personal autonomy professionals have regarding decisions associated with the use of their expertise (McInnis, 2010). According to Sullivan (2000:673) the practice of learned professions has generally been understood to possess a 'significant domain of discretion' at the individual level and is thought to 'require a stronger sense of moral dedication than most occupations'.

Williams (2008) suggests the current professionalised society in which we live has resulted in the term 'professional' becoming diluted. He adds, professions exist 'in the inside-out/outside-in negotiating space between the two competing agendas of ecologies of practice (linked to intra-professional hierarchies) and the economies of performance (linked to state and managerial agendas)' (Williams, 2008:535). He explains ecologies of practice as:

'a combination of shared and personal experience, the sometimes tacit ways of acting, and even the affective dispositions that people within a profession develop and which come to be labelled as professional' (Williams, 2008:535)

Thus Williams (2008) suggests ecologies of practice highlight what it means to 'be' a professional, being inside-out as they arise from interactions within the profession, conveyed to those outside of it. The economies of practice however, are closely linked to performative or managerialist ways of measuring interactions and behaviours that represent professional practice, thus they emerge from the outside-in.

Academic identity

So, can we consider academe as a profession? The inter-dependent relationship between universities and the professions has long been established with recognised professions acting as the faculties of the universities whilst regulating admission to the professions through

credentials (Williams, 2008). The relationship between universities and the professions has, according to Williams (2008), been a contentious one. Certainly, in the UK, post-1992 universities were, until recently, focused on providing practical, professional education – vocational, where established pre-1992 universities tended to focus on the type of education required for specific professions. The survival of the university and academe as a career resulted in new emphasis being placed on the profession of teaching which subsequently became central to the role of the academic (Williams, 2008). Piper (1994:5) asks, 'does the professionalism of the academic lie in the work of teaching, or is it derived … from the occupation for which his [sic] students are being prepared'? Williams (2008) goes on to ask, upon what is the knowledge expertise of the academic based – in teaching or in the discipline content? If it is in the discipline then Piper (1994) suggests there is no single 'academic profession' as the disciplines are so diverse. Williams (2008) argues what remains are a range of professions tied to disciplinary identities. He adds, should an academic leave the university they cease to be an academic however, they will remain a physicist, lawyer, whatever, suggesting that the term 'academic' does not in itself qualify as a 'profession'. Taylor (1999) brings some closure to this debate saying it is in relation to the disciplines, as researchers, that academics display professional characteristics.

The preceding discussion raises some interesting points in relation to academic identities particularly where the changing context of university life brings into question whether the academic can be construed as a professional (Barnett 2000). It also raises the question – do academics subscribe to the profession (discipline) to which they belong or to the profession of teaching? Further, Barnett (2000) argues, this post-modern world of supercomplexity, marks out an age of fragility where nothing can be taken for granted adding, that academe now faces a crisis of legitimacy. Since the legitimacy of expertise and knowledge, and therefore of the university, is now contested Barnett (2000:168) asks, where does this leave the 'new' university and the knowledge workers who work within it? He suggests, 'attending to supercomplexity'. What is not clear from the discussion is whether academics have made a conscious choice to be part of 'a university for supercomplexity … [which is] one in incessant turmoil, where all the basic assumptions as to one's identity as researcher, scholar and teacher are kept perpetually in the air …' (Barnett, 2000:172).

Roots of academic identity

As discussed above, in the context of work, identity draws strongly from organisational considerations but also from professional considerations. In an academic context, those dimensions intersect in particularly salient ways. Billot (2010:712) suggests an individual develops a sense of the 'academic self' through their imaginings of what comprises 'the academic' along with 'their past experiences and their understanding of the current situation'. Self-identity has, according to Billot (2010:712), 'strong connections with the known and the valued, is influenced by the unforeseen and disruptive and is transformed by external social pressures at both micro and macro levels'.

As universities were viewed historically as a communities of scholars representing power, elitism and to some extent, exclusion (Harris, 2005) along with values such as collegiality, collaborative management and academic freedom (Winter, 2009), it could be suggested that the recent transformation of the tertiary sector has contested those values (Billot, 2010). Billot (2010) goes on to say an individual will identify with the institution and as a member of the academic profession. This results in academic identity becoming 'intrinsically bound up with the values, beliefs and practices held in common with others of that affiliation' (Billot, 2010:712). Central to academic identity is the notion of academic professionalism with its established practices of professional training and cherished values that equip

academics with the skills to self-regulate (Winter, 2009). That professionalism, however, has differing dimensions, principally and traditional split between teaching and research.

While ‘academic identity’ may have dominantly professional roots, an academic’s identity is affected by specific organisational imperatives and thus by organisational identities. Efforts to differentiate one university from another for reasons of competitive advantage, create critical mass in a field, or create brand identity can moderate the professional or discipline-based allegiances. Moreover, the internationalisation of universities seems likely to have moderated some of the national, ethnic and even personal context of identity formation. The literature reviewed here suggests these shifts have particular force because of the changes in the institutional context of higher education.

Academic identity within the changing institutional context

Current discourse predominantly depicts the concept of identity as being one in crisis (see Delantym 2008; Clegg, 2008) due to the degree of fragmentation generated by change in social institutions, patterns of life and the erosion of established freedoms. Henkel (2010) claims academic identity is a function of community membership and, interactions between the discipline and the institution. Taylor (1989) emphasises the importance of this community element, suggesting identities are formed and developed within defined communities that hold strong normative power. Indeed, one function of such a community is that it provides the language in which individuals understand themselves and interpret their world. Henkel (2010) says academic disciplines tend to generate symbolic materials about themselves which enable academics to build dominant self-identities. She adds individuals position themselves within the rules of language and the system of meanings of the prevailing culture.

Delanty (2008) argues the current times epitomised by new managerialism, increased commercialization and flux, increases the emphasis on identity. According to Delanty (2008:133) ‘the identities of academics, in their professional and personal roles, like identities more generally, are expressions of individualised life projects rather than products of specific roles’. He adds, many identities, particularly academic identities, are generated from creative engagement with institutional roles. Thus he argues identities within evolving institutional frameworks are being reshaped and modified. So although the discussion surrounding identity tends to be one of crisis and the erosion of established liberties, an alternative viewpoint might suggest universities offer those who work and study in them many opportunities for expression and recognition of their identities (Delanty, 2008). However, Mueller et al. (2008) suggest academics may question, challenge and resist changes being introduced if they perceive such changes undermine their core values.

Indeed, until fairly recently it was plausible to consider universities in exceptionalist terms (Henkel 2010) characterised by exclusive forms of knowledge and inquiry, academic values and educational ideas. The institution’s employees tended to enjoy ‘optimal conditions for the formation and maintenance of distinct, stable, legitimising identities (Henkel, 2010:4). However, recent transformations within HE have led to the erosion of these identities (Henkel 2010:7) and created a blurring of boundaries between academic faculty and other occupational groups within HE institutions. Henkel (2010:7) stresses the changes in HE ‘are enmeshed in more far-reaching changes in societies’ along with the ways in which we understand them. Certainly the concept of a profession used to be a strong source of identity however within HE, the discipline to which academic belonged tended to be viewed as the primary source of academic identity.

As Archer (2008:386) points out, ‘new forms of relationships, knowledge and academic labour’ have evolved and the concept of the ‘corporate’ university, according to Archer (2008); Henkel (2010, 2005); Dent & Whitehead (2002), has the potential to disrupt what it means to be an academic and what constitutes academic work. In this contemporary context, individuals perhaps have more freedom and opportunity to create new identities and are less restricted to one type of institution. It could be suggested the reason for this is that institutional identities are more diverse and less stable however as staff find themselves moving between different work spaces, tasks and roles it is likely they will construct and reconstruct how they define their identities overtime (Henkel, 2010). It is also possible, as staff work in a greater variety of contexts and amongst different groups this may challenge their personal values, aspirations and sources of self-esteem rendering such multiple identities irreconcilable (Henkel, 2010).

Findings/discussion

The emerging literature on academic identity identifies a number of dimensions that seem to matter, and seems therefore to warrant further and systematic research. As these types of considerations appear to be common for work identities that have strong professional or discipline-based components, research suggests are ones that could be applied beyond the setting of academia as well.

Social identity may at times function to the exclusion of personal identity, implying that salient self-images may be created primarily on the basis of group membership. Further, Turner (1982) argued perceptions of the self and others may be influenced by group membership more in some contexts than in others. Berger and Luckmann (1966) say, identity is formed by social processes and determined by the specific social structure in which it is maintained, modified and reshaped. It emerges from the dialectic between individuals and society, which means that it is shaped in the interplay between the subject and the context (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) being both multidimensional and changeable (Gioia et al., 2008).

Watson (2008) says the extent to which people embrace particular social-identities or ‘personas’ as an element of their self-identity varies from person to person and from one occupational group to another. For some individuals who work as managers, doctors or academics, being a manager, doctor or academic is relatively central to whom they perceive themselves to be. For others it may be peripheral. Arguably, for the majority, their occupational identification is just one part of their life and their notion of self. It is therefore necessary to fully appreciate the interplay between public and private ‘identities’—the dialectic between the internal and the external aspects of identity work.

Avenues for further research

The literature review here suggests that changes in particular in organisational imperatives, which have wider societal- and institutional-level bases, have prompted uncertainties and conflicts in the construction of the professional identities of individual academics. Given the parallels between academe another professional worlds, it would therefore be of wide interest to explore more systematically that range of identity conflicts that arise among academics and the strategies they have adopted to cope with it.

Following Coupland and Brown (2012), collecting narratives of academics facing shifting organisational imperatives would help identify how the values, locations and roles a variety of sub-dimensions of the professions conflict with organisational imperatives. It would also

identify the range of responses and coping mechanism individuals employ in dealing with the conflict. Of particular interest are a) teacher-dominant academics thrust into an organisational imperative for generating research funding; b) early career researchers thrust into teaching-intensive posts at teaching-led universities; c) mid-life career-changers, who join academic environments from other types of organisations, or from professions other than academe, who then face pressures from the professional, rather than the organisational side.

It would be particularly interesting to assess how they respond along a variety of dimensions, among them the strategic responses to institutional change suggested by Oliver (1991), acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance and manipulation. For example, how have academics compartmentalised the organisational imperatives to retain the greatest freedom of action for exercising the professional ambitions? Or is their emphasis the other way around, creating compartments of academic inquiry, with walls around them, giving less freedom, perhaps, but more security? How widespread is the practice of sending cynical 'apologies' to avoid the intrusion of administrative duties? Academics, like other professionals, achieve their status on the basis of the possession and stewardship of a body of knowledge, so how do they use this expert power (French & Raven, 1959) to manipulate organisational processes to expand agency against structure? What leads some academics to undergo conversions? Think of the teachers who come to embrace research, or the researchers who move into executive education and the grubby world of making money. What does it take to stand up and say 'NO' and not suffer reprisals and even thrive?

Conclusions

The identities people create are effects of both structure and agency, aspired to as much as they are subscribed, regulated, resisted, negotiated and accepted (Alvesson & Willmott 2002), 'playing out different forms of discursive domains and temporal spaces' (Ybema et al., 2009:303) although 'the nuances of these relationships are, and will continue to be, contested' (Coupland & Brown, 2012:2).

Structural changes are evident in higher education, and there is evidence those changes have left some academics with a sense that their scope for agency – and perhaps with it their sense of academic freedom itself – has been constrained. This paper and the literature it has reviewed suggest that research into the roots of the resulting conflicts is likely to be based on the tensions between shifting organisational imperatives and the individual's adherence to perceived imperatives of the profession. Resolutions of those conflicts could come through variety of adjustments or coping mechanisms, with implications for individuals and the organisations that employ them. Understanding the implications will help to guide the employment policies of universities and the work of academics themselves, and it may assist those working in other professions facing similar societal or institution-level pressures for change.

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