

Social work academics' subject positions: convergence and divergence (0173)

Diane Simpson

University of Lincoln, UK

## **Abstract**

Using Foucault's (1989) concept of subject positions, this doctoral research, explores and discusses identities and positions of social work academics. Thirteen subject positions (Foucault, 1989) provided insight into the daily experiences of social work academics but also had specific functions in managing identities of 'practitioner' and 'academic'. The subject positions were critical in facilitating the transition from practitioner to academic, but also highlighted tensions and challenges (i.e. divergence) between social work and academic practices and identities, as well as issues of synchronicity (i.e. convergence). The subject positions facilitated the management of identities, enhanced areas of compatibility, addressed and resolved issues of paradox, tension and antithetical identities. Thus, subject positions reflected social work academics' experiences of *being, negotiating/becoming* social work academics. Subject positions were conceptualised as being, negotiating or a combination of being and negotiating, set within a meta-position of a Dominant and Default Social Work identity.

## **Methodology**

Twenty-one social work academics from five English universities took part in semi-structured interviews which were transcribed and provided for member checking (Bryman, 2008).

## **Introduction and Background**

Foucault (1989) proposes that individuals respond to different situations and issues by adopting subject positions. As each situation is unique and reflects current societal expectations and contexts, positions are fluid and different positions can be maintained simultaneously. Various typologies exist that conceptualise academic identity (Barry et al.,

2006; Fanghanel, 2007; Whitchurch, 2008; Whitchurch, 2009; Lam, 2010; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2011; Levin and Shaker, 2011; Coates and Goedegebuure, 2012; Knights and Clarke, 2014) although these tend to address specific academic practices or groups of staff. Notably, a typology relating only to practitioner academics is not evident in the existing literature.

## **Findings**

In line with Foucault's (1989) notion of subject positions, thirteen subject positions emerged which enabled social work academics to synchronise existing and new identities, resolve tensions and paradox, but allow an overarching dominant professional social work identity to remain. Subject positions reflected current trends within academic and social work practice and their associated discourses.

Meshing of social work and academic identities, with positive benefits for the transition into the academy, took place through *Identity Synchronicity and Continuity* as participants were able to re-use existing social work knowledge and skills in the context of higher education, creating a sense of competence and self-efficacy. Identity synchronicity and continuity was problematic in the tendency to regard students as service users as this created tensions and paradox with readiness for practice agendas that dominate social work education (Lord Laming, 2009; Social Work Task Force, 2009; The College of Social Work, 2012).

Increasing awareness of, and striving toward, expectations of academic disciplinary regimes (Foucault, 1991) were evident (*disciplined academic, fledgling academics, lone academic*), converging with norms within higher education (for example, about research activity and excellence in teaching). However, there was divergence and paradox with the expectations of higher education and antithetical identities emerged where social work academics rejected normalised expectations (Foucault, 1991) about research production and being regarded as an academic (*resistant academic*), particularly when this construction of academic identity differed from individual perceptions of self and a belief that research should be relevant to social work practice. Despite a prevailing commitment to social work as a profession and

identities as social workers (*dominant and default social work position; guardians of the profession*), there was, paradoxically, resistance to neoliberal trends within social work practice (*resistant academic*); resistance against professional practice is not reported for other practitioner academics.

Expectations of publication engendered a sense of vulnerability (*vulnerable Academic*) reflecting previous research about “unbecoming” (Colley et al., 2007: 178; Archer, 2008: 389); however, vulnerability was magnified by uncertainty about the future of social work education in light of unremitting governmental examination (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Department for Education, 2014; Narey, 2014). Similar divergence and conflict occurred between a dominant social work identity (*dominant and default social work position; guardians of the profession*) and the expectations of the neoliberal university (for example, student satisfaction and progression) although commitment to a professional social work identity was prioritised (*dominant and default social work position*). The tensions inherent between academic and social work practitioner (for example, suitability issues) often required a careful balancing between the demands of these roles (*tightrope walker*).

Social work academics doubted their credibility as academics (*spurious academic*) and highlighted how they did not have a natural fit with academic life (e.g. longer academic years); hence *the misfit*. These findings are commensurate with research about other practitioner academics (Blenkinsopp and Stalker, 2004; Reybold, 2008; Gourlay, 2010). Although many participants felt uneasy and ill-equipped for their role as academics, some felt secure in their capabilities as academics (*comfortable academic*). Feeling efficacious as academics was also promoted through social context or, in line with Foucauldian thinking, the concept of ‘technologies of relationships’.

Subject positions facilitated the delivery of the curriculum and a creation of an academic identity that revolved around a core social work identity and emphasised the needs of qualified social work, reinforcing discourses about readiness for practice (*for example, identity synchronicity and continuity, dominant and default social work position, the bridge and the disciplined academic*). Making the curriculum relevant to authentic social work

practice was central to being a social work academic and professional standards were enforced for social work academics and students alike (*the bridge, identity synchronicity and continuity, disciplined academic*).

The subject positions enabled participants to manage, develop, negotiate and acquire an academic identity which was able to accommodate participants' self-perceptions as academics and demonstrate a commitment to a social work identity that, where necessary, took priority over educational matters. Positions were critical to surviving the transition from social work practice into the academy and in creating workable identities as academic and social worker. Participants were able to move between identities dependent upon the situation.

Thus, some of the positions comment on the descriptions and experiences of daily social work academic practice (i.e. *being*) whilst others have a mediating effect (i.e. *becoming/negotiating*). The former is particularly associated with feeling illegitimate, out of place and at risk (*spurious academic; misfit; vulnerable academic*), rejection of academic identities and practice (*resistant academic*), active engagement with the norms of academic practice (*disciplined academic, fledgling academic, comfortable academic; lone academic*), drawing together social work and academic practices (*the bridge*) and protection of the social work profession and users of social work services (*guardians of the profession*). The latter is characterised by two positions: *identity synchronicity and continuity; tightrope walker*. However, a combination of being/becoming is also possible with some positions straddling both functions: *dominant and default social work position, resistant academic and the bridge*. A dominant social work identity (being) exists but when tensions or challenges develop, this also becomes a process for managing difficulties (becoming). *The bridge* and *resistant academic*, whilst reflecting daily experiences also allow some negotiation of roles and identities. A *dominant and default social work position* is an overarching meta-position that frames all practices, academic and social work.

**997 words** (not including abstract and reference list)

### Reference List

- Archer, L. (2008) Younger academics' constructions of 'authenticity,' 'success' and professional identity. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(4) 385 - 403.
- Barry, J., Berg, E. and Chandler, J. (2006) Academic shape shifting: Gender, management and identities in Sweden and England. *Organization*, 13(2) 275 - 298.
- Blenkinsopp, J. and Stalker, B. (2004) Identity work in the transition from manager to management academic. *Management Decision*, 42(3/4) 418 - 429.
- Bryman, A. (2008) *Social Research Methods*. Third edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Coates, H. and Goedegebuure, L. (2012) Recasting the academic workforce: Why the attractiveness of the academic profession needs to be increased and eight possible strategies for how to go about this from an Australian perspective. *Higher Education*, 64(6) 875 - 889.
- Colley, H., James, D. and Diment, K. (2007) Unbecoming teachers: Towards A more dynamic notion of professional participation. *Journal of Education Policy*, 22(2) 173 - 193.
- Croisdale-Appleby, D. (2014) *Re-visioning Social Work Education: An Independent Review*. London: Department of Health.
- Department for Education (2014) *Nicky Morgan Announces Children's Social Work Reforms*. London: Department for Education. Available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nicky-morgan-announces-childrens-social-work-reforms> [Accessed 4th February 2015].

- Fanghanel, J. (2007) Local responses to institutional policy: A discursive approach to positioning. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(2) 187 - 205.
- Foucault, M. (1989) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1991) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin.
- Gourlay, L. (2010) *Transitions into the Academic World: Identities and Academic/Literary Practices*. Oxford: Centre for Excellence in Preparing for Academic Practice. Available from <http://www.cetlrecord.ox.ac.uk/resources/resource27g.php> [Accessed 25th September 2010].
- Knights, D. and Clarke, C.A. (2014) It's a bittersweet symphony, this life: Fragile academic selves and Insecure Identities at work. *Organization Studies*, 35(3) 335 - 357.
- Lam, A. (2010) From 'ivory tower traditionalists' to 'entrepreneurial scientists'? Academic scientists in fuzzy university-industry boundaries. *Social Studies of Science*, 40(2) 307 - 340.
- Learmonth, M. and Humphreys, M. (2011) Autoethnography and academic identity: Glimpsing business school doppelgängers. *Organization*, 19(1) 99 - 117.
- Levin, J.S., and Shaker, G.S. (2011) The hybrid and dualistic identity of full-time non tenure track faculty. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 55(11) 1461 - 1484.
- Lord Laming (2009) *The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report*. London: The Stationery Office.
- Narey, M. (2014) *Making the Education of Social Workers Consistently Effective: Report of Sir Martin Narey's Independent Review of the Education of Children's Social Workers*. London: Department for Education.
- Reybold, L.E. (2008) Practitioner-faculty dialectic: Balancing professional identities in adult education. *Journal of Adult Development*, 15 140 - 147.
- Social Work Task Force (2009) *Building a Safe, Confident Future: The Final Report of the Social Work Task Force*. London: DCSF.
- The College of Social Work (2012) *Professional Capability Framework: Readiness for Practice Capabilities*. London: The College of Social Work. Available from <http://www.collegeofsocialwork.org/uploadedFiles/PCFNOVReadiness-for-practiceCapabilities.pdf> [Accessed 27th May 2012].
- Whitchurch, C. (2008) Shifting identities and blurring boundaries: The emergence of *third space* professionals in UK higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62(4) 377 - 396.
- Whitchurch, C. (2009) The rise of the *blended professional* in higher education: A comparison between the united kingdom, australia and the united states. *Higher Education*, 58(3) 407 - 418.