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**'Get yourself some nice, neat, matching box files!':  
Research Administrators and occupational identity work**

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**Abstract**

To-date, qualitative research into occupational groups and cultures within academia has been relatively scarce, with an almost exclusive concentration upon teaching staff within universities and colleges. This paper seeks to address this lacuna and applies the interactionist concept of 'identity work' in order to examine one specific group to-date under-researched: graduate research administrators. This occupational group is of sociological interest as many of its members appear to span the putative divide between 'academic' and 'administrative' occupational worlds within higher education. An exploratory, qualitative research project was undertaken, based upon interviews with 27 research administrators. The study applies the work of Snow and Anderson (1995) and particularly of Perinbanayagam (2000), in order to analyse how research administrators utilise various forms of identity work to sustain credible occupational identities, often in the face of considerable challenge from their academic colleagues.

## **'Get yourself some nice, neat, matching box files!': Research Administrators and occupational identity work**

### **Introduction**

The sociology of work and occupations has during the past decade or so witnessed a resurgence of interest in 'the mundane', everyday world of occupational work, analysed via detailed, empirical studies (Coffey & Atkinson, 1994). This article sits within that tradition and examines the hitherto under-researched occupational world of British University research administrators. This occupational group is of particular interest as many research administrators appear to straddle the supposed academic-administrative divide, incorporating considerable academic elements within their routine work tasks. Via a symbolic interactionist lens, the article analyses the 'identity work' undertaken in order to assert distinctive identities as specialist academic administrators. As various commentators have noted, knowledge about occupational groups and cultures within academia is sparse (e.g. Delamont *et al.*, 1994; Blaxter *et al.*, 1998; Abbas and McLean, 2001), and concentrates almost exclusively upon teaching staff (Edwards, 2000; Hey, 2001) whilst other groups such as technicians and administrators (McInnis, 1998) remain relatively unexplored. The work of Snow and Anderson (1995) and particularly Perinbanayagam (2000) is used as the theoretical framework in order to analyse how research administrators utilise various forms of identity work to sustain credible occupational identities, often in the face of considerable challenge from academic and other colleagues.

## Context

From the mid-1980s, the British higher education system became characterised by a New Managerialist (Clarke & Newman, 1997) approach to management and governance, drawing upon practices from the private-for-profit sector and producing ‘a series of interconnected strategies and practices for restructuring public services focused on work intensification, service commodification and “control at a distance”’ (Reed & Deem, 2002, p. 130). A concomitant trend towards greater specialisation of university administrative functions (McClintock 1998), produced an increase in ‘professional’ (McInnis, 1998) or ‘career’ administrators. This specialisation has been noted internationally, for example in Australia (Miller, 1995; McInnis, 1998), Canada (Miller, 1995) and the USA (Shumar, 1995). Within this array of specialised administrative functions sits that of the research administrator, and specialist associations for research administrators exist not only in Europe, but also in North America and Australasia. Indeed, SRA International (2006) promotes itself as the ‘Professional Society, educating and supporting research administrators around the world’.

Within the UK, the so-called ‘binary line’ between Universities and Polytechnics was formally abolished by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, which alongside other fundamental changes, permitted the former polytechnics to compete with the pre-1992 universities for research funds from the UK funding councils. The need for universities to diversify their range of research funding sources in the face of a decline in state funding, and expectations of greater research productivity in order to compete within the UK

Research Assessment Exercise<sup>1</sup> resulted *inter alia* in increasing numbers of contract researchers (Allen Collinson, 2004), and also of specialist research administrators to manage, or assist with, research projects. Whilst for these administrators, their work focuses primarily upon the management and administration of research grants and projects, it may involve a diverse range of tasks including project costing, bidding (to the European Union, UK government departments, UK research councils, charities, local authorities, etc) and negotiation, financial modelling and monitoring, production of final reports and their presentation. For some research administrators interviewed, it was difficult to distinguish elements of their portfolio from those of research managers, Research Fellows and Assistants. The work of other research administrators primarily focuses upon research degree administration, e.g., in relation to academic quality procedures, designing and implementing codes of practice, monitoring student progress, servicing research degrees committees, and so on. Some research administrators are involved in both research and research degree administration. In sum, as Pringle (1989) found in relation to secretarial work, there is no one simple or standard occupational definition of what a research administrator does.

Within this study, research administrators' conceptions of occupational identity were found to be influenced both by their administrative and academic colleagues, as workplace 'significant others' (Cooley, 1983). In relation to power differentials between academics and administrators, which generally accord academics the power to define the latter as

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<sup>1</sup> The Research Assessment Exercise is a regular, peer review exercise to evaluate the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. This assessment informs the selective distribution of funds by the UK higher education funding bodies. For further detail, see McNay (1997); Lucas (2004).

'other' and 'non-academic', it might be argued that such differentials are a product of the formers' greater academic capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and consequent higher academic 'credibility'. The data revealed, however, that many of the administrators interviewed possessed equivalent, and in some cases higher, educational qualifications than those of their immediate academic colleagues. The hierarchical nature of academia (Park, 1992), however, enabled academics to impose their classification upon other occupational groups within the university. Administrators found themselves in many ways treated as the poor relations of the university system (McInnis, 1998), at least in comparison with 'permanent' academic staff who were perceived as the core, in contrast to the periphery (Kimber, 2003), composed of those somewhat pejoratively termed 'support' staff, including administrators, technicians, secretaries, library and computing staff. In common with other occupational contexts and groups, such as classroom assistants (Todd, 1994), contract researchers, (Reay, 2000; Hockey, 2002; Allen Collinson, 2003), and secretaries (Pringle, 1989), research administrators experienced varying degrees of marginality, and represented somewhat of an underclass within their working environment, at least on dimensions such as pay and conditions, and flexibility of working hours.

The gendered (and indeed 'raced' and class-based) nature of academia in general has been examined by many (e.g., Davies & Holloway, 1995; Reay, 2000), at the structural and micropolitical level. Morley's and Walsh's work on the micropolitics of gender and the academy is particularly noteworthy in the British and Commonwealth contexts (Morley, 1999, 2005; Morley & Walsh, 1996). Although there is not the space here to discuss the gendering of administrative work in general, it is interesting to note that male research administrators constituted just under 25% of our interviewees, and no salient gender differences emerged from participants' accounts. This was a surprising feature, and is

certainly not to say that there were no gender differences, nor that research administration is not a gendered occupation<sup>2</sup>, but only that issues of gender were not identified or articulated *explicitly by participants*. The following account focuses upon participants' perceptions and seeks to avoid the undue imposition of conceptual frameworks upon them. As Morley (1999, p. 13) notes, in relation to interviewees, it is important: 'to allow them their privacy and separateness, and not make assumptions about shared tacit knowledge'. As one of the researchers on the project had formerly worked in research administration, it was deemed particularly important not to assume *a priori* shared knowledge and perspectives. This focus on participants' perceptions can, however, be problematic; as Morley (1999, p. 24) notes, it is difficult to know whether informants' views should be taken at face value or as an example of 'false consciousness', although the latter option might indicate that the researcher's reading of context is in some way more valid than that of her/his participants.

It should also be noted at this juncture that the article does not re-examine the wide-ranging and complex debates around the concepts of professions, semi-professions and professionalism<sup>3</sup> nor indeed how research administrators might be classified. The focus is, rather, on the occupational identities that research administrators themselves construct and present, particularly to academic colleagues. In order to examine this and other

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<sup>2</sup> There are wide-ranging discussions around the feminisation of occupations and occupational gender segregation generally; e.g.: Walby 1990, Savage and Witz 1992, Hakim 1996; Wharton 2005).

<sup>3</sup> This is a vast literature, but for a flavour of discussions, including those relating to gender and professions, see for example Johnson (1972); Dingwall & Lewis (1983); Freidson (1986); Atkinson & Delamont (1990); Savage & Witz (1992); Corral and Lester (1996); Evetts (2003); Torstendahl (2005)

facets of the occupational milieu of research administration in higher education, it was decided to undertake an exploratory, qualitative research project, details of which follow.<sup>4</sup>

### **The research process**

As an initial step, and to provide contextual information, an email questionnaire was circulated to all UK research administrators who were members of RAGnet, at the time of data collection the national network for research administrators, subsequently reformed as ARMA, the Association of Research Managers and Administrators (UK) (ARMA, 2006). The questionnaire sought basic information such as: age, gender, qualifications, length of time in research administration, principal areas of responsibility and whether located at the level of department/school, research centre, faculty or central administration. Respondents were also asked if they would be willing to participate in the core phase of the project, the interviews. A total of 77 research administrators responded to the questionnaire, all of who had a minimum of a first degree. Respondents ranged over those in their first year in role, to those with over a decade of experience in research administration. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the 'traditional' notion of generalisability (Van Maanen, 1988) was not of primary significance. On the basis of the questionnaire returns, purposive or criteria sampling (Creswell, 1998) was used to select a group for interview, and whilst no attempt was made to construct a random or representative 'sample', effort was made to assemble a group providing a fair cross-spectrum in terms of gender, age, experience in the role, and the type of post held (central department, research centre or academic department).

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<sup>4</sup> The research team comprised myself and Dr John Hockey, University of Gloucestershire.



Interviews were eventually undertaken with 27 research administrators, based at 19 higher education institutions, of whom 21 (77%) were female, reflecting the general gender balance noted in the initial survey. Interviews were one-off, semi-structured, in-depth, between 45 and 90 minutes, and audio-taped. Interview transcripts and observational notes made at the time of the interview, were analysed and coded 'manually'; transcribed via a word processing package but not subjected to any specialist data analysis software. Thematic coding (Flick, 1998) was used to classify the data. Given that both researchers were interested in symbolic interactionist perspectives on occupation, emergent coding categories included themes such as office settings and 'props', occupational role definitions, identity and conceptions of occupational self, and occupational interaction. It should be stressed that, other than the observational data recorded in note form by the researchers, the accounts of the research administrators themselves constitute the focus of the analysis, and: 'accounts are all we have to work with and shaky inferences to what is/was really going on should be dispensed with, as a pointless metaphysical exercise' (Gilbert & Abell, 1983, pp. 2-3). The limitations of the 'single research technology' approach (Berg, 1989, p. 4) should also be borne in mind. The theoretical underpinnings of the article will now be considered.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

Although there is not the scope within this paper to address more fully the complexities of current sociological debates on 'identity' and 'self' (see e.g., Callero, 2003), the forms of self and identity which appear here owe their construction primarily to the symbolic interactionist tradition, and are congruent with Jenkins' formulation (1996, p. 29) where self is: 'each individual's reflexive sense of her or his own particular identity, constituted *vis à vis* of others in terms of similarity and difference'. Symbolic interactionist perspectives on

identity vary greatly along a continuum between more processual and more structural orientations. As Howard (2000, p. 371) notes, more structural approaches focus on the concepts of role identities and social positions, linking social structures to persons, whereas other approaches lay greater emphasis upon the processual, interactional elements of identity construction (Blumer, 1969). This article focuses upon the latter, whilst nevertheless acknowledging the power of structural constraints, both within organisations and in the wider social world.

Research administrators, in common with all occupational role incumbents, experience both 'role imposition' and 'role improvisation' (Stryker, 1987). The degree of role improvisation was found to vary considerably between individuals for a variety of contingent reasons, including previous occupational experiences, the amount of latitude permitted by management, degree of seniority, and the nature of their specific responsibilities. As Dietz and Ritchey (1996, pp. 1-2) note: 'identities are derived from occupied social positions and the meanings and role expectations associated with them'. From the data, the divergent roles and responsibilities covered by the title of 'research administrator' emerged as salient, together with the complexities of operationalising the role. A common thread, however, related to the 'academic' component of much of the work. Whilst there are many interesting angles on the occupational worlds and identities of this particular group, this element seemed particularly intriguing. The article therefore focuses upon the 'identity work' which research administrators undertook, particularly in relation to their contestation of, and resistance towards being categorised negatively by academics as '*just* administrators' and 'non-academic', despite what many perceived as their regular crossing of the putative occupational boundary.

## Identity work

Within the sociological and anthropological literature, the concept of 'identity work' has been well utilised (e.g. Stewart & Strathern, 2000), particularly within the symbolic interactionist tradition (e.g. Prus, 1996; Perinbanayagam, 2000). As Snow and Anderson explain:

'...identity work may involve a number of complementary activities: (a) procurement or arrangement of physical settings and props (b) cosmetic face work or the arrangement of personal appearance (c) selective association with other individuals and groups (d) verbal construction and assertion of personal identities.' (1995, p. 241)

In Perinbanayagam's (2000) work, these activities are reformulated, and 'map' on to Snow and Anderson's categories to form the following identifications: (a) and (b) combine to form *materialistic*; (c) becomes *associative*; and (d) becomes *vocabularic*. It emerged from the data that all three were used routinely by research administrators during everyday work routines, as they sought occupational and personal credibility with colleagues. This involved contestation of and resistance towards their negative categorisation by some, but certainly not all, of their academic colleagues.

Whilst many different kinds of identity are posited in the literature, Snow and Anderson (1995, p. 240) make a useful distinction between social identities, defined as those we attribute or impute to others, situating them as social objects, and personal identity attributed to the self by the actor her/himself. In the interviews it emerged that many of the research administrators' personal identities, which included a strong academic component, were at times at variance with the social identities attributed by their academic and other colleagues. One of the findings from the research was the notion of the (often disputed) *boundary* between academics and administrators, and this will first briefly be examined in

order to contextualise the data that subsequently follow and which are thematically grouped by each form of identification. The extracts which follow are taken from the interview transcripts.

### **Boundary maintenance**

As Bourdieu (1984) has noted, social identity lies in difference, and such difference is often asserted against what is closest and therefore deemed to represent the greatest threat. Forms of boundary negotiation and maintenance activity have been subject to analysis in relation to various settings where occupational groups in analogous areas of work find themselves engaged in inter-professional social relations. Studies have, for example, been undertaken in health care settings (Allen, 2001), including those between nurses and doctors (Wicks, 1998), within classrooms (Todd, 1994); on commercial airlines (Hochschild, 1983); and indeed within academia - between library/computing professionals and academics for example (Corrall & Lester, 1996).

Congruent with many of these studies and also with those of general academic-administrative relations (e.g. McInnis, 1998), data analysis revealed evidence of contestation and friction between the two groups, where 'uneasy and ambivalent relationships between academics and administrators (generated) frustrations and tensions for both sides' (McInnis, 1998, p. 161). Many interviewees, including some of those who actually problematised the administrative/academic divide, did acknowledge the existence of some sort of boundary between the two groups, covert and tacit though it might be, given the rhetoric of collegiality and egalitarianism. As one interviewee noted:

... I do get the feeling that there is a very definite divide between academics and admin and some degree of scepticism on both sides... so there is that divide which is covert, but it's there for sure...

The tendency to classify them as ‘non-academic’ was particularly problematic for many interviewees, who expressed great frustration with what they perceived as ‘a default identity of “non-academic”’ (McInnis, 1998, p. 168), where administrators are ‘othered’. This defining of persons by what they are not, was felt to denigrate and deny research administrators’ specialist skills and subject expertise and to result in a lack of respect for their qualifications, abilities and knowledge. Even the title, Research Administrator, was considered to misrepresent the role, and potentially conjure up negative imagery:

It would have been much better being entitled ‘Research Coordinator’, that way I could have avoided being pigeonholed by academics as akin to the people who organise the exams!

In order to combat this, research administrators engaged in a whole array of identity work, to construct and maintain positive identities and to present themselves as credible colleagues with academic knowledge and skills. This work ranged over all three of Perinbanayagam’s (2000) *materialistic*, *associative* and *vocabularic* identifications, from arrangement of work settings, through networking with academics, to engagement in identity talk; these dimensions will now be examined.

### **Materialistic identification: setting the scene**

One of the primary ways in which the research administrators chose to indicate their academic credentials was via the arrangement and content of their office settings. Baldry (1997) has discussed the importance of the personalisation of workspaces, and it was observed (as most of the interviews were conducted in the administrators’ offices), that a variety of physical ‘props’ (Goffman, 1959) signalled the administrators’ involvement in intellectual and academic activities. Undoubtedly, many of these objects such as books and journals, also served functionally as well as symbolically. For example, many

administrators had bookshelves stacked with academic books and journals, and some had included their own Master's and/or doctoral thesis within this collection. In many offices, walls, notice boards and (where institutional policy permitted) doors were hung with posters and leaflets advertising conferences, colloquia and seminars. In one instance, somewhat analogous to practice in some doctors' surgeries, an interviewee had hung framed copies of her degree and doctoral certificates on the office wall. In offices shared with other (non-research) administrative staff, it was noted that these administrative colleagues did not exhibit these academic props, in the form of academic books, journals and so on.

Such props might also be perceived as transitional or boundary objects, serving as symbolic bridges to a former academic status, whether as student or researcher (none of the interviewees had formerly worked as a full-time lecturer). Not only did the administrators signify to themselves the continuity of an academic self, as a form of personal identity work, but they also engaged in presentation of this particular social identity to their academic colleagues:

When I first started work here as a research administrator, some of the academics would come into my office and start looking over the books on my shelves, sometimes with a look of surprise. I don't think most of them had come across an administrator – especially a female one - who was more interested in talking about Foucault than rules and regulations – bit ironic that statement, I know!

These props also served as boundary markers to distinguish, even to disassociate, the research administrators from other administrative and management staff who did not share the same academic concerns:

X, my line-manager, thinks administrators and academics just don't mix. He came into the office one day and stared, very obviously, at all my er, rather overlaid bookshelves. 'What do you want with all this stuff?', he asked, 'Get yourself some nice, neat, matching box files!'

I think the other women [administrators] in the Registry think I'm a bit odd really ...a bit threatening may be, some of them. 'Look at all those books' one said the other day, 'Have you read them all?'

These props reminded both the interviewees and their academic colleagues that the former too had academic interests and identities, and objects such as books were utilised to signal materialistic identification. Analogously to the university students studied by Silver (1996), who stressed the importance of objects in establishing social identities, the research administrators used academic-related objects for impression management, to make visible their identification with the academic world and to remind themselves of a core element of their identity:

It's important to me to have my (academic) books near me. It reminds me of who I really am, it's like ... well, I guess what I'm saying is 'Look, I'm more than just a person who just happens to be working in administration at the moment. I have interests too, like you lot [academics]'

My books and stuff are a bit of a comfort to me really. After spending a morning in Management Team debating the finer points of procedures handbooks, where the mail should be delivered - for goodness sake! ... I can come in here and remind myself of what really matters to me. And it sure isn't all that Registry rubbish! I like to remind them of that, at least tacitly, when they come in here.

These were some of the **materialistic** identifications that research administrators made in displaying an academic component of their identity via the arrangement of office settings. A second form of identification which emerged as salient was that of **associative** identification.

### **Associative identification**

Whilst the 'idea that there is a single, cohesive academic *profession* is both powerful and contested' (Fulton, 1996, p. 157; my emphasis), Delamont *et al.* (1994) have portrayed the significance of an academic *identity*: 'an identification with intellectual traditions and

groups, with departments or disciplines, with academic peer-groups, networks and learned societies' (1994, p. 149). It became apparent that many of the research administrators retained this academic identification: they engaged in academic identity work via their association with academics, not only within the workplace but also socially, and via attendance at academic conferences and seminars. As Pettinger (2005) notes, social relations between work colleagues are a relatively neglected dimension of occupational studies, despite the fact that friendship and sociability are often considered important by workers. Within their University, research administrators engaged in networking with academic colleagues, both functionally in terms of work tasks, but also for more purely social reasons, such as coffee-time conversations focussed around discipline-specific issues and interests. The importance of subject disciplines to academic identities is well established (Reed & Deem, 2002; Becher, 1989), and many of the research administrators had actively sought posts related to their own discipline, considering that this intellectual background assisted greatly their work:

Hmm, well, I think that (overlap) is the nature of research administration, especially if it's at school [i.e. departmental] level, and especially if the administrator has academic degrees in that particular discipline, and also it enables me to network very successfully with the academics because I'm also academically qualified and I can talk, if you like, in their parlance.

Such identity talk is discussed further below. These kinds of shared academic interests helped not only with work tasks, but also in creating a cohesive community of like-minded colleagues who provided support and 'informal consultancy' (Pithouse, 1994, p. 15):

I've written a working paper myself, so I might ask for X's advice so I'm not just liaising with them about the job but also about my own sort of academic interests which brings us all sort of very close together.

Most research administrators considered that their role would be rendered much more difficult without the possession of considerable academic capital (Bourdieu, 1988), not only for



functional reasons, but they also suspected that without a degree, even a doctorate, they would encounter credibility problems:

It makes my work easier in so far as I don't think the academics would take me seriously if I didn't have one (a doctorate), because it's part of being on the same level as them... being seen as a serious, qualified person, I think. I don't think that they would react to someone who wasn't at their level, if you like.

Some interviewees engaged in associational identification with the academic sphere by maintaining links with subject associations such as the British Psychological Society, and by attending subject-based conferences, seminars and colloquia, often at their own expense. These occasions provided fora in which to engage in intellectual debate beyond the immediate demands of the occupational role. It also emerged that a handful of the research administrators undertook identity work via teaching, with departments keen to utilize their disciplinary knowledge. Although this work did not form part of their contractual obligations, the research administrators concerned enjoyed the challenges and experience of teaching, some for the first time:

My Master's dissertation was looking at postmodernism and gender and the course leader thought it would be interesting for students to have somebody in who'd just completed a Master's degree ... but for me, too, I wanted to do it, ... and thoroughly enjoyed it. A lecture theatre full of students and just me, scared stiff beforehand, but elated afterwards.

With regard to identity issues, in common with several interviewees who proclaimed themselves academics manqué(e)s, the same administrator signaled her intention to return to a more academic self in the future:

... as I say, I think I'm a frustrated academic probably (laughs) ...I have helped out and done lectures here to third year undergraduates and thoroughly enjoyed it and I think it also, again, helps with the job I'm doing that the academics know that I can also lecture at a certain level, and I would like to do my PhD at some stage.

Indeed, several interviewees indicated that research administration constituted a temporary occupational 'stop-gap' and articulated ambitions either to return to academic work or to take up an academic post in the future. For most interviewees who did teaching such involvement was hard won, and lecture preparation and presentation had to be undertaken in their 'leisure' time if managers were not amenable, even if the teaching was clearly of benefit to the institution. Indeed several research administrators reported animosity from (non-academic) managers towards such academic tasks. In this context, teaching and/or pursuing their own research in addition to undertaking a full-time administrative job required a good deal of commitment to the academic self, in the face of indifference or even hostility.

The majority of interviewees had some involvement with research students, and given the relatively small student numbers concerned, often established close relationships. Indeed almost a third of interviewees indicated that they provided help to research students that exceeded purely administrative advice, and at times was more akin to supervisory support. Such associative identification via the provision of help and academic advice was recounted positively:

I have a very close working relationship too with the research students. I know most of them personally ... and again having an interest in the PhD research that they're doing and perhaps being able to help them, probably more with the admin side, but I have been helping one of the PhD students with looking at Foucauldian analysis which she can introduce to her own PhD.

Interestingly, alongside associational identification *with* academics, at times research administrators also 'celebrated' their difference in certain contexts, a feature noted in respect of other occupational groups working in close proximity, such as the gynaecology nurses studied by Bolton (2005) who fêted the distinctiveness of their occupational roles in

contrast to other workers in the same medical milieu. Likewise, at times research administrators made comments reflecting a degree of associational distancing from academics. This corresponds with other research findings: Seyd discovered that academics were portrayed by administrators as: 'unworldly, unreliable, incompetent at managerial and administrative tasks, and never in the office when needed to deal with urgent student issues' (2000, p. 35). Analogous constructions were evident from interviewees' comments, where academic staff were portrayed variously as being in their 'own little world', self-centred, child-like, obstinate, volatile, emotional, and administratively incompetent and resistant:

...academics tend to be more of the creative type of people and if they're a bit like Van Gogh and painters, they can throw a wobbly ...

They are just in their own world of delivering teaching and doing research... Lots of academics then when I am trying to obtain the information from them, just become obstinate in relation to your requests.

As part of their identity work, research administrators contrasted themselves with this somewhat stereotypical view of academics, by characterizing administrators as more practical, worldly, efficient, calm and generally mature and professional in their behaviour!

For example:

When they (academics) scream and shout, and on occasion cry, I remain calm; you have to put up with a lot of that. I always remain sitting down and keep my voice low.

... if someone (academic) wants to rant and rave at me, then I can take it and walk away. From my point of view it's unprofessional for an administrator to lose their cool and to rant and rave back. Hopefully, the individual will calm down when they get my email ...

This contrasts starkly with notions of academics (particularly males) being subject to high degrees of emotional restraint, preoccupied with control over emotions in order to privilege rationality (Morley, 1999, p. 82).

The above section has considered both the associative identification and associative distancing that research administrators practise, depending upon context. The final form of identification that emerged from the data as highly salient, was vocabularic identification in the form of 'identity talk'.

### **Identity talk**

As Howard (2000, p. 372) notes: 'people actively produce identity through their talk', and for interviewees this was undertaken in a variety of contexts and modes. Given the salience of the academic elements of occupational identity, it is not surprising that most interviewees noted the importance of signalling their educational qualifications and disciplinary socialisation to academic colleagues, in order to be taken seriously in their occupational role. The following comments reflect the views of the great majority of interviewees, although some reported being more assertive in expressing their academic pedigrees:

I have never said to people I have a degree, but gradually over time that kind of personal stuff gets included in conversations, and I suppose it's an indicator of your capability. It tells academics you have some level of understanding.

I did a part-time Master's degree solely ... not that it helped me to do my job in a literal sense, but because I need to flag up an academic pedigree. Occasionally you get some arrogance in researchers and I will let them know that I have some intellectual pedigree. There are some who treat anyone who is not an academic as if you are a cleaning lady.

Research administrators also indicated their enjoyment of engaging in discourse and debate around their subject area whenever the opportunity arose – and pressure of work permitted. For those who were members of research and/or research degrees committees, these debates would form an intrinsic part of their work:

... I've got a research committee coming up later in the week, and I really enjoy that. Not so much the routine stuff, but when we get to discuss the ins and outs of a student's application, then it can be really fascinating. It's also chance to engage in

a bit of real academic banter with people about cultural history – believe me, you don't get that very often, stuck in this place! (indicates the administrative block where she works).

Research administrators indicated their demonstration of subject expertise in less formal contexts via discourse and use of specialist terminology; sometimes unwittingly revealing disciplinary background:

... something similar occurred when I first starting working with my former Dean. We were both chatting away over a cup of coffee one morning and discussing the potential use of rooms in our Centre. 'Hmm,' I happened to say, 'that's definitely contested social space'. She gave me a quizzical smile and said, 'Ah ha, you're giving away your background there!'. We both chuckled.

And sometimes more deliberately indicating their familiarity with the academic world in order to make a point:

He's a bit of an 'old-school', traditional guy – calls administrators 'secretaries', thinks that women's role is looking after the kids at home ...uh, that kind of thing. Remember one time he was going on about some important dictionary he was contributing to, hoping it would be published in time for the RAE. I mentioned casually that one of my papers in an international journal looked like being published just in the nick of time too... his jaw nearly hit the floor!

### **Discussion and future research**

This article has sought to apply the concept of identity work to the hitherto under-researched occupational world of the UK university research administrator. From the interviews, it emerged that this occupational title covered a wide range of different roles. Indeed, one of the most salient findings to emerge was the complex and often contested nature of occupational identity for this group, particularly in relation to academic colleagues. It became clear that complexity, fluidity and context-dependency characterised much research administrative work, and this accorded a certain amount of negotiated social space in which to engage in role improvisation (Stryker, 1987). Many interviewees valorised the opportunities afforded by their work for crossing the putative

academic-administrative divide, and there was evidence of engagement in extensive identity work as research administrators struggled to maintain the academic elements of their identity, despite challenges from academic colleagues, a minority of whom appeared to characterise administrative staff as 'dim dross' (cf. Reay, 2000).

One of the noteworthy features in interviewees' accounts was the very sparse reference to a gender dimension within their occupational world. This stands in stark contrast to studies of other occupational groups, such as secretaries, some of whose work tasks may appear analogous (for example minute-taking), although the considerable difficulties in defining the work tasks of a secretary have been well-documented (Pringle, 1989). The gender dimension of research administrative work is certainly worthy of further investigation. Interestingly however, in common with secretarial workers (Pringle, 1989) almost all the interviewees (both female and male) made some reference to the 'invisibility' of their work. This finding corresponds with other research such as Oakley's (1984) study of housewives, and of paid work like nursing (Cronin, 2001) and waitressing (Ehrenreich, 2002), both predominantly 'feminised' occupations, and with Smith's (1987) general statements regarding the gendered division of labour and women's invisibility.

It emerged that research administrators used relationships with academic colleagues as markers of both convergence and divergence, dependent upon context. Many interviewees emphasized the common threads of culture, norms and values and the overlapping duties and responsibilities shared with academic colleagues, together with similarities in academic capital and educational biographies. This stands in contrast to findings regarding *general* administrators within universities, which portray separate occupational cultures and values (Seyd, 2000), where academics alone are assumed to hold their primary identification with a

subject or discipline. This premise was clearly not supported by the data from this project, suggesting that research administrators may constitute a distinctive sub-group within higher education administration in terms of allegiance to what might be termed academic culture and values. Such attitudes might be explained by research administrators' own academic socialisation, and perhaps by a degree of 'self-selectivity' in choosing to work in an occupation closely allied with the academic activity of research. The project upon which this paper is based was conceptualised very much as an exploratory study. Certainly further research might usefully unravel the reasons for a distinctive occupational identity given that research administrators appear to devote considerable time and energy to undertaking 'academic' identity work, and this within the often pressurized working environment of the British university system (Weiner, 1996), and sometimes in the face of considerable 'collegial' contestation.

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