

## Living on the Edge? Professional Anxieties at Work in Academia and Veterinary Practice

David Knights\* and Caroline Clarke\*\*

\* Lancaster University Management School, LA14YX, UK

Corresponding author Email [d.knights@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:d.knights@lancaster.ac.uk)

\*\* Open University Business School, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA.

### Abstract

Through empirical research on academics and veterinary surgeons, this paper focuses on identity and how it is reflected in, and reproduced by, anxiety and insecurity at work. Through three analytical themes: perfection, performativity and commodified service, we explore how these professions experience a loss of autonomy as they are subjected to competitive market forces as well as an intensification of masculine managerial controls of assessment, audit and accountability. We see these pressures and their effects as reflecting a commodification of service provision where the consumer (student or client) begins to redefine the relationship between those offering some expertise and those who are its recipients, partly achieved through the performative gaze of constant and visible rating mechanisms. Our empirical research also identifies sources of anxiety concerns in their attempts to achieve perfection against this background of uncertain knowledge and precarious contexts of enacting professional expertise.

Keywords: Academics, anxiety, commodified service, professionals, perfection, performativity, vets.

### Introduction

‘Don’t push me, ‘cause I’m close to the edge. I’m trying not to lose my head. It’s like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder how I keep from going under’ (Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five)

This article is focused primarily on an analysis of empirical research on academics and veterinary surgeons where we found high levels of anxiety displayed due largely to parallel pressures and intensifications of work. They also share a number of commonalities concerning their preoccupations with perfection, uncertainties regarding their knowledge and competence, and the

intensification of work that, as a result of managerial interventions and market controls, is steadily eroding their professional autonomy. Each of these themes will be examined in detail through the presentation of some of the data from our empirical studies but we anticipate a greater relevance of this study for even broader issues within modern society. The anxiety of the contemporary world could be seen to contrast sharply with that of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was often described as suffering from dis-identification and anomie (Durkheim, 1897/1951), alienation (Marx, 1844/1916), or meaninglessness due to the existential void (Sartre, 1943/1996). These anxieties were seemingly a product of insufficient connection or integration with society, or a failure of linking personal troubles to public issues (Wright-Mills, 2000). By contrast, today's anxieties seem individualized and focused more directly on identity and may be seen as reflecting and reproducing an over-identification with, for example, the nation state (nationalism), race (racism), gender (feminism), idealised images of the body and dress (fetishism or fashionism), or one's profession (professionalism). These personal desires, expectations and idealised images are discrepant with everyday life experience, but they reflect and reproduce considerable anxiety and insecurity. In short, social, political and philosophical questions and unease about our purpose, meaning and integration in society have been overlain by preoccupations with our identities (Knights and Clarke, 2017). In intellectual discourse, it has meant that identity politics<sup>i</sup> has tended to supersede class politics but not without considerable debate and resistance (Ruti, 2015).

Many of these tensions can be seen to revolve around the continual inflation of expectations fuelled by a society that fails to provide the conditions through which they could be fulfilled. Global uncertainties are created and exacerbated by international terrorism, religious fundamentalism, nationalist protectionism and the revival of political extremism not seen since the 1930s. This was reflected, for example, in the UK's vote to exit the European Union, demands for Scottish independence, the success of the maverick Donald Trump in the US Presidential race, the autocracy in Putin's Russia and Communist Asia and the rise of neo-fascist political parties across much of Europe.

In circumstances also where neo-liberal<sup>ii</sup> demands for productive performance invoke considerable anxiety, the question in our title about whether we are all living on the edge provides provocative context for our focus on the problematics of anxiety and insecurity at work. One interpretation of the anxieties and insecurities that reflect and reproduce considerable tension can be traced to the proliferation and intensification of concerns or preoccupations that the modern subject has with realizing their potential or generating and sustaining a secure and stable identity (Costea et al., 2012; Ekman, 2013; Knights and Clarke, 2017). The response of politicians, the media, the cultural

industries, educational institutions, occupations and professions worldwide is often to reinforce the anxieties by intensifying the illusory expectations of individuals beyond any possibility of them being realized, except for a comparatively small minority.

Broadly the problematic of this article is the preoccupation with identity that arises from, but also fuels, anxieties and insecurities within the working practices of the professions and, to some extent, life more generally in the context of governmental relations of power and knowledge. Foucault sees governmentality as lying between sovereign power, where there is control over the conduct of others and domination through threats to physical existence, but its practices engage and stimulate ‘the freedom of the subject and its relationship to others’ (Foucault, 2000: 300). To illustrate our arguments we present some primary empirical data involving the culture and organization of professional work among academics in higher education and veterinary surgery. Our research question is ‘what tends to generate the anxieties and insecurities that prevail within these two professions?’ Rather than remaining just with localized matters of professional practice, we seek to broaden our analysis by linking these anxieties and insecurities also to governmental practices of managing populations through meritocratic myths of equal opportunity and the mantra of subjects realizing their human potential. This coincides with more specific neo-liberal values that encourage individual success, autonomy, control and strength, all regulated through “ruthless” mechanisms of judgement and performativity (Macdonald and Kam, 2007). The contribution of the article is to provide theoretically informed empirical analyses of identity and its management in conditions of anxiety and insecurity within academia and veterinary surgery. We anticipate that the analysis has implications for professions and everyday life more generally but this would require further research.

The article is organized as follows. The first section begins with a literature review of theories, discourses and practices focused on anxiety and insecurity. Secondly, we turn to our two professions and before providing a methodological framework for our empirical material, the historical and contemporary context of academics and veterinary surgeons is discussed. In the third section, we present some excerpts from our empirical research organized around three themes: anxieties related to the desire for perfection; uncertainty about one’s knowledge and expertise; and finally, commodification of the service or the erosion of professional autonomy as both masculine managerialism (audit and accountability) and market controls (competition and rankings) encroach upon practice. This then leads to a final section that provides a summary and discussion of the research and its implications for our understanding of the study of anxiety and insecurity in professional organization and society more generally.

## *Anxiety and insecurity at work*

The term ‘at work’ in our section heading suggests how our anxiety and insecurity work their way through all human activities and are therefore pervasive *beyond* the world of organized employment. As such, we examine quite a broad literature in this section to contextualise this research, although our main focus is to convey the prevalence of anxiety and insecurity in the workplace. Contemporary discourses on the topic tend to be dominated by psychological disciplines (Nolan, Wichert, and Burchell, 2000), for example in a review of the literature authored primarily by researchers from industrial relations (Sverke, Hellgren and Näswall, 2006), only a handful of their references are drawn from outside psychology and associated disciplines. Equally dominated by psychology is the literature on stress at work (Cooper et al., 2001) although a handbook on the subject does extend to chapters relating to culture, albeit still with a psychological orientation (Wong and Wong, 2006) and there is a limited literature on the health implications of insecurity at work, but again this is psychology based research (Nola et al., 2000; De Witte, 1999; Green 2011). An exception is to be found in a set of essays from a range of disciplines concerned to examine research on how employment flexibility strategies have subjected workforces in Britain to insecurity and exploitation (Heery and Salmon, 1999), as well as Newton’s work regarding the ways in which organizational responsibilities are deflected on to the individual through the discourse of ‘stress’ (Newton, 1995). These issues have recently been exacerbated through the rise of the zero hours contract, a way of normalising ‘all but the most extreme forms of abusive employment arrangements’ (Adams, Freedland, & Prassl, 2015).

Literatures on anxiety have a considerable history extending from psychoanalysis (Freud, 1930; Lacan, 1980)<sup>iii</sup>, to a more philosophical and sociological interest in this topic that can be traced to existentialism (Sartre, 1943/1996), where anxiety and insecurity are related to the amorphous, overflowing and uncontrollable nature of existence and the overwhelming, yet unrealizable, desire for a stable and secure identity. Grounded in subject-object separation ontology that is fundamental to both self-consciousness and human freedom, Sartre describes how anxiety can be wholly debilitating (Ashman and Gibson, 2010: 130) because it leaves us devoid of any guidance regarding our actions and responsibilities. Such debilitation, generated by anxiety that stems from the preoccupation with an identity that can never be secured (Watts, 1951), reflects and reinforces the misrecognition of self as an entity separate from the world. This is challenged not only by philosophy (Heidegger, 1927/1978), psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1980; Laing, 1990) but also by the

physical (Barad, 2007) and social sciences (Grosz, 1994; Braidotti, 2011; Knights and Clarke, 2017).

Technologies of power in the form of Foucault's (1977) strategies of hierarchical observation, normalization and the examination constitute subjects in ways that can be productive to their own well being but also generate high levels of anxiety, uncertainty and insecurity. For surveillance is "liquid" (Bauman & Lyon, 2013) since it has no clear boundaries; consequently, subjects can rarely relax for surveillance is everywhere in an age where 'privacy is dead' (26) but this is partly because of a seductive desire for 'wilful and joyful self-exposure' (25)<sup>iv</sup>. The outcome is not only constant internal pressures of self-monitoring and self-disciplining, but also anxiety and insecurity regarding our failure to live up to the idealized images presented by others, especially on social media sites. Even then, subjects are never sure of meeting the correct standards and norms except through 'success' in processes of competition where, by definition, only a limited and exclusive number are winners, while the remainder have their fears realised and anxieties confirmed.

Of course, life can be seen in terms of endless searches for security in the form of social recognition and a respected identity even though a 'unified, completed secure and coherent identity is a fantasy' (Hall, 1992: 277). For 'multiple insecurities – existential, social, economic and psychological' (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009, 37) fill our lives insofar as we are always dependent on the judgements of uncontrollable and unpredictable others. Since identities are fragile and unstable (Knights & Willmott, 1989; 1999; Collinson, 2003), we clearly suffer the precariousness of identity almost everywhere – in leisure, sport and even in the comfort of our own homes where family breakups are a frequent occurrence. However, it is perhaps especially marked in the workplace where the threat of unemployment (or the uncertainty and ambiguity as to whether our income is sufficient for survival, especially for precariats on 'zero hours' contracts in the UK or similar casual work elsewhere), competition for scarce opportunities and positions, and organizational politics, can all have negative, as well as sometimes positive, impacts on health, wealth and wellbeing (Knights and Murray, 1994; Newton, 1995; Heery & Salmon, 1999).

Insecurity, then, tends to accompany issues of identity because we can never guarantee that others will confirm us in the sense we have of ourselves that we so desperately rely on for our orderly stability (Clough, 1992). This is because we can never foresee let alone regulate the judgements that others make of us and thus confirmation of the self remains perpetually uncertain (Becker, 1969). Such instability combined with the fragile sense we have of ourselves fuels our anxieties and insecurities because 'the desire for security and the feeling of insecurity are the same thing' (Watts,

1954, 71). Moreover, anxiety is only intensified by the demands of educational, family, governmental and media institutions that impose an imperative for everyone to realize their full human potential (Costea, Amiridis and Crump, 2012). Here there are performative, surveillance techniques operating but the vague and unbounded nature of this so-called human potential means that the only way to validate 'progress' is through conventional competitive achievement, reflecting and reinforcing the mantra of the "success ethic" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967) and its anxiety-provoking pressures.

Issues of social inequality are marginalised in this mantra by personalizing rather than socializing any discrepancy between seemingly limitless potential (Ekman, 2013) and what can realistically be realized. According to a variety of 'individualization' theses (Bauman, 2000; Beck and Beck-Gerswhyn, 2001; Giddens, 1991), the individual is compelled to find 'biographical solutions' to problems that are systemic, 'to search for the best means of creatively coping with the contradictions and tensions they encounter in their own lives' (Howard, 2012: 119). In other words, responsibility is thrown back on the individual so that any failure to realize one's own potential can only be blamed on the self (Sennett, 1998), the consequence of which, whether intended or unintended, is to reinforce, legitimize and institutionalize the status quo, and confirm those niggling feelings of never being quite good enough. This could be seen as the dark side of governmentality where while providing a sense of freedom to enact one's own practices, self-discipline sustains social control as a comparatively economic or low cost exercise in power-knowledge relations.

Yet whether voiced by politicians, business, or education, contemporary culture thrives on the myth of equal opportunity and institutions that claim to be meritocratic. However, the level of institutionalized social inequalities in which, alongside the US, the UK might readily claim world leadership, make this equal opportunity mantra an obstacle race for all except a privileged elite minority (Bourdieu, 1984; Walzer, 1984). Bear in mind that because by definition a race to the top involves few winners, no matter how ultimately mythical, there is every reason for those exercising power to support equal opportunity (Hayes, 2013). This is because it legitimizes the inequality it claims to be transforming, by the presumed replacement (or complement) of class privilege with merit as the basis for material and symbolic advantage. Meritocracy becomes a more difficult target for political opposition than the privileges secured through social class and property ownership but when combined, as Young's (1968) satire on its dangers anticipated, only outright revolution could threaten its hegemony.<sup>v</sup> This challenge to the ideology of meritocracy has clearly failed to materialise for indeed it has not only been transformed into 'a positive idea' (Allen, 2011: 67) but has also become institutionalized as the peak of 'progressive' politics in responding to

social inequality. Consequently, it is rarely understood as an anxiety-inducing governmental practice.

An overwhelming competition for, conquest over, and control of, scarce material and symbolic goods in the workplace reflects and yet quite clearly reproduces much anxiety and insecurity at work. Although there is a paucity of empirical evidence, it has been argued that the control strategies of management render work routinely a place of anxiety and insecurity (Nichols & Beynon, 1977; Collinson, 1992; Knights & Willmott, 1999) as well as reflecting and reproducing social inequalities, that may often seem legitimate to those in the lower reaches of the hierarchy (Sennett & Cobb, 1977). Yet another source of anxiety and insecurity in the workplace derives from work intensification and this has been studied in Britain through interdisciplinary empirical survey research (Burchell, Lapidó and Wilkinson, 2005). However, the phenomenon is not restricted to the disadvantaged, since competition and careerism within management and the professions interpellates individuals to join the illusory game, which for the vast majority also generates substantial anxiety and insecurity (Dalton, 1959; Jackall, 1988; Knights and Murray, 1994; Ogbonna and Harris, 1994; Knights and Clarke, 2014; Clarke and Knights, 2015).

#### *Anxiety and Insecurity among Academics and Vets*

We turn now to a brief review of the anxiety and insecurity literature regarding the two professions in which we have conducted primary empirical research. Whereas in the past, the professions enjoyed autonomy and status, today they are as much subjected to being managed as managing and as subordinate to market forces as any occupation (Dent and Whitehead, 2002). This is to be found among academics where managerialism has proliferated (Deem, Hillyard & Reed, 2007) and within the veterinary profession that has become increasingly subjected to market competition (Williams and Jordan, 2015). Empirical research on academics is very limited (Ogbonna and Harris, 2004) for ‘there has been a marked reluctance to turn our gaze upon our own working conditions, practices and relations’ (Gill, 2014: 12)<sup>vi</sup>. However, there has been growing evidence of problems of anxiety and insecurity among staff in universities. These are often linked to the intensification of work and masculine managerial expectations about quality in publishing, teaching and administration (Clarke and Knights, 2015) and, as practicing academics, we have an inside autoethnographic view of the profession. In the case of vets, we have drawn on the evidence from within the profession of mental health difficulties, suicide and the incidence of depression (Bartram and Baldwin, 2010), although the research in this area tends to be largely descriptive drawing either on statistical

evidence or survey research from within the profession itself, thus grasping ‘the material of these practices, but not their *form*’ (de Certeau, 1985: xviii).

Studies of anxiety and insecurity among academics arise mainly from the recording of autoethnographic experiences (Humphreys, 2005; Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012; Sparkes, 2007) or as an indirect result of studying something else such as work intensification (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004), performativity and evaluation (Keenoy, 2003; Macdonald and Kam, 2007; Clarke, Knights and Jarvis, 2012; Knights and Clarke, 2014; gender (Davies Lubelska and Quinn, 1994; Thomas and Davies, 2002; Acker and Armenti, 2004; Barry, Berg & Chandler, 2006; Leathwood and Read, 2009; Tillmann, 2011; Savigny, 2014), or resistance (Worthington & Hodgson, 2005). More direct reflections on anxiety and insecurity are provided by Gabriel (2010) who argues that academic reviews, ‘create intense anxieties in authors, some of whom are left with deep scars’, the implications of which are neither fully acknowledged or understood (765). Reflecting on their own experience as academics, Harding, Ford, & Gough (2010) state that ‘for the many of us who feel we fail to live up to’ ... an ... ‘idealized norm’ [of the perfect four starred academic], ‘our place is that of the abject, the insecure, and the peripheral’ (165). The anxieties of meeting the demands of quality in research, publishing, teaching and administration and the intensification of judgments from an array of managers, editors, reviewers, peer groups and students in pursuing an academic career are extensively recorded (Knights and Clarke, 2014; Clarke and Knights, 2015).

The literature also comments on how ‘universities have become sites of contested identity, where, for example, research professors and the “research-active” become the other, in relation to whom the less research-active defend their previously constituted selves in terms of now devalued criteria’ (Harley, 2002, 203), as the new-found second class citizen, or poor relation. Close and constant scrutiny and judgment, competition and preoccupation with winning ‘in a game of academic prestige’ (Adler & Harzing, 2009, 74) expose academics ‘to deep insecurities regarding their worth, their identity and their standing’ (Gabriel, 2010, 769). This constant gaze has aroused ‘all manner of high emotions, anxieties, defences, denials, deceptions, and self-deceptions, rivalries, insecurities, threats, vulnerabilities, [and] intimacies’ (Hearn, 2008, 190).

In sum, it would seem that much of the increase in anxiety and insecurity within academia has been stimulated and sustained by the dramatic growth of masculine managerial strategies of audit, accountability, performativity and productivity with their associated linear logic of metrics and measurements, competitive rankings and targets of every aspect (i.e. administration, research, publishing and teaching) of an academic’s working life (Sparkes, 2007; 2013; Knights and Clarke,



2014). These managerial controls have in addition been intensified through market mechanisms whereby the switch from government grants to fees have transformed students into consumers who in ‘paying the piper’ increasingly demand to ‘call the tune’ (Nordensvärd, 2011).

Equally vets have found themselves subjected to increased consumer/ client power as competition and consumerist values have proliferated but as yet, have suffered less from the encroachment of managerialism than academics. Also, our evidence for vet anxiety and insecurity is supported more strongly by the considerable survey literature. This gives substantial evidence of alcohol and drug abuse, depression and high incidences of suicide. In most published data, after medics and dentists, vets are listed as the third most likely to commit suicide<sup>vii</sup> and this is confirmed and reinforced by studies within the profession that focus on their poor mental health (e.g. Bartram, Yadegarfar, & Baldwin, 2009). In an attempt to explain the high suicide rate among vets, Bartram and Baldwin (2010) point to a number of factors such as stress of the job, accessibility to means of committing suicide, professional isolation, drugs misuse, and even suicide contagion that may interact to render vets vulnerable to suicide. Other research has similarly identified work pressure stress and isolation but also unsocial hours and perhaps most importantly, the incongruities between vets’ experiences of academic success and achievement in their educational progress and the precariousness of everyday practice in which scientific certainty is the exception rather than the rule (Clarke and Knights, 2015a).

Indeed, the question of whether students at veterinary school are realistically prepared for ‘a career in practice’ has been explored (Tomlin, Brodbelt and May, 2010), and the main concerns reported were making mistakes and work-life balance (ibid.). These fears are not without foundation for 78% of new graduates admitted that inexperience, time pressures and lack of supervision contributed to them making ‘iatrogenic’<sup>viii</sup> mistakes in their first year of practice, and some vets then ‘suffered a loss of confidence, felt stressed, felt guilty or upset...and questioned whether they should continue to work as a veterinarian’ (Mellanby and Herrtage 2004, 762). Also, the ambiguous nature of veterinary practice has been the focus of other studies in order to explore stress associated with facing ethical dilemmas, from both quantitative and qualitative perspective Batchelor and McKeegan, 2012; Batchelor, Creed and McKeegan, 2015). One significant study illustrated how the UK ‘formal code’ of ethics transferred and abdicated responsibility for these issues over to the individual veterinary surgeons who were then expected to ‘take steps to protect their own physical and mental health’ (Magalhães-Sant’Ana, et al. 2015: 5).

Our own fieldwork tends to confirm these findings, although we seek to understand them theoretically as well as in terms of their practical consequences. Theoretically we consider the anxieties of both academics and vets to reflect and reproduce the precariousness of identity (Pullen, 2007; Ashman and Gibson, 2010) which they seek to resolve through, albeit often self-defeating, strategies of aspiring to perfection in the enactment of their various practices. Acknowledging the importance of quantitative surveys to establish the parameters of possible problems within the profession, mere statistical evidence is unable to unravel what might be the complex conditions and consequences of the anxieties and insecurities surrounding veterinary work.

### **Framework and Methods of Research**

Like most professions, academics and vets suffer insecurity and doubt because of the problems of meeting increased expectations, and near impossible demands, of those for whom they provide a service. So in many ways, our analysis of these two professions is aimed at drawing attention to a problem that extends well beyond our focus<sup>ix</sup>. In order to understand this condition, it would seem necessary to go beyond conventional research, which tends to replicate, rather than challenge, the masculine linear-rational model often subscribed to by professions seeking to claim an exclusive expertise that defines the relationship between themselves and those (i.e. clients, students or patients) who are the recipients of their services (Johnson, 1977).

We seek thereby to develop a methodological stance that is consistent with a post-positivist epistemology (Douglas, 1970; Braidotti, 2011), and is concerned to expose the myth of objectivity by acknowledging the deeply interpretive mediation when researchers construct reality. We therefore try to avoid presenting data in a detached and formalistic manner, as if they are independent of the researcher's experience or ethical concerns (Knights, 2015). This involves some scepticism of the humanistic faith in the rational researcher who can disregard the self in the search for "enlightened truth" where scientific knowledge is presumed to be a 'mirror image of the objects' it studies (Mol, 2002: 152). By contrast, we see ourselves as researchers who are entangled in a range of practices that are co-constituted in our mutual enactments with our research participants (Mol, 2002) and rather than conceal this behind abstract claims of representation, we believe that rigour resides in their disclosure. For, in our view, it is important to allow the reader to see what is driving the selection and analysis of research materials (Knights and Clarke, 2017).

In the studies we adopted an interpretive research design with a strong ethnographic flavour where, in addition to interviewing, we were either observer participants (Wacquant, 2015) in academia or

non-participant observers (Denzin, 2009) in veterinary practices. We also conducted a substantial interview programme in both professions: within academia 52 interviews with lecturers, readers and professors took place within 8 different UK business schools and within veterinary practices, 75 interviews stratified to ensure representation of three types of vets: Small Animal (household pets) Large Animals (farm stock) and Equine (horses owned for leisure or sport), as well as junior vets through to partners/ directors<sup>x</sup>. Participants in academia were split 60:40 in terms of males and females respectively, and their ages ranged from 29 through to 68 and within the vet practices, there was a more even balance of 39 males and 36 females but with a similar age range from 25 to 63.

These interviews were semi-structured and an attempt to understand how academics and vets experience their working lives by talking generally about their affinities with the profession and themselves.<sup>xi</sup> In our attempts to research thoughtfully we ensured that participants were content to talk about the subject, understood the nature of our research and were assured about their anonymity. Given our own membership of the academic community, this concealment was even more pertinent, but in any case this is always essential in research because any open and ‘candid’ conversation demands a great deal of trust between researcher and participant (Fineman, 2001), to minimise ‘responses [that] are purposefully guarded and limited in terms of providing any meaningful data’ (Clarke and Knights, 2014, 44).

Given the size of our 2 data sets of interview material, we did use NVIVO™ software to assist in the analysis, but we also interrogated manually the interviews and our observations to tease out the themes through which we have organized and presented our empirical materials. This was not to generate pseudo-scientific legitimacy for our data, but rather to enable us in examining as much of it as possible. Because of being practicing academics, it was impossible not to be aware of the anxieties and insecurities surrounding the work but we sought explicitly to avoid asking leading questions rather than just encouraging our participants to talk about matters of concern. This was also the case with vets because of the widespread knowledge of the prevalence of mental instability, substance abuse and suicide but again we did not ask direct questions relating to such issues. However, in writing this article we searched our data for instances of our participants’ reflections of such problems.

### **Academics and Veterinary Surgeons: Empirical Findings**

While aiming to be of interest to students of the professions in general, as well as relating to issues beyond the workplace, the empirical focus of this article is primarily that of examining

contemporary anxiety and insecurity in the working lives of academics and vets. A prevalent condition and consequence of anxiety in the professions and society more generally, and now illustrated through our empirical research, is the contemporary preoccupation with, yet precariousness of, identity (Brown, 2015, Knights and Clarke, 2017). Although this takes many forms, at the extremes it can be reflected in self-doubt and perhaps even a sense of paranoia about living up to idealised conceptions of competence and perfectability that are intensified by various social expectations but are unrealisable and often debilitating (Knights and Clarke, 2014, and here we present our data under the heading of *Perfection at Work?* Self-doubt does not only derive from failing to realize illusory goals of perfection but also from feelings of deficiency with respect to the knowledge and skills that are required in performing academic and veterinary work, and this constitutes our second theme of *Knowledge and Performativity at Work?* A third analytical theme concerns the sense in which professional autonomy is being eroded as the labour of both academics and vets is commodified, and they are transformed into being service providers, where students and clients are the main arbiters of their value, hence the subtitle: *Commodification at Work?* The question marks are included to prevent a closure around these 3 themes and thus allow for further debate and discussion and it does need to be acknowledged that it is a little artificial to categorise our research material in this way for, as with all boundaries, they merge, overlap and violate the unique lives of our participants in many ways for description inevitably involves some ‘violation’ (Aasland, 2009: 36).

### *Perfection at work?*

We have found both academics and vets to be driven by idealised vocational conceptions of identity or what is interpreted as being a good scholarly, ‘proper’ academic or a competent veterinary practitioner. For academics, this means producing the perfect theory, publication or lecture<sup>xii</sup> and for vets, administering the ideal cure for a sick animal, the perfect consultation or impeccable service to the client. As our academic respondents expressed it,

we know we have to be perfect (Reader)

there’s an element of feeling I’ve never really got to being an academic; you-know, like the real academics (Senior Lecturer)

The vet profession attracts people who are perfectionists, perhaps a bit obsessive, none of which are necessarily healthy characteristics (Pet vet, 7yrs).

We view ourselves as high achievers ... I think we like to be right, don't we? I don't like being wrong...when it doesn't go well, you see it as, yes, a mini failure, don't you? (Equine vet, 19yrs)

As can be seen from these quotes indicating self-doubt, the education and training to be a vet tends to privilege order, certainty and predictability that can fuel this preoccupation with perfection. Much of this doubt, however, is predicated on essentialist notions of the self, as well as highly individualistic concerns relating to the 'narcissistic pleasure of "competence and accomplishment"' (Roberts, 2005, 624),

A unique group of people. They're all a bit odd ... Most of them have some kind of self-esteem complex or self-confidence (Lecturer).

Not surprisingly then, this constant concern for flawlessness is very much turned in on the self, rendering academics and vets responsible for their own lack of perfection/success, which then becomes even more anxiety provoking,

being a vet, seeking perfection ... you see that with many vets, that they had a parent that, or parents that kept pushing them, effectively saying "you're not good enough" (Farm partner, 26 yrs)

there's a lot of that anxiety and I think we could do a lot more to support people through ... just changing the ... definition of "what is it to be an academic?" (Professor)

It is quite a pervasive and sinister force that operates upon the identities of academics as they (we) seek to realise an idealised image of self-perfection in research, publishing and teaching, even though in relation to research and publishing, the competition determines that only a minority can fulfill all the demands (Macdonald & Kam, 2007). In relation to vets, the sense of blaming the self is a particularly prevalent way of expressing serious anxiety and insecurity around the pursuit of perfection, in the form of getting things 'right',

you just don't want things to go wrong. And when they do you're still hard on yourself (Pet Vet, 6 years)

what bugs me is if I do something wrong and it goes wrong or if it's an area of my knowledge that I feel that I should have known. So if I miss a diagnosis and then I think – "I've been so stupid it was obvious, with hindsight" (Equine Partner, 27 years)

Self-blame can also occur through internal monologues that despite years of practice continue sometimes to prevent vets from having a good night's sleep,

If I'm not sleeping very well I'll wake up and maybe think "I didn't do that" or "I wonder how that op is?" and you play things like "did I miss something?" or "could somebody else have picked up on something I have missed or done a better job at that time?" (Pet vet, 20 years qualified)

Such disclosures were pervasive, with the following quote being representative of many of the responses in our research,

things like animals that die and "could I have done something different? Was it my fault? Or, is someone going to blame me for that, although I've done everything I can". (Farm vet, 18yrs)

This concern for perfection could be linked to usually getting things right in education and especially in examinations, for entry into both professions is contingent on a history of high levels of academic success, where

middle class girls [have] got all their A levels and they've got everything. They have fantastic CV's (Equine vet, 24 yrs.)

and academics who identify problems

as personal failings, rather than perhaps it being the institution (Lecturer)

For vets, there is also the tendency for their training to have been heavily based on natural science paradigms of causality, predictability and certainty,

undergraduate learning is black and white. It's this and that. Come out to the real world and then it's just grey and ... then you struggle with things ... you realize that it never really was black and white. It's just it was easier to digest if it was presented in that way, but it's a form of stress I think (Pet vet, 16yrs).

Gawande (2010) describes medicine as what takes place when the complexities of people's lives have to be treated with practices based on simple prescriptions derived from science and yet this

realization of uncertainty and unpredictability does not at all diminish medics' desire and aspiration for perfection, nor those of our vet participants

it's very frustrating the amount of uncertainty that we've got, and it would be nice to be *more right*  
(Equine vet, 8 years)

But there is always the potential that 'perfection can turn tragic' (Hyde, 2010, 6) and this desire to enact flawlessly was articulated in such a way that, at the very least, it provided a trace to an increased propensity for suicide,

we're passionate people, and when you can't do the job perfectly, it does really get you down. So I can understand why people might commit suicide (Pet vet, 9 years).

This preoccupation with perfection as an attempt to secure one's identity is of course self-defeating because 'the more you strive for some kind of perfection...the more you see that you are playing a rarefied and lofty form of the old ego-game' (Watts, 1966). Indeed, Watts describes this desire to attain security and feeling anxious as being synonymous, for it is in the very pursuit of a secure identity that anxiety about not achieving it is most intense and thereby effectively self-defeating (Knights and Willmott, 1999). While it cannot easily be isolated from issues of knowledge and expertise, in both professions perfection is 'a state of being that is both a benefit and a burden' but its hegemonic grip needs to be interrogated in the sense that anything 'less than perfection is [readily seen as] pathology' (Hyde, 2010, 4). Despite this, there is a relentless requirement for both vets and academics to ensure that a persuasive and competent performance takes place, and this is the focus of our next section.

### *Knowledge and performativity at work?*

Through their students and clients respectively, both academics and vets find their identities exposed and vulnerable as they are subjected to a high degree of judgement and assessment via a variety of media, such that they are constantly under the gaze and evaluation of the 'other'. This governmental form of power and knowledge results in professional freedom being directed toward constant subjective self-discipline and surveillance (Foucault, 1977). For example, beyond face to face complaints, there are virtual channels such as social networking sites where feedback is neither controlled or modified, and websites specifically devoted to 'naming and shaming' poor 'service' that often have little to do with the specific criteria they purport to be rating. The website 'rate your

lecturer', a kind of *trip advisor* for students about academics, has the following hashtags “#studentpower, #teachingfirst, #opinionsmatter”. However, the type of feedback provided is often about aesthetics or unrelated, but apparently “relevant”, subject matter,

“Cons: Jokes!! Coffee making skills, poor taste women (sic), poor taste in music, bad taste in shirt[s]”  
(taken from [www.rateyourlecturer.com](http://www.rateyourlecturer.com))

So the rating becomes less about the content of the *lecture* and more of a judgement on the physical characteristics of the *lecturer*, so a shift from doing the lecture to the person *who is seen doing it*, (Ekman, 2013), or any other performative aspects that students may or may not appreciate

I mean some of the unflattering comments that I got early on was ‘he looked like NikNak from The Man with the Golden Gun’, remember the kind of dwarf in the Bond movies? So obviously alluding to my size (Professor)

In a more explicit way the website [www.ratemyprofessor.com](http://www.ratemyprofessor.com) incorporates the body of the lecturer through the criterion ‘hotness’, which clearly sexualises the lecturer, in ways that vets are not immune to either,

you’re encouraged to speak to your clients at all times. And as long as you’re a young, male vet, that’s why you wouldn’t wear your wedding ring (Equine vet, 6 yrs)

On matters of aesthetics, competence, and knowledge, the visibility and frequency of different forms of monitoring and ratings render both professions constantly preoccupied with, and anxious about their own performance,

Gossip in the farrier shop, Facebook, but much more, just gossip, rumour and innuendo would be fairly standard. The odd comment on Facebook “so and so screwed this up” or “that practice is crap they got my bill wrong again”, or whatever (Equine vet, 19yrs)<sup>xiii</sup>

Some of my tutor colleagues have had instances where they kind-of got extremely stressed, even to the point of, you-know, almost medically problematic stress because of the way certain students engaged with feedback [sheets]...the comments can be very personal and...it does hurt individuals, particularly if they’re very personal comments. (Professor)



Skill in communicating, or translating knowledge into practical achievements is both central and problematic to the work of academics and vets, but in an environment where rejection is always a possibility, or even a probability,

I had been told by another client I wasn't the right vet to be looking at their animal, and the reason why it was not getting better was because of that (Equine vet, 7yrs)

if it happens to you it could really affect you... You're always doubting yourself and you don't want anyone else to do it for you (Equine vet, 3 yrs).

Academics feel anxious and vulnerable because of their visibility in situations where their knowledge and performative competence is continuously judged, by students, peers, editors, reviewers, audit agencies and line management. As such their (our) identities as competent academics are continually threatened with rejections by journals, reviewers, colleagues and of course students,

It's quite daunting, whatever level you're at, the fear of rejection ...it requires a great amount of resolve' (Professor)

'the fear of failure can be difficult...your confidence can become very fragile' (Professor)

Similarly, visibility was said to be a real problem for vets, particularly those who were ambulatory,

An equine vet as opposed to being a small animal vet, is on display all the time, everything you do is usually in front of the owner. One occasion on a livery yard, I decided I would put it to sleep, because it was so dangerous, and then you've got conflicting opinions with people in the yard, saying, "oh, you shouldn't have put that to sleep" (Equine vet, 8 yrs)

The vets we researched have many 'masters' to satisfy, with the former comprising clients, patients, practice partners and the Royal College (i.e the professional regulator) and yet perhaps they are their own harshest judge,

There's an emotional aspect to it - do you yourself have the knowledge and the capabilities to know what the problem is? That's the first problem and then B do you have the capability to deal with that problem once you know what it is? (Farm vet, 4 yrs)

UK academics also have many masters to satisfy, and associated with this there are multiple tasks that must be accomplished, for example to

teach students, engage with students, have assessment strategies, feedback strategies, supervise MScs, PhDs, mentor people, mentor other members of staff, research, write research bids, write research papers, present at conferences, publish in high quality journals, administration and all aspects of pastoral care. I mean it's just never-ending but is it realistic? (Lecturer).

These imperatives are translated into 'continual self-surveillance' (Kuhn, 2009: 686), adding to the anxiety and feelings that

you have to be excellent at everything...you need to be fucking amazing (Senior lecturer)

Anxieties about performance among vets are often related to the problems of confidence due to limited experience, mistakes, and issues that are exacerbated by age and/or gender,

when you're a relatively new graduate, your confidence is a little bit teetering on the edge, so if somebody else doesn't have confidence in you, instead of thinking "well actually, they're wrong, I'm fine", you think, "I'm obviously rubbish". (Pet vet, 14 years)

As a new grad some people say "I'm three times your age", or "I've owned horses for 40 years" basically saying, in a way that means, and you're not even 40 years kind of thing. (Equine vet, 4 years)

In academia, while a great deal of anxiety is generated by the demand for competence in writing and publishing, there is also teaching, which is hardly free of similar pressures and stress associated with performing<sup>xiv</sup>

"When I'm teaching the anxiety just gets into me because the teaching is so anxiety provoking, it's really immediate" (Reader)

Academics often extend their feelings of responsibility when students 'mess up', such that doubts as to their own performance and competence can start to creep in,

we had quite a lot of people fail their first bit of work, and it's not necessarily "have we done something wrong?" although there's always that anxiety there (Senior lecturer)

You know, it's a little bit like your PhD student fails her PhD, you know, "how could you allow her to submit the thesis if you, as the supervisor, knew that it was not good enough?" (Professor)

There is also a strong tendency to internalize students' anxieties, which are often projected onto academics,

you take on their anxieties, their hopes and their aspirations and really trying to split those and work out what's you and what's them ... I think it is a really anxious thing in what is, essentially, an anxiety-provoking, isolating role (Senior lecturer)

In a similar way vets also tended to do this where clients had particular anxieties or emotions,

we had to put him down, and I knew it was the right thing to do with him, I knew I couldn't do anything. He's weeping, a grown man weeping "I don't have anything else, I don't have any children, I don't have any family, this is it. Are you sure there's nothing else you can do?" I ended up crying as well, which I genuinely don't normally do. (Equine vet, 14 yrs)

Perhaps because any kind of 'failure is the great modern taboo' (Sennett, 1998, 118) client/student demands, criticisms, complaints and anxiety about performance are all experienced as problematic for identity by academics and vets alike. Part of the reason for this is that both professions (as many others) are suffering the effects of deprofessionalization as a result of masculine managerialist audits and rankings as well as market forces determining their activities and relationships with students and clients. We turn now therefore to examine these processes of commodification at work.

### *Service as a Commodified Provision?*

Bauman and Donskis argue that because 'we are all commodities' then 'we are obliged to create demand for ourselves' (2013, 27), so 'failed' or unpersuasive performances' may compromise our

ability to be effective in practice, or even undermine our confidence as to whether we are competent enough to continue with our veterinary professional endeavours (Mellanby and Herrtage, 2004).

In a similar vein, within universities there has been an explosion of monitoring controls including, competitive league tables, targets, accountability, teaching quality assessments and other mechanisms of audit, that seem fundamental accoutrements for managerialist agendas (Willmott & Mingers, 2012; Knights and Clarke, 2014), and which appear to endorse a linear-rational, performative and instrumental efficiency. In a survey, nearly half the Higher Education (HE) respondents reported that their general or average level of stress was high or very high. Nearly one third of HE respondents claimed to have very often experienced levels of stress they found unacceptable, and 5% felt they were permanently suffering stress (Court and Kinman, 2008: 3)

There's massive amounts of stress because from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to bed you always feel like you should be working; there's always things to do (Lecturer)

Synergies are found again within the veterinary profession with 90% of vets reporting that their work is stressful, especially in relation to clients, but also being constituted as a service provider (RCVS survey, 2014). We had similar reports of stress,

think the stress, just the emotional stress and not enough support (Pet vet, 9yrs)

some of them leave quickly, just the stress of it and it doesn't live up to what they thought (Farm vet, 13 years)

Also, many complained about commercialization,

I think that's something, possibly in common with a lot of other professions, it's becoming less respected, and I think that's got a lot to do with the commercialisation of the profession as well. I do think people sometimes think you're just out to make money from them (Farm vet, 8 yrs)

Lots of companies are making lots of money off supplement sales. "You guys as vets could have a huge commercial influence, because who better to tell you that something works better than your own vet?" And that sat with me, and it still sits with me, very uncomfortably, because I don't want to be known as a salesman. I'd rather be known as a vet (Equine vet)

In academia an additional imperative to meet student demands has been brought to bear on academics from the change in tuition fees and the so-called student-as-consumer relationship. This, arguably, has also exacerbated a transformation from ‘revered expert’ to service provider,

‘in Finland...they still regard the university professor as high status so ... you feel different about yourself... When you come back to England the reality checks in, you’re just a service provider’  
(Professor)

I think the students are now becoming seen as clients, as consumers, and that definitely changes the relationship. If the student has a problem you need to drop everything if at all possible (Lecturer)

These changes are also reshaping notions of academic freedom in terms of teaching content, if not explicitly then certainly implicitly, and yet the pressures to ‘please’ or at least ‘satisfy’ arises not only from students, but also from management who anticipate how negative feedback might affect their league table positions and then ultimately, student recruitment,

This is my impression. It’s not people saying “You can’t do that?”. It’s people saying “OK now, you have to be very careful... I don’t know if people have to report complaint stats or what, but it’s those kinds of things, and so that relationship really does change. I’m not really sure where these lines are coming from so now I just have to watch out and I know that if I say certain things that I’m running the risk of there being a complaint (Lecturer)

While masculine managerialism can generate tensions for the academic through mechanisms of control such as the Research (R.E.F.) and Teaching (T.E.F.) Excellence Frameworks<sup>xv</sup>, generally there is considerable consent, or at least compliance, to the norms of productivity and ranking. Not all of these anxieties, tensions and insecurities are a direct consequence of competitive ranking in academia because although constantly complaining about, and feeling pressured by the intensification of managerial control (Knights and Clarke, 2014), they (we) similarly collaborate in their legitimation through perceiving them as some kind of “objective” index of scholarly knowledge and skilful competence. This illusory perfect identity then becomes something that we all chase (Clarke and Knights, 2015).

By contrast, managerialist strategies within the veterinary profession have been slow to develop partly because until the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) prevented ownership or management of a vet practice to anyone without vet qualifications. Once

this rule was relaxed, corporate (PLCs) chains of vets entered the market and are expected to secure a 50% market share in the very near future (RCVS, 2014). Consequently, many of the independent vets we interviewed felt threatened and insecure by the prospect of the profession becoming overwhelmed by this new business model as is evident here,

competition is what scares me the most. We've got all these corporates trying to buy up the world. (Pet vet, 28 yrs)

they're buying and buying more businesses and it's all under one name. . . It's like a plague now. (Pet vet, 11 years)

In addition to being likened to a disease spreading, corporates were also portrayed as seductive; luring clients in, for example by loss leading offers and then charging excessively for further service. Once a client is captured, many corporates seek to maximise returns,

The company insists on a strategy of low volume high value so they insist that we try and do as much treatment on each visit to maximise the return. I am leaving because I have been in conflict with my boss, particularly about this. (Pet vet, 25 years)

These transformations are likely to result in the introduction to the profession of similar managerial strategies to those in academia of audit, accountability, competitive ranking and the use of metrics and measurements of performance, profitability and productivity as corporates seek to maximize returns on capital. Already managerialism is prevalent in the new corporate practices, but this will affect the independent practices because they will be forced to subscribe to these hegemonic market principles in order to compete for their diminishing share of the market. The competition is seen as increasingly tough, even between independents where corporates are not necessarily present, and where there is an increasing pressure to please, or lose the business,

There's a degree of loyalty but not a lot. I think clients are quite promiscuous. In one equine survey they reckon 30% of clients would use one or more vets (Equine vet, 14yrs)

they're just horrendously demanding. They expect you to bend over backwards and break both your legs and arms just to do what they want you to do, whether or not it's the right thing (Pet vet, 30yrs)

In summary, both professions have suffered an erosion of their autonomy and social respect as they have been subjected to a mixture of managerialist and market controls and differing pressures from those who pay for their services. Sometimes this undermines their integrity as they have to ‘bend over backwards’ to please their clients or students but it invariably threatens their identity. While even vets working for corporates are not yet experiencing the same level of managerial audits as academia, the reduction in their professional autonomy and expertise as a result of commodification and competition means the pressure is equally as intense as in universities. The identities of both professions are challenged as they experience increasing anxiety and insecurity emanating from the intensification of work and the proliferation of audits in their respective organizations.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

We have primarily been concerned to document the identity anxieties and insecurities among academics and vets with whom we have participated in research and link these to 3 different themes, relating to concerns with perfection, a lack of confidence regarding their own knowledge and competence, and an erosion of professional autonomy that arises from the commodification and intensification of their work as their expertise is increasingly reduced to merely providing a service. While acknowledging that by definition identity can never be secured because it is contingent on the unpredictable and uncontrollable approval of significant others (Knights and Clarke, 2017), constant and continuous threats to its stability are debilitating for individuals. Of course, there are some differences between the two professions for academics do not suffer the same comparatively high suicide rates as vets but there is considerable evidence that academics and especially women with children are anxious and stressed – having to ‘work harder and sleep less’ in order to keep pace with the intensification of work (Acker and Armenti, 2004: 3) and that mental illness is a serious problem (Shaw and Ward, 2014)<sup>xvi</sup>.

By way of summarizing the contribution of our empirical research, we have drawn out three different understandings of the construction and reproduction of anxiety among academics and veterinary surgeons. First, they both experience a rigorous and lengthy training in which they have to pass through a number of performance hoops involving examinations and assessments from their teachers. In many ways they internalize the anxieties of high achievement during this period. However, at the end of all this, high level qualifications neither guarantee them a job or an easy rite of passage into practicing their profession, so anxiety remains.

Second, practicing their profession is not the same as acquiring the necessary education and skills to do so. Vets experience some shell shock when seeking to put their knowledge into practice not least because clients and especially farmers are sceptical of their lack of experience, but also they find that interpersonal skills seem to trump their clinical knowledge. Their high achievement mentality also runs up against the precariousness and instability of servicing clients. Students (and parents) routinely judge academics and not just on supervision and teaching competence but also on a range of qualities, such as sexual appeal, that are wholly extraneous to their work. For example, they are subjected to a research and publication competitive regime that by definition can only give identity recognition to a minority and even then only precariously and they are expected to secure research funding as well as fulfil administrative and management responsibilities alongside these other onerous duties.

Third and finally, there are socio-political transformations relating contemporary neo-liberal regimes that seek to extend market competition to every corner and crevice of our society in the form of managerialist strategies of control. Moreover, these controls also involve individual academics and veterinary surgeons feeling responsible for solving problems that are not of their own making, and go well beyond the remit of the profession – a phenomenon that Bauman terms ‘liquid modernity’ (2000). This thrives on and reinforces the employee anxieties that we have found prominent in academia and have been well documented elsewhere (Thomas and Davies, 2002; Sparkes, 2007; Knights and Clarke, 2014) and are beginning to enter the veterinary profession as corporates gain a pre-eminent foothold (Henry and Treanor, 2012). While our empirical focus has been quite narrow, it emphasises how within neo-liberal governmental regimes, identity has become a resource for managers to invoke self-discipline among their employees and this extends well beyond the two discrete professions examined here. All in all, these anxieties prevalent throughout both professions are internalized by practitioners and have the effect of dividing individuals off from one another as they cannot escape the feelings of not only being in competition with their own colleagues but also with themselves.

Experiences of discrepancies between a history of high achievement and the problems of practice, the perpetual judgements, and the surveillance that reflect extensions in management control result in a threat to professional autonomy and identity. This threat is anxiety provoking in and of itself although the anxiety is then self-fulfilling as it renders practitioners unsure of their competence and confidence in enacting the responsibilities of their profession. Identity is then highly vulnerable by virtue of the feelings of self-doubt and the sense of never being quite good enough. As intimated, our research has implications for professions in general and perhaps more importantly, for the wider



society both nationally and globally. For example, not only are suicide rates comparatively high among vets but they are even higher within medicine and dentistry and almost as high in pharmacy (see Note iii) and there are autobiographical texts to support the arguments about anxiety and stress in medicine (Gawande, 2014; Marsh, 2014). Moreover, mental health, alcohol and drug abuse are significant problems related to suicide in the general population of Western cultures and especially among the young (Galif et al., 2007).

With respect to the professions it is significant that those with the highest rates of suicide have ready access to lethal drugs but this difference does not explain the high levels of depression, alcoholism and drug abuse. Within academia it seems that only scientists figure in the top 20 of suicide rates, but research reveals high levels of anxiety and insecurity within the profession. Perhaps it is no coincidence that all of these occupations have experienced some de-professionalization and loss of autonomy as well as increasing managerial controls of assessment, audit and accountability as a result of being subjected to market forces.

However, the intensification of competition in academic and veterinary practice is reinforcing the degree of de-professionalization, for both are forced to provide a commodified service that satisfies their consumer students or clients. Of course, while the consumer is sacrosanct, relations are mediated through a wide range of controls, demands and expectations that are then adopted by practitioners in a self-disciplining and self-regulatory fashion. This is the case perhaps regardless of who the master is – for academics there are many masters – the managerialist layer of the university, accrediting agencies, teaching quality councils, students as consumers pressing for attention and also as recipients of our teaching to whom we feel a responsibility, peers, research councils, reviewers, editors, the teaching excellence body, and not least the research excellence panel. For vets it is the client/service provision in a competitive consumer environment, the practice/partners' demands for profit, and the animal-patient as the other for whom they are responsible, but also constrained, especially in terms of client wishes and matters of economics. While commercial rivalry has been increasing in general, it has become more intense as corporate practices have entered the market and have begun to 'squeeze profit margins' (Henry and Treanor, 2012:1), arguably further eroding professional autonomy as vets are reduced to providing a commodified service. So instead of knowledge and exercises of power defining the relationship between academics and consumers or vets and clients, in order to maximise returns, it is the power of competition and the purse that now does so.

Some of the anxiety and insecurity would seem to derive from high standards required in the preparation or training prior to entering these professions. Entry into dentistry, medical and veterinary schools demands the highest of grades at pre-university level and the professional courses within universities are demanding of the highest standards such that those meeting these requirements will have already experienced a long period of academic success. In some ways, the standards placed on prospective academics are even higher in that few can secure an appointment without a doctorate and often 1 or 2 publications, thus involving at the very minimum, 6 years of university education.

The experience of academic success is internalized and becomes an expectation closely aligned with one's professional identity, but post-education it is no longer given continual affirmation through exam success, and therefore tends to be displaced into a form of self-imposed and self-disciplinary demands for perfectionism in the job. So despite perfectionism being an illusory ideal (Watts, 1973), vets hate things going wrong and similarly academics are often reluctant to 'let go' of their manuscripts for fear of imperfections that are more often than not, exposed and criticised. Yet the pursuit of perfection is much broader in its genesis and impact than can be discerned from the examination of two professions for it is linked to broader social values about equal opportunity, meritocracy, self-development, and realizing human potential all of which serve to legitimize and reproduce social order. It also clearly has its roots in Christianity and Buddhism where perfection is exalted as the ultimate union with God or with an ego-free Nirvana (Gray, 2002; Hyde, 2010). The idea that everyone can be successful in realizing their own potential without the constraint of any particular discrimination or disadvantage, however, generates as much anxiety and insecurity as it seeks to mitigate. This is so because as Bauman notes, there can never be any resolution; 'a hundred years ago "to be modern" meant to chase "the final state of perfection" -- now it means an infinity of improvement, with no "final state" ' (2000, viii/ix).

In summary, it is our view that identity is inherently unstable and that much anxiety is produced through self-defeating attempts to stabilize it (Knights and Clarke, 2017). Of course, training for perfection, the experience of successful academic achievement and the commodification of professional services that undermine the autonomy upon which a dignified sense of self depends all exacerbate the anxieties and insecurities that surround the instability of identity.

One issue that we have not had space to discuss but would be worthy of future research is the relationship between professional practitioners and their managers. In both these professions, we observed numerous criticisms or scathing remarks about management, and this negativity is also

reflected in the autobiographical literature that we consulted within the medical profession. The usual complaints are that management disrupts or restrains good practice yet when, as is frequent in veterinary if less so in academic practice, a dearth of managerial action is experienced, there is equal condemnation. However, a frequent comment within professions more generally is that it is better to have no management than bad management although it is rare that the latter is absent unless it is because of the former. Consequently, management is damned if it intervenes and damned if it does not and this contradiction needs to be explored. One explanation may revolve around the concept of identity and the indignity of subordination where any denial of autonomy is seen as an affront to one's sense of self. However, identity is a poisoned chalice in that it is driven by insecurity that subjects seek to eradicate regardless of the impossibility of doing so. At one and the same time as demonizing management as a threat to autonomous identity, its intervention is glorified as a potential means of removing all the uncertainties and instabilities that are a source of insecurity, despite this being impossible, for 'the desire for security and the feeling of insecurity are the same thing' (Watts, 1954, 71).

Of course, management cannot fulfil these expectations so can only remain glorified as long as its potential is never tested; hence the belief that no management is better than bad management. The culture and organization of the professions leads practitioners to remain ambivalent, contradictory and at best tense in their relations with management, shifting continually between seeing them as the devil incarnate as well as the source of ultimate salvation. In effect, this 'dual face of management has been present since the beginning: power on one side, burden on the other' (Deslandes, 2016,18/19) and this might be seen as reflecting the conditions and consequences of our anxieties in 'living on the edge'.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> This is often described as identitarian politics but it is seen as a switch from economics to culture as a central framework for studying the social and political world of western society.

<sup>ii</sup> We acknowledge that neo-liberalism is more complex and multi-dimensioned than this representation (see Lerner, 2000: 21).

<sup>iii</sup> We avoid focusing on the psychoanalytic literature partly for reasons of space but also because it would deflect us from our interest in culture and organization.

<sup>iv</sup> The classic case of this is social media.

<sup>v</sup> Interestingly, Young was highly critical of Tony Blair's endorsement of his concept of meritocracy for the satirical arguments of the book had not been detected and the exercise is now being repeated in speeches by the new UK Prime Minister Theresa May.

<sup>vi</sup> There is a literature that is more about the universities than the academics within them (e.g. Readings, 1996; Collini, 2012; 2017).

<sup>vii</sup> Highest Suicide Rate by Profession, WWW.NEWHEALTHGUIDE.ORG © 2014, Last Updated 29 July, 2015 Consulted 12<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2016. In none of the suicide rate tables is there a category of academics in general although scientists are included and are reported to be 18<sup>th</sup> in the table and 1.28 times more likely to commit suicide than the average.

<sup>viii</sup> An iatrogenic mistake is one where there is any adverse condition in a patient resulting from the diagnosis, manner, or treatment provided by a physician or surgeon

<sup>ix</sup> Indeed there is statistical evidence of even higher rates of suicide and depression among medics and dentists than vets but also high rates among sales occupations. For all these and academics, the unrelenting performative demands on incumbents may be the link.

<sup>x</sup> Increasingly, the business structural model for veterinary surgeons is shifting from self-employed partnerships to public limited companies with boards of directors. This is partly because such a structure is more tax efficient but also it may be a response to the growing corporatisation of the profession (Green, 2014).

<sup>xi</sup> For example we asked: At a dinner party how do you explain what you do for a living? What drew you into this work? What activities are legitimate and rewarded in your work? How would you describe a good/ bad day? What would you like to see changed in your working practice?

<sup>xii</sup> While there are a number of references to the problems of perfectionism in students (see for example: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/02/education/edlife/stress-social-media-and-suicide-on-campus.html>? <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/well-connected/academic-pressures/struggling/perfectionism>), very little literature exists relating to full time academics (c.f. Boekhorst, 2014).

<sup>xiii</sup> A website called vetconfessionals.com provides a lot more evidence of these problems.

<sup>xiv</sup> Not all academics expressed this sense of anxiety but it was highly prevalent.

<sup>xv</sup> The UK REF, which assesses publication output and quality and ranks individuals, departments and universities, has occurred every 4-6 years since the 1970s but a parallel assessment of teaching excellence using a range of factors, including student feedback, has only been institutionalized in 2016.

<sup>xvi</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/feb/13/university-staff-scared-to-disclose-mental-health-problems>