Academic Identity: A Modern Perspective

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Abstract: The paper raises questions about the meaning of academic identity, discusses professionalism and asks what is a profession? Both trait and functionalist models are presented as a means of understanding these areas. Two key papers relating to academic identity - Henkel (2005) and Archer (2008) - are discussed, and then questions are asked regarding what is it to be an academic in modern times and what are the pressures under which academics work? These questions feed into a discussion on differences between, and the possible effects, of New Public Managerialism and 'new managerialism' on academic identity. 'Blended' professionals, the impact of organisational and academic structures on academic identity and other potential issues are also discussed. Finally, the paper offers both a framework and suggested questions to help academics focus their thoughts in terms of their own academic advancement.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to raise questions for discussion and debate on academic identity rather than to offer definitive answers or specific conclusions. In particular, the paper addresses the following three questions:

1. What is academic identity?
2. What is it to be an academic in modern times?
3. What are the pressures that academics work under?

Each of these questions is addressed in order throughout this paper but first a short section on theory.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework by which my approach has been formed and influenced is essentially a constructionist approach, which understands meaningful reality as something that can be constructed rather than discovered. As Crotty (2003) puts it, constructionism is:

...the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context (Crotty, 2003, p 6).

In this respect, I have taken an interpretivist stance and I adopt notions of symbolic interactionism, as cited by Blumer (1969) that:

Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that these things have for them; the meaning of such things is derived from, and arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows; and that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (Blumer, 1969, p 2).
Finally, I adopt notions of critical inquiry that seek to “…call current ideology into question and initiate action, in the name of social justice” (Crotty, 2003, p 157). In this respect I do not attempt to reify notions of academic identity but rather raise questions for the purpose of discussion and debate with a view to enabling academic staff to reflect upon their own position and identity with a view to some form of self-development.

Beaumont (2009) states that “…self-development is characterized by mature self-awareness, self-insight, openness to experience, open-mindedness, comfort with ambiguity, and cognitive complexity in terms of self and others”. Beaumont goes on to say “These personal qualities represent an integrated type of self-development that is considered to be a form of actualization tendency”. When referring to actualisation tendency, Beaumont is talking about a concept which emerged in the 1950s. Specifically, Maslow’s (1987) concept of self-actualisation, which refers to a developmental process that involves the actualisation or full use of one’s abilities or potential. This paper seeks to provide early career academics with a practical means for active self-reflection so as to enable a positive form of personal change such as a move towards either a more teaching and / or research oriented role.

**What is Academic Identity?**

Academic identity is a phrase that is discussed in the Higher Education sector as if it is a fixed and known thing. Academic identity lacks precision in terms of description and cannot therefore be summed up in a few sentences. Rather an explanation of academic identity is sought that attempts to unpick notions of academic ontology (how academics come to be) so as to help form an understanding of how academics might form epistemologies (how academic come to know). Academic identity is complex and is composed of many competing influences. At best one can describe academic identity as a constantly shifting target, which differs for each individual academic. However, this is not to say that there are not commonalities; there are and I would argue that these commonalities may be set within a particular framework, which can help to situate an academic in terms of personal standing both within and without their particular institution and their personal and professional networks.

What then are these commonalities that might contribute to academic identity? First, we can think of the academic with regard to professionalism. The term ‘professionalism’ is rather like an onion: it has layers of meaning (the suffixes to the word profession, -al, and –alism) and each time you peel a layer off you end up with something that looks slightly different.

Broadly speaking, a profession may be interpreted as an occupation in which members control their own work (Freidson, 2001) and being more specific than this can lead one into difficulties. Eraut (1994) supports this position and talks about Law and Medicine as ‘ideal types’ for professions. Acker (1999) states that scholars have had issues defining any of the professions that include women, such as, inter alia, Teachers, Nurses and Social Workers, and as a result have come up with labels such as ‘semi-profession’ (Etzioni, 1969). Acker also states that teaching, nursing and social work have all had issues with being recognised as professions and to counter these issues each has used strategies to bring them on a par with the recognised professions, eg, raising the qualifications bar for potential members of those fields. Eraut (1994) takes issue with the use of a term such as ‘semi-profession’ and suggests that this simply adds another ill-defined category. Millerson (1964) states, “Of the dozens of writers on this subject few seem able to agree on the determinants of professional status”.

Traits and Functionalist Approaches

If it is not possible to agree on the determinants of professional status then how might one envision the academic profession? Johnson (1972) suggests splitting the different approaches into two broad types, namely, ‘trait’ and ‘functionalist’ models of the professions which may help to allay any confusion. On the one hand, ‘trait’ models usually list common characteristics, while on the other hand ‘functionalist’ models usually focus on the components of the model, such as the components’ relevance to society or to a client-professional relationship.

A Professional Trait Model?

Millerson (1964) presented a list of twenty-three ‘traits’ taken from the work of twenty-one authors who had tried to identify what might constitute a ‘true’ profession. Johnson (1972) pointed out that of the authors, no single ‘trait’ was deemed to be essential to a profession and nine of the ‘traits’ were identified by a single author only. Additionally, not even two of the authors could agree that the same ‘traits’ could be used to describe a profession. Notwithstanding this, Johnson gave a useful summary of the most frequently mentioned ‘traits’, which were: skill based on theoretical knowledge; the provision of training and education; testing the competence of members; organisation; adherence to a professional code of conduct; and altruistic service. Eraut (1994) would argue that lists of ‘traits’ do not help to resolve the problem of definition because lists are inclined to be based on the author’s view of what constitutes the most salient features for high-status professions; and at the same time traits may relate to specific cultures and would therefore have more relevance in particular countries.

A Functionalist View

Eraut (1994) posits that most accounts in the literature adopt a ‘functionalist’ view of the professions that accords importance to the professional knowledge base. Barber (1963) suggests that professional behaviour can be defined in terms of ‘four essential attributes’:

1. A high degree of generalised and systematic knowledge;
2. Primary orientation to the community interest rather than to individual self-interest;
3. A high degree of self-control of behaviour through codes of ethics internalised in the process of work socialisation and through voluntary associations organised and operated by the work specialists themselves; and
4. A system of rewards (monetary and honorary) that is primarily a set of symbols of work achievement and thus ends in themselves, not means to some end of individual self-interest.

Traits and / or Functionalist Views?

The essential difference between this ‘functionalist’ view of professionalism and the ‘trait’ view already shown above is that within this ‘functionalist’ model there is a clear connection between the attributes and their relationship to society. The underpinning assumption of this model is perhaps, according to Eraut (1994), best expressed by Rueschemeyer (1983) who suggests that:

Individually, and, in association, collectively, the professions ‘strike a bargain with society’ in which they exchange competence and integrity against the client and community, relative freedom from lay supervision and interference, protection...
against unqualified competition as well as substantial remuneration and higher social status.

For Eraut then the argument is that “relative freedom from interference is based on unique expertise, moral integrity, confidentiality and protection from political abuse”. However, Eraut also notes that sociologists of conflict in the 1970’s accused the professions of using the power they derived from their superior knowledge to justify their sheltered market. Notwithstanding this, both functionalist and conflict theorists place expertise in prime position as the key source of professional power and influence.

I would argue then that the key difference between the ‘trait’ and ‘functionalist’ view is that ‘trait’ models provide a means for description whereas ‘functionalist’ models provide a means for explanation. In this regard, ‘trait’ models provide a means for describing concepts of required behaviour such as the acquisition of necessary qualifications, codes of practice, codes of conduct, ethics, and autonomy within given constraints whereas the ‘functionalist’ view gives a means for interpreting descriptions of professional behaviour. The ‘functionalist’ view is not however without issue as it is based on universal assumptions (Johnson, 1972). I would also suggest that the ‘functionalist’ view ignores internal power struggles as it only focuses on attributes that are of relevance to society or client-professional relationships. Nevertheless, an awareness of ‘trait’ and ‘functionalist’ models can help to identify where further explorations might take place.

**The Nature and Development of Academic Identity: Communitarian and ‘Authentic’ Perspectives**

A number of authors have sought to understand the nature and development of academic identities but I have focused on two recent papers that have relevance for this discussion. First, Henkel (2005) who takes a broad view of academic identity and then Archer (2008) who takes a narrower view of identity in relation to ‘authenticity’ and ‘success’.

**A Communitarian Perspective**

Henkel (2005) explored the implications of policy change in the UK for academic identities using a predominantly communitarian theoretical perspective. The underlying principle to which she worked was that academic identity is a function of community membership that is grounded in interactions between the individual and two key communities: first, the discipline and second, higher education as an institution. She examines the impacts of changes upon the dynamic between individuals, disciplines and universities within which academic identities are formed and sustained and upon individual and collective values central to academic identity, namely the primacy of the discipline in academic working lives and academic autonomy. She found that challenges to these have been strong but they have retained much of their normative power, even if the meaning of academic autonomy has changed. Finally, she suggested that communitarian theories of academic identity may need to be modified in the contemporary environment, but they do not need to be abandoned.

**Issues with Henkel’s Approach**

Henkel (2005) solely focuses on notions of ‘community’ stating:

> We follow Clark (1983) in defining, first, the discipline and, second, the enterprise or higher education institution as the key communities in which individual academics have built their identities. Disciplines are given tangible form and defined boundaries in the basic units or departments of universities and their role in the shaping and the substance of academic identities is there reinforced.

However, I interpret the term ‘community’ as being more about the ‘who, what, where and when’, and as a means for describing a collection of individuals who possess similar goals, values and interests (ie, a trait approach). In contrast, I interpret the term ‘culture’ as being more explanatory, addressing the ‘why’ and ‘how’, and therefore somewhat more elusive. In this respect, culture is more about the ‘doing’ and the expression of those communal goals, values and interests (a functionalist approach). Higher Education Institutions may be indistinguishable in terms of stated missions (communal identity) but the way individuals interact with each other, as a reflection of the institutions’ methods of achieving those missions, may produce very different cultures (cultural identities). Trowler (1998) would explain this using a phenomenological approach as he sees “…culture as (being) created uniquely in each social setting and considers this to be in a constant state of flux”. In addition, Trowler suggests that to reach an empathetic understanding of a culture one must first analyse and describe it, which suggests using both a functionalist and trait approach to reflect upon Academic Identity.

An ‘Authentic’ View

Archer (2008) attempted to understand the nature and formation of contemporary academic identities. Archer conducted interviews with a sample of ‘younger’ academics within United Kingdom universities, and considered how ‘younger’ academics positioned themselves (and in turn how they experienced being positioned) with regard to notions of ‘authenticity’ and ‘success’. Archer argued that younger academics’ experiences of inauthenticity are exacerbated by: (a) the current dominant performative ethos, (b) their age, (c) race, class, gender, and (d) status – in particular, contract researchers. Specifically, Archer argued that the extent to which younger academics “…are able to perform ‘success’ is shaped and constrained by structural locations of ‘race’ / ethnicity, social class, gender and age”. Consideration was also given “…to the younger academics' various attempts to position themselves as ‘authentic’, and their negotiations of this contested discursive terrain”. Archer suggested that “…the ‘authentic’ and ‘successful’ academic is a desired yet refused identity for many younger academics, who must negotiate on a daily basis not only their attempts at ‘becoming’ but also the threat of ‘unbecoming’. In this respect, Archer’s work is influenced by Colley and James’ (2005) understanding of professional identities as disrupted processes which can involve not only ‘becoming’ but also ‘unbecoming’. Colley and James describe two younger academics who fell into difficulty because their personal professional values were at odds with the professional practices of their professional community (one found new security and confidence whereas the other resigned because she could not accept imposed changes to teaching and learning practices). From Archer’s research we can take a message that academic identity is not only determined by the individual, but also by the communities of practice to which professionals belong.

Archer (2008) also talks about how “…the contemporary field of higher education is being shaped by the rise of new public managerialism (eg, Clarke and Newman, 1997)”. Archer goes on to say “The ‘audit explosion’ in universities (Strathern, 1997), and the refashioning of higher education as a (quasi-)market has been instrumental in fashioning new forms of relationships, knowledge and academic labour. Driven by a raft of technologies designed to render universities and academic workers more ‘useful and relevant’ (Davies and Petersen, 2005, p 33), new public managerialism has sought ‘to produce in individuals higher levels of flexibility, productivity and co-operation with national economic objectives for the economic benefit of the nation’”. Archer then notes that “it has been argued that the current ‘new times’ are disrupting notions of professionalism, what constitutes academic work and what it means (or what it should mean) to be an academic”.

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Issues with Archer’s Approach

I would not necessarily agree with Archer that these ‘new times’ are disrupting notions of professionalism as it is not entirely clear as to what professionalism means (for the reasons I have already stated). However, it could be argued that despite being unable to provide a neat and tidy definition of something (professionalism), that one could still recognise disruption of that thing. Nevertheless, what constitutes academic work is a question that we can think about in terms of an academic profile. Examination of typical job advertisements for academic staff in the United Kingdom in 2011, reveals posts requiring academic staff to have a profile that includes or to be working towards a number of the following: teaching, research, external engagements, consultancy, management (of some sort) and / or administration. If this is what constitutes academic work, then I would disagree that the ‘new times’ are interfering with academic profiles. Rather than this I would say that academic profiles are always open to change because of changes in the external environment and as a result of personal intervention. With regard to ‘new times’ interfering with what it means (or what it should mean) to be an academic is a more difficult one to answer, which I now address.

What is it to be an Academic in Modern Times? What are the Pressures that Academics Work Under?

Archer speaks about the impact of various elements of New Public Managerialism (NPM) as if NPM is an uncontested concept. However, this is not the case, the term NPM is often mixed up with ‘new managerialism’. Deem and Brehony (2005) address this issue as part of an exploration of ideological conceptions of management, especially ‘new managerialism’, with particular reference to their role in the reform of higher education. Although noting differences regarding the meanings of the term ideology, Deem and Brehony (2005) argue that ideology may be distinguished by the extent to which it serves to promote interests and maintain relations of power and domination while also noting a connection with language and discourse. In essence, Deem and Brehony tell us that ‘new managerialism’, may be thought of “as an ideological configuration of ideas and practices recently brought to bear on public service organisation, management and delivery, often at the behest of governments or government agencies”, whereas “…‘new public management’…” is seen by protagonists as defining new forms of administrative orthodoxy about how public services are run and regulated. In other words, NPM may be seen as a means to obtain efficiency without an underpinning ideology. If this is the case then there are other aspects of ‘new managerialism’ as described by Deem and Brehony which may have an impact upon academic identity. First, if management is indeed a political rather than a technical activity then it may be reasonable to expect that academic managers would be expected to buy into the current ideology. Second, Deem and Brehony (2005) found that:

… the features of ‘new managerialism’ most evident in UK higher education appeared to be:

- changes to the funding environment,
- academic work and workloads (more students, a smaller unit of resource per student and pressure to do both teaching and research to a high standard);
- more emphasis on team work in both teaching and research, partly in response to external audit; the introduction of cost-centres to university departments or faculties;
- greater internal and external surveillance of the performance of academics and an increase in the proportion of managers, both career administrators and manager-academics, in universities.
Whitchurch (2009) looked at identity in terms of the disposition of Higher Education professional staff, and focused particularly on the concept of blended professionals. By blended professionals, Whitchurch meant those staff who cross internal and external institutional boundaries, and who help to create new forms of third space between professional and academic domains. Whitchurch (2009) notes that recent work on academic identity has tended to focus on the emergence of specialists in areas such as marketing and enterprise, and on their positioning as “managers”, Whitchurch’s study addressed the identity movements of new forms of “managerial professional” that have not yet been fully mapped. In essence, Whitchurch focused on the changing identity of professional staff who are absorbing academic influences into their own identities. The impact of such a move is that professional staff are better informed regarding academic practice, which forges new working relationships and understandings, which in turn could potentially act upon the identities of academic staff.

There are some other issues relating to academic identity and ‘new managerialism’ which have not really been considered in any great depth in the literature such as the impact of organisational and academic structures on academic identity. For example, according to D’Annunzio (2005) there are a number of issues surrounding the use of a matrix structure in organisations, such as: misaligned goals; unclear roles and responsibilities; ambiguous authority; lack of a matrix guardian; and silo-focused employees (those who concentrate their focus upon their own departments / subject areas without any recourse to the greater institution). In addition, Rees and Porter (2004) suggest that:

For the structures to work effectively they should only be introduced when appropriate and even then after careful planning. An important aspect is the training of multi-disciplinary team leaders. However, it can also be crucial to ensure that those other key members of management who need to monitor and support matrix structures are properly selected and have received appropriate management training.

In my ongoing research into the perceptions of Higher Education Academic Managers on the impact of certain aspects of new managerialism on their working lives, especially with regard to power, management and identity, I found evidence that matrix structures could be problematic as described above. Indeed, one academic who was talking about organisational culture stated:

It is to do with the openness of the matrix. The downside is that there is a lack of sense of direction and there is not a clear sense of direction from the centre. One frustration with the structure relates to where there needs to be change. It can be hard to marshal the resources because there is no clear leadership.

Another academic from a different institution answering the same question on organisational culture said:

Regarding the matrix structure, it is very good for adding things as all of the service functions are plugged in but it is very bad for ordering and getting a sense of priority...meaning the alignment of authority and responsibility...those two things are very much misaligned in my view. So the matrix structure is part of what provides the openness and the supportiveness of the environment but it is also part of what leads to an absence of clear direction where change is not simply a matter of adding things.

In essence, the debate upon matrix structures can be captured quite simply: two bosses with equivalent status in the structure causing confusion for their staff, a lack of organisational
direction and unclear objectives for staff. In this respect, academic identity is left in uncertainty with no clear means for resolving matrix related issues.

Other possible factors affecting the formation and maintenance of academic identity could include: a) the types of HEI within which an academic might work. For example, an HEI could be private or pre- or post- 1992 Universities. Each of these types of HEIs are organised in different ways in terms of governance and management structures, the way that they are funded, and in terms of scrutiny the way that they report; b) the terms and conditions within the different types of contract under which academic staff work may differ between HEI type and can therefore impact upon identity. For example, some contracts of employment within Higher Education restrict academics to university lecturing (teaching) only or research only. A final consideration might be the impact of part-time staff (also referred to in different HEIs as visiting lecturers or hourly paid lecturers) on full-time academics.

**Conclusion**

From a constructivist perspective, the issues raised in this paper have been put considered with a view to constructing a meaningful view of academic identity that will raise questions for discussion and debate. In addition, it is hoped that the paper will help colleagues to both question and initiate action in terms of self-actualisation and personal development. It was suggested that using either or both a trait and functionalist approach could aid in a consideration of how interpretations of what it means to be a professional might help to determine how academic identity is viewed. On the one hand, using a trait approach could help to determine what essential attributes an academic might need. On the other hand, a functionalist approach could help to determine how an academic profile might need to be amended, in terms of what function an academic has in relation to society's benefit.

It was also suggested culture should not be ignored when thinking of academic identity in terms of community. In essence, reflecting on academic identity in terms of both community and culture can help to situate an academic in terms of goals, values and interests. For example, Henkel (2005) cited Taylor (1989, p 28) who said “To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad . . . what has meaning and importance to you and what is trivial and secondary”. Henkel went on to say that “For Taylor the moral framework within which these questions are addressed has three dimensions: obligation to others, fulfilment or meaningfulness and a range of notions concerned with dignity, respect and self-esteem”. In addition, Archer showed that notions of ‘becoming’ and ‘unbecoming’ can help us to consider differences between our own opinions and those of others contained within both communities and cultures. Furthermore, issues and pressures brought about by managerial change, whether ideological or not, can lead to significant change for academic identity. It was also suggested that the development of ‘blended’ professionals could have an impact upon academics. Finally, it was suggested that other factors affecting academic identity that were not covered in depth within the literature included: organisational / matrix structures; the types of HEI within which academics work and the type of academic contract which they might hold with their employer.

In closing, a Reflective Framework (Table 1 as shown below) identifies areas of both tension and challenge with regard to how notions of academic identity might be informed. In this respect, the framework may be used as both a developmental and reflective tool to: a) generate questions for personal reflection; and / or b) as a filter for examining aspects of Higher Education which impinge / impact upon academic staff. The framework is followed by example questions which could be used as a starting point for critical reflection or alternatively as research questions for further academic identity research. The framework has particular relevance for new academic and administrative staff as it covers the political, institutional and personal contexts needed for personal and professional development. A
practical example might be a member of staff considering their own career prospects. In this instance, that member of staff would need to be aware of the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (also known as the Browne report) which took place in October 2010 and the delayed white paper on Higher Education due to be published in 2011. They would need to be aware that there are proposals to raise student fees, cut institutional funding, and as a result expect job losses and the closure of some university departments. On the one hand, reflecting upon the example discussion questions shown below might lead that member of staff into making a decision to stay put and to develop a further line of enquiry in their own work so as to solidify their position in their own institution. On the other hand, a different reflection might lead that member of staff to seek work in a different department in a different institution where job security may be more likely.

Table 1. Reflective Framework

| External world: policy change (new managerialism), external agencies (QAA, HEA), communities, cultures | Purpose / Function |
| Structures: HEI, Faculty, School, Department / Subject area | Description / Traits |
| Professionalism (and what it means for the individual) | Values |

Example discussion questions:

1. What policy changes are on the horizon and how would they affect my academic profile (teaching, research, consultancy, external engagements, manager, administrator)?
2. What changes are happening in my communities of good practice and how will they impact upon me?
3. Am I a professional? Do I hold professional values? Are my professional values at odds with other communities of practice to which I belong?
4. What purpose / function do I serve in my current role?
5. How would I describe myself in terms of traits / attributes? Do I need to change / augment my overall profile by adding new traits / removing old traits?
6. What values do I hold? Would I let my personal / professional values stop or interfere with my ‘becoming’ as I ‘unbecome’?

References


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