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Remote working in academia: A site of contested identities

Amanda Lee
Derby Business School
University of Derby

Summary

This development paper discusses the affects and impact of formalised remote (location-independent) working on notions and construction of academic identity. Data is drawn from a six year longitudinal ethnographic study exploring the lived experiences of location-independent and office-based academics. Findings suggest academic identities are being dynamically recreated, with a more or less conscious awareness of how this is being done. The organisational decision to formalise location-independent working (LIW) led to a distinct group of academics identifying themselves as 'LIW' and office-based academics identifying themselves as distinct from their LIW colleagues. The dynamic interplay between LIW and office-based academics resulted in contested identities between these two groups. Despite these manufactured and socially constructed divisions, both groups identified strongly with the notion of an overarching academic identity. As such, the notion of academic identity was not contested, but it was seen as threatened and, potentially weakened, by the prevailing managerialist culture.

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Research context and background

This research was set within the Business School of a UK post 1992 new university. A multiple method longitudinal ethnographic study was conducted between 2010 to 2016, to explore issues associated with academic employees following the introduction of location-independent working (LIW) practices. In the context of this research, LIW is a term used to describe the practice of working in locations independent of the more traditional, fixed office setting. LIW employees sign up to a new working arrangement in which they are provided with a laptop, printer and smartphone, and forgo the right to an office on-campus. This study examined how, and in what ways, LIW practices impacted upon the lives, working relationships and identities of academics. Thus, the focus and level of analysis was on exploring the experiences, preferences, views, working relationships, day-to-day lives and self-articulations of both location-independent and office-based academic employees, within the case study institution. This paper draws on findings pertaining to notions and constructions of academic identity. Multiple qualitative methods were utilised, incorporating in-depth loosely structured interviews; participant day-in-the-life diaries and the author's own auto-ethnographic reflective research journal. All academics within the Business School were invited, by email, to take part in the study. After two rounds of invitations, six LIW academics and six office-based academics, volunteered to take part. Three further participants; an HR representative, a senior faculty manager, and a trades union representative, were purposively selected as critical cases (Teddlie & Fen, 2007). Additionally, the author undertook a self-interview and completed a day-in-the-life diary along with participants. This brought the total number of participants to sixteen and triangulation of data collection methods and participant sample was enabled.

Notions and construction of identity

Firstly, wider definitions of identity are considered, before going on to discuss the specific context of remote working and academic identity. Identity is an extremely broad concept and studies of identity represent a diverse field within the academic literature. According to social identity theory, our identities are not only constructed at an individual level, but are also expressed through our interactions with, and membership of groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979). For others (Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas 2008; Watson 2008) identity is concerned with an ongoing process of becoming which incorporates how and in what ways individuals deal with their complex, and often ambiguous and contradictory, experiences of work and organisation. Goffman (1959) refers to the significance of symbolic acts and associated meanings in the construction of identity, as well as the notion of 'dramaturgy': "*The way in which the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself [sic.] and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them.*" (Goffman 1959: 9). For Giddens (1991), discourse and self-narrative (the capacity to keep a particular narrative going) are seen as important in identity construction.

Brocklehurst (2001) examined the experiences of professional employees making the transition from a conventional office environment to one of homeworking. He framed this within the context of Giddens's (1991) conceptualization of power, identity and time/space to explain the organisational transitions taking place. He concluded that forms of work organisation such as homeworking, give both management and employees the flexibility to redraw boundaries in terms of time, space, home, work and the realm of the public and private. It is the home-workers themselves who then have to make sense of these changes in respect of their own understanding of self and identity.

Tietze and Musson (2010) adopted a case study approach to the investigation of issues around identity for managers who have made the shift to homeworking. They argued that such an approach was essential in order to consider the impact of flexible working practices as opposed to focussing on the use of telecommuting technologies to ascertain the organisational benefits of homeworking. They concluded that bringing an identity perspective into the sphere of homeworking research demonstrated that the meanings individuals attach to their work, their homes and themselves were not static or pre-determined and that individuals made sense of homeworking in the context of their overall lives.

Several writers (Henkel 2005; Clegg 2008; Archer 2008; Quigley 2011) have examined the ways in which academic identity has been affected by policy change in the UK. Henkel (2005) argued that academic identities are developed and maintained as a result of shared values, meaning and sense making which occurs at both an individual and collective level. Key findings from Henkel's (2005) research, in terms of defining academic identity were the importance of discipline and academic freedom. Indeed, academic freedom was found to be key issue in respect of LIW academics. Linked with notions of academic freedom was academic autonomy, and this was also seen as fundamental to what it is to be an academic (Kogan 2000; Halvorsen and Nyhagen 2011). However, according to Henkel (2005) definitions of academic autonomy are changing as a result of competing priorities and institutional agendas.

Archer (2008) explored younger academics (which she defines as 35 years and under), constructions of identity and their strategies for dealing with the constraints and pressures of the modern university. Whilst Archer's definition of younger academics may appear rather arbitrary, she explains this as a means of identifying those that grew up in the 1980s, the so-called "Thatcher's children" (Archer 2008). Archer (2008) supported Davies and Petersen (2005) call for further investigation into the lived experiences and day-to-day practices of academics. In common with older academics, younger academics identified core values of intellectual endeavour, professionalism and criticality. It was also important for them to have autonomy in how and when they worked. A key difference noted in the construction of identity between younger and older academics was the way in which they located themselves in the present, rather than referring back to the nostalgic discourse of a bygone age.

Ylijoki and Ursin (2013) explored the ways in which Finnish academics make sense of, and construct, their academic identities in the wake of structural transformations in higher education. They argue managerialism has led to the formation of academic identities that are increasingly polarized and diverse. This notion supports the findings of Findlow (2012) who suggests the term 'professional-academic' identity may be a more accurate and holistic representation of the way in which academic identities are changing.

Emergent findings

The notion of academic identity emerged as a construct from the data collected. Issues included thoughts and interpretations about what it is to be an academic, with many participants using the label 'academic' to describe themselves. One participant spoke about the nature of work in relation to LIW but her comments suggest a wider conceptualisation of the academic role;

"I think that is the nature of the academic role...and perhaps that's one of the things that makes it peculiar, to other LIWs, it hasn't been with academics, it has been with office

workers and front line staff...But the way academic work is, it defies cut off at 5 o'clock, because that is not how academia works." (senior faculty manager)

Other participants spoke more personally about what being an academic means for them and how it is bound up with notions of who they are;

"If I stopped being a researcher, I would lose a massive part of who I am, definitely, absolutely and I think that's reinforced by being married to another academic as well, so it's our life" (office-based research fellow)

For one participant, LIW was being used as a deliberate strategy to protect her academic identity;

"Being LIW means I'm able to plan my time more efficiently, because there's not can you give me two minutes? ...then forty five minutes later when you've got a meeting booked. I'm either here or I'm not. So it's a way of trying to remain an academic." (LIW senior lecturer)

Findings also revealed the way in which academic and professional identity are blurred, and participants reported a strong desire to be treated as professionals. Furthermore, distinctions emerged between the articulations of office-based and LIW academics. LIW academics reported feelings of detachment and isolation, whereas office-based academics expressed frustration at not being able to find their LIW colleagues;

"I'm not with anyone from my department, apart from all the LIW people...who are all in the cafe...you're not with any colleagues, so you don't see anyone...I saw S this morning and she said, "What are you doing here? Haven't seen you for months." But I literally haven't seen her for months." (LIW senior lecturer)

"It's very confusing and it's a little bit unfair in terms of...you don't see a lot of LIW people in a lot of the meetings that go on...I don't know if there's an attitude of we're LIW so we don't have to be anywhere....They can't be there for their office hours because there's never anybody in there, so I don't know where they're going." (office-based senior lecturer)

Concluding comments

The decision by the case study university to formalise the practice of LIW has led to a distinct group of academics identifying themselves as 'LIW'. Furthermore, office-based academics identify themselves as distinct from their LIW colleagues. Despite these manufactured and socially constructed divisions, both LIW and office-based academics identify strongly with the notion of an academic identity. The dynamic interplay between LIW and office-based academics has resulted in contested identities between these two groups. Although LIW academics are formally signed up to this working arrangement, this is a local agreement, rather than a contractual change in terms and conditions of employment. Even so, office-based academics, when working flexibly, describe themselves as working 'LIW', which suggests the distinction is more nuanced. Nevertheless, LIW academics felt their choice of working arrangement helped them to maintain academic integrity, which in

turn served to protect their sense of academic identity. Whilst findings from this research are based on one case study, they have relevance in the wider context of professional knowledge workers, who work both within and outside of a traditional office setting. Between now and the conference, critical analysis and discussion of the emergent findings will be developed. Additionally, the concept of contested identities will be further explored with the aim of contributing to, and building upon, existing theoretical understandings of identity construction.

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