Becoming Academic in the Digital Age: Negotiations of identity in the daily practices of Early Career Researchers

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Executive summary

This study contributes to the literature in the fields of 'academic identity' and 'digital scholarship' with a focus on a relatively under-researched group: Early Career Researchers (ECRs). The study explores the academic identity-building practices of ECRs through the representational properties of online profiles and in the context of daily academic practices. Guided by a conceptual framework which is grounded in Actor-Network Theory, the study is concerned with how identities are formed (as well as what those identities are).

The study developed a methodology, which sought to move beyond the use of a narrative approach (for capturing *accounts* of identity) to reveal how identity is also shaped *institutionally*, *materially* and *socially*. Accordingly, a mixed-method approach was used to generate three unique data sets: institutional policy of six universities; multimodal participatory journals produced by six ECRS over a six month period (one from each of the universities); and a corpus of online profiles identified through the journaling. Analysis focused on i) institutional framings of academic identity; ii) material framings; iii) social practices; and iv) personal accounts, and crucially highlighted the points of tension between them (as sites of struggle for competing Discourses.)

The study found that in developing their academic identities, ECRs are forced to juggle interests, values, assets, resources and lifestyle with pressures around authenticity, visibility, status, security, belonging, freedom/independence and support. In this way, the diverse and dynamic practices of ECRs often come into tension with the homogenising structures of institutions (which include/exclude and privilege certain practices over others). Online profiles can act both as liberating spaces in which complex identities might be renegotiated and reconciled, and/or as rigid standardizations which obscure the less conformist elements of identities. Methodologically, the study also reaffirmed the shifting nature of personal accounts of identity but also of institutions and artefacts (assumed at the start of the study to be relatively stable entities.)

The findings of this study have already been presented at a number of events and are in the process of being written up for publication. This SRHE Newer Researchers' Prize has also contributed to two further successful applications: a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship and an ESRC Seminar Series grant which will allow me to take forward my work in the fields of digital scholarship, researcher identity and researcher development.

Aims and Objectives

Despite an abundance of research into the effects of changes in the structure and organisation of Higher Education on academic identity (e.g. Gordon and

Whitchurch 2010; Henkel 2009; Barnett and Di Napoli 2008) few studies have explored how this plays out within the Early Career Researcher (ECR) group, though it is this new generation who are arguably under the most pressure to establish themselves as academics (McApline 2010; Gale 2011) and will have a significant impact on the construction of academia in the future (Archer 2008). At the same time, while studies have cited the impact of digital technologies and practices on the changing nature of academic practices (Weller 2010; Lea and Stierer 2011) few, if any, have considered the role of digital artefacts as representational outlets for academic identity.

In response, this study aims to explore the academic identity-building practices of ECRs through the representational properties of online profiles (including academic staff webpages, personal blogs and social networking sites). By considering how ECRs are positioned and position themselves through such digital artefacts in the context of their daily academic practices, the study seeks to advance understandings of academic identity beyond conventional narrative accounts to also take into account the institutional, social and material forces that shape identity.

The study seeks to achieve this through the following objectives:

- Capturing personal accounts of academic identity through interviews and participatory multimodal journaling with ECRs

- Capturing social framings of academic identity through analysis of daily academic practices (through interviews and journaling)

- Capturing institutional framings of academic identity through analysis of university policy documents

- Capturing material framings of academic identity through analysis of staff profile pages and other digital resources (identified in the journaling)

The study will consider tensions within and across representations of academic identity at these three levels.

Methodology and project timetable

Conceptual framings

The study draws on Actor-Network Theory (for example Callon 1986; Law 2004; Latour 2005) to conceptualise both 'academic identity' and 'ECR' as *assemblages* whose boundaries are drawn in different ways through different social and material practices. This approach resists essentialism of concepts (i.e. the taking for granted of 'academic identity' or 'ECR' as a given *thing*) and instead takes an interest in the practices through which different conceptualisations are arrived at (for instance, funders' definitions of ECRs for the purpose of allocating postdoctoral studentships compared to a university's definition of ECRs for the purpose of allocating work tasks). In this way, the concepts of 'academic identity' and 'ECR' are not definitive or autonomous but are rather *effects* of networks of

social and material actors in interaction with each other. Such networks might include academics, universities, academic texts and research technologies as well as constructs such as REF and 'academic impact'. ANT also provides a useful framework for showing how certain actors are displaced in order for concepts to appear as unified and taken-for-granted, which helps to expose the power relations inherent within concept building. This study then, does not propose a single definition of either concept but rather explores how different definitions or understandings of 'academic identity' and 'ECR' are adopted by the institutional and individual participants and shaped by the social-material make-up of representational artefacts.

Methodological approach and data sets

mixed-method approach was used to generate three unique data sets (as set out in the Table below).

Table 1 Methodological strands of the study

Focus	Approach	Methods	Data-sets
Institutional framings	Case studies	Policy Discourse Analysis from 6 HEIs	Institutional policy on ECRs, researcher development and related
Social framings	Ethnography	Multimodal participatory journaling with six ECRs (one from each of the 6 HEIs) over a 6 month period. Each of the participants subscribed to an 'interdisciplinary' academic identities (which spanned the fields of neuroscience, psychology, linguistics, education studies, media & communication studies, cultural studies, architecture, computer science, philosophy, sociology, social policy, political science, economics and statistics).	o Research trajectory maps o Two semi-structured interviews with each participant as well as several informal 'data catch-ups' o Audio, video or written journals kept over 6 month period o Other visual data collected over 6 month period o Presentations (participant analysis of data) o Reflexive journal of my own experiences as an ECR
Personal accounts	Narrative/ participatory analysis		
Material framings	Material semiotic analysis	Analysis of representational artefacts identified through the journaling	o Staff profile pages o Profiles on social media o Blogs o Personal websites

Ethical considerations

Data collection was approved on the basis of a satisfactory report submitted for review to the IOE's ethics committee. This detailed report is available to those interested.

The key issues discussed in the report included and encountered over the course of the research included:

- Protecting anonymity of participants when most of the data focused on their profiles and was therefore easily identifiable

- Concealing identity of institutions (in order to protect the identities of ECR participants)

- Representing visual data (a number of steps were taken to obscure identifiable elements)

- Encountering depression (this was an issue for four out of the six ECR participants but all found the research helpful rather than distressing and all had sought professional help prior to joining the study)

Work plan: program of activities

Table 2 sets out the timetable for the project from Oct 2013–Dec 2014.

Table 2 Work plan

	DATA COLLECTION	**DATA ANALYSIS**	**DISSEMINATION**
Oct-Dec 2013	• Case study HEIs selected • Participants recruited • First interviews in mid-October • Data collection starts late October • 'Catch-up' with participants in December	• Initial analysis of institutional policy related to ECRs	
Jan-Mar 2014	• Data collection continues • Instructions issued for presentation of data	• Continued analysis of institutional policy related to ECRs • Material-semiotic analysis of representational resources identified in journaling	
Apr-Jul 2014	• Final interviews/ presentations in April/May	• Synthesis of institutional analysis with analysis from multimodal journaling	• Presentation of work-in-progress at IOE • Presentation of work-in-progress at an AHRC ECR event
Aug-Dec 2014		• Synthesis of institutional analysis with analysis fro multimodal journaling	•Preparation of journal article •Presentation of study at Oxford Learning Institute event (November)
Dec 2014			• Paper presented at SRHE NR conference Dec 2014 • Journal article submitted following feedback

Analysis of results

1. *Institutional framings of academic identity*

    - ECRs' identity is shaped in part by institutional definitions of 'ECRs', 'Postdocs' or 'Newer Researchers'.

    - Most institutions did not have an explicit policy for the treatment and career development of ECRs but those that did also appeared to make a greater investment in this group. Just two HEIs had a formal, internally funded postdoc programme, of which one was a 2 year fellowship scheme (with no suggestion of continued employment at the end) and the other was a 5 year tenure-track programme. Both of these institutions (together with another HEI without internally funded postdoctoral positions) also had particularly strong research development programmes and support systems, targeted specifically at the ECRs group.

    - Individual identities often shaped by (or in contrast to) institutional identities

    - Institutions are not singular policy systems but are most often a conflicting array of schools/departments/faculties frequently with different infrastructure as well as agendas and policies

    - Policies in relation to the 2014 REF were probably the most influential in defining research agendas for institutions which in turn influenced and ordered academic priorities for ECRs (e.g. research relative to teaching).

2. *Social framings of academic identity*

    - The daily academic practices identified by ECRs included:
        - Career progression (job applications/promotion)
        - Publications
        - Bid writing/research
        - Teaching
        - Conferences
        - Career development (training/leadership/admin)
        - Media and other public engagement activities
        - Social networking
        - Life outside of academia (different balances of work-life with the most 'successful' ECRs viewing academia as a vocation)

    - Mobility/time/space (e.g. importance of one's own office v mobile and remote working)

    - Conflicts in identities were identified based on:

- o Quantitative versus qualitative approaches to research (i.e. identification with one but pressure to pursue the other)
- o Writing for academics versus for the beneficiaries of the research (kudos associated with the former despite the 'impact agenda' but principles more in line with the latter)
- o Blogging versus journal/book publication (issues of status, visibility, different writing practices)
- o Different disciplinary identities (e.g. career opportunities in one but identification with an other)

3. *Material framings of academic identity*

Table 2 sets out the different representational properties of the various types of staff profile page encountered by ECRs.

Table 3 Representational properties of different staff profiles

	CONTROL OF TEMPORAL ELEMENTS	CONTROL OF SPATIAL ELEMENTS	TARGET AUDIENCE	INSTITUTIONAL AGENDA
DEPARTMENTAL PROFILE	Web administrator (can't be easily updated)	Designer (layout is confusing and exclusive – e.g. no publications)	Visitors to a particular department (other identities obscured by department's)	Promote department to through its staff to students and visitors
RESEARCH PORTAL PROFILE	Automatically updated centrally to reflect new publications and grants	Designer but also content recontextualised from other spaces	University (to aggregate data on publications and funding) and visitors	To promote the success of the university through comparable indicators
RESEARCH FOCUS PROFILE	Static	Designed at 'school level' as an informal interview (though based on written responses to questions)	Students, potential students and people outside the university	Marketing tool showcasing the 'brightest academics' and challenging notions of traditional academic – Impact

Other types of material artifact also played a role in framing academic identity:

- • Personal websites are a useful alternative to staff profile pages to showcase research and other information in a single space

- Social media and blogs (more visible and interactive/engaged but also more time consuming, requiring regular updates and minimal boundaries between professional and personal lives

Identity was also framed by the relative authority of different types and shapes of academic text:

> *"I'm not sure whether the book will be submitted to the next REF anyway. Despite the fact that it is an academically rigorous book, the fact that it is aimed primarily at teachers… may lead some to consider it less 'academic' than other books. This isn't helped by the fact that it has been published in a 'textbook' style format (e.g. the size is bigger than normal 'academic' books, and as a result it appears thinner). I have to admit that I was disappointed when I first saw the printed version because of this. The academic snob in me wanted it to look like a 'proper' academic book."*

4. Personal accounts of academic identity

ECRs described their identities in relation to the following characteristics[1]:

- Age (ranging from 33-41yrs)
- Academic position (two lecturers in permanent positions; one in a tenure-track post; three undertaking temporary research contracts)
- Gender (five women; one man)
- Nationality (three UK nationals, two Europeans)
- Class (two strongly identifying as having working class backgrounds)
- Family (two with young children; one pregnant; one single)
- Disability (one identifying as having Aspergers syndrome)

NB all participants were white, which may explain why ethnicity did not feature as an identity-marker

ECRs also drew on a number of metaphors to describe their academic identities. These included:

- Being on a rollercoaster
- Being a fragmented network
- Searching for an intellectual home
- Being on an ever-extending ladder
- Security represented by having one's own office
- The romantic image of the autonomous scientists versus the realities of navigating funding and publication pressures while working on other people's projects in precarious posts

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[1] All participants were white, which may explain why ethnicity did not feature as an

- Being a set of scales, forced to balance research and teaching; academic prestige with public engagement
- Juggling
- Living/breathing academia

5. *Points of tension between different framings of identity*

Analysis also picked up on the points of tensions between different types of identity, for example:

- Between personal experiences and institutional structures and practices (e.g. negotiating the standard academic career path with very different career objectives and ways of working common to Asperger's Syndrome)
- Between disciplinary/methodological identities and sources of funding (e.g. more resources available for quantitative studies, though qualitative research may be of greater interest or even more methodologically apt)
- Between material affordances and social status of media (e.g. levels of interaction facilitated by wikis/blogs versus traditional publications)

Project conclusions and outcomes

The study concludes with the following key findings:

- ECRs identities are in a constant state of 'becoming' and evolve through their on-going negotiation of interests, values, assets, lifestyle with pressures around authenticity, visibility, status, security, belonging, freedom/independence and support
- Diverse practices based on personal circumstance (e.g. disability and caring responsibilities) often sit in tension with homogenising structures and processes (such as standardised institutional policy) and material artefacts (which prompt particular representations)
- Power can be identified at the points of tensions between different framings of identity
- Academic prestige and job-security is not the only motivating factor for ECRs – many are deeply committed to the impact of their research and to collaborations outside of academia
- ECR identity is dynamic as are institutional identities and policies and digital resources/texts

These findings and others emerging from the analysis have been/will be disseminated through the following outputs:

- The SRHE Annual Conference 2013
- Institute of Education Social Science Research Unit seminar (April 2014)

- Connected Communities and Early Career Researchers workshop, City University (May 2014) presentation available:

  http://earlycareerresearchers.wordpress.com/2014/03/25/call-for-participants-ecr-workshop-2nd-may-2014/)

- Oxford Learning Institute 'Work-in-Progress Seminar' (Nov 2014)

- The SRHE Newer Researcher's Conference 2014

- Draft underway for submission to the *Higher Education Quarterly*

Benefits of the award and acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to SRHE for giving me the change to conduct this research. Benefits of going through this process included:

- Valuable experience administering and leading a small research project

- The opportunity for self-reflection on my own evolving academic identity as an ECR

- Learning from peers and experience sitting on the R&D committee at SRHE

- Experience in writing and assessing bids (contributing to two successful grants from Leverhulme and ESRC)

- Contributing to the foundations for further research to reconcile my interests in ECRs, researcher education, academic literacies, digital scholarship and impact/public engagement

I would like to acknowledge the following colleagues who may valuable contributions to the design and implementation of this research

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