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Younger academics’ constructions of ‘authenticity’, ‘success’ and professional identity

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This article contributes to ongoing work that seeks to understand the nature and formation of contemporary academic identities. Drawing on interview data conducted with a sample of ‘younger’ academics within UK universities, it considers how they position themselves (and in turn experience being positioned) in relation to notions of ‘authenticity’ and ‘success’. It is 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 – but especially for those who are contract researchers. In particular, it is argued that the extent to which they are able to perform ‘success’ is shaped and constrained by structural locations of ‘race’/ethnicity, social class, gender and age. Consideration is given to the younger academics’ various attempts to position themselves as ‘authentic’, and their negotiations of this contested discursive terrain. It is 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’.

Introduction

The field of higher education, like any other field, is not static but constantly shifting, evolving and changing. Likewise, the meanings associated with ‘being’ an academic and what constitutes ‘academic work’ are always in process. Research has sought to chart the various ways in which universities and higher education are constituted and configured at various points (e.g. Clark 1983, 1987, 1995, 1997). Attention has also been given to understanding the nature and development of academic identities (e.g. Becher and Trowler 2001; Cuthbert 1996; Henkel 1997, 2000; Taylor 1999; Tight 2000; Trowler and Knight 2000). In recent years, interest has focused particularly on the conditions and implications associated with universities now operating within an age of ‘supercomplexity’ (Barnett 2000). In the post-Fordist era, ‘universities and academic life are becoming more complex and differentiated spaces’ Clegg (2008, 3), and the academic ‘profession’ has diversified ‘into even smaller and more different worlds than was previously the case’ (Becher and Trowler 2001, 17). Various changes have been noted in the nature, content and balance of academic work (Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight 1998; Cuthbert 1996), such as the considerable loosening/fracturing of the teaching and research relationship (Barnett 2003, 2005). Indeed, it has been argued that academics joining higher education since the 1980s are joining a very different system to those who joined in the 1960s and 1970s (Henkel 2000, 180).

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Particular interest is currently being directed at the ways in which the contemporary field of higher education is being shaped by the rise of new public managerialism (e.g. Clark and Newman 1997). 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, 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’. These changes continue to shape the nature, organisation, form and meanings of higher education at the macro level (Barnett 2003) – encapsulated in the notion of the ‘corporate’ university – and at the level of individual and collective academic professional identities (e.g. Davies and Petersen 2005a, 2005b; Davies et al. 2005; Evetts 2005; Hey and Bradford 2004; McWilliam 2004). In particular, 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. As Davies and Petersen argue:

The ‘Enterprise University’ and the signifying practices that come with it are, it seems, everywhere apparent – although its inevitable affects on academic work and day-to-day practices, and on academic identities, has yet to be adequately researched. (Davies and Petersen 2005a, 33)

Contested academic identities

Academia is a contested territory that entails constant struggles over the symbols and boundaries of authenticity. In his mapping of the French academic field, Bourdieu describes how claims to legitimacy are bound up with the creation of capital and the formation of hierarchies and power relations within the academy:

… the university field is … the locus of a struggle to determine the conditions and the criteria of legitimate membership and legitimate hierarchy, that is, to determine which properties are pertinent, effective and liable to function as capital so as to generate the specific profits guaranteed by the field. The different sets of individuals (more or less constituted into groups) who are defined by these different criteria have a vested interest in them. In proffering these criteria, in trying to have them acknowledged, in staking their own claim to constitute them as legitimate properties, as specific capital, they are working to modify the laws of formation of the prices characteristic of the university market, and thereby to increase their potential for profit. (Bourdieu 2001, 11)

In other words, questions of authenticity and legitimacy are central to the formation of social relations within the academy – with individuals and groups competing to ensure that their particular interests, characteristics and identities are accorded recognition and value. Whilst this is, of course, characteristic of all fields, Bourdieu does suggest that higher education is particularly dependent on ‘the representation which its agents have of it’ (14). Hence academia is both the object and product of ‘rival, sometimes hostile representations, which all claim the status of truth and thereby the right to exist’ (13).

Bourdieu was principally concerned with understanding how the boundaries of authenticity/legitimacy are set up, enacted and policed by relatively powerful actors within the higher education field (e.g. the ‘famous names’ of French intellectual life, such as Foucault, Derrida and Lacan). In this article, however, I am interested in an exploratory analysis of how less powerful and established academic subjects (in this case, ‘younger’ academics) position themselves (and experience being positioned) within debates around ‘authenticity’.
In the light of the changing contemporary higher education field, as outlined in the preceding section, younger academics are interestingly located at the nexus of competing discourses around what it means (or might mean) to be an academic. That is, as new arrivals within the field, they have ostensibly not experienced the relations which characterised former eras. They are thus positioned differently to those already established within the field and may hold various competing interests and identity constructions.

My approach is further shaped by Colley and James’ (2005) understanding of professional identities as disrupted processes which can involve not only ‘becoming’ but also ‘unbecoming’. In other words, ‘becoming’ an academic is not smooth, straightforward, linear or automatic, but can also involve conflict and instances of inauthenticity, marginalisation and exclusion. Colley and James thus challenge common-sense ‘implicit assumptions about the permanence of professional status once it has been attained’, arguing that there is no ‘unidirectional movement of novices from legitimate peripheral participation to full membership of a community of practice’ (1).

Colley and James’ work within the context of further education draws important attention to the role of the (changing) field in constituting and shaping professional identities, and to the interlinking of professional identities with the personal:

…professional identities and trajectories are inseparable from personal and political identities and trajectories. There is certainly no such thing as ‘FE tutor’ separate from the complex, wider lives that [professionals] have lived and are living. (12)

Hence this article pays particular attention to the role of younger academics’ locations within specific institutional and occupational contexts, and to the role of ‘race’, gender, social class and age to their constructions of ‘authenticity’ and ‘success’ – and the implications of these for their own experiences of un/becoming academics. Through an understanding of academic identity as a desired and contested site, and a conceptualisation of younger academics’ claims to authenticity as shaped by their locations and embodied identities, the article questions who can be the ‘authentic’ and ‘successful’ academic in contemporary academia? To what extent are younger academics able to ‘be’ and feel legitimate and/or successful, and in what ways might an ‘authentic’ academic identity be a desired yet refused subject position?

The study
The data reported in this article were collected for a pilot study, funded by the author’s institution. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the author (a white, middle-class woman who both identifies as, and is predominantly positioned by others as, a ‘younger’ academic) with eight ‘younger’ academic workers (defined loosely as those aged 35 and under – although the final sample did not comprise anyone under the age of 30). Respondents were snowballed through personal contacts from a range of English universities and subject areas, and included those employed on both teaching/research and research-only contracts. Whilst care was taken to ensure diversity within the sample, existing relationships between the interviewer and interviewees inevitably shaped the research process and have ethical implications (it would be too simplistic to suggest that these factors operated in any unitary or straightforward ways, but some interviewees might have been more ‘open’ and potentially less guarded in their responses where we already knew one another quite well). Demographic details are provided in Table 1, although for the purpose of protecting anonymity, their details have been disaggregated.

Interview topics included educational and career biographies and views on higher education; constructions of professional identity; perceptions of changes in academia,
notions of the ‘golden age’; the impact of managerialism in higher education; work practices; views on impact of age/gender/ethnicity/social class on working life and career; future plans and aspirations and constructions of ‘success’. Interviews lasted from around an hour to an hour and a half, and were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. Participants chose their own pseudonyms (Joanne, Kate, Iness, Lucy, Rose, Nikki, Amerjit and Gema). Some identifying details have been amended slightly, or are not fully reported, to protect anonymity. All participants were sent copies of their transcript and resulting analyses (copies of draft papers) for comment, and any amendments/changes were made on the basis of mutual agreement via discussion.

Inauthenticity

Writers on higher education, following Ball’s (2003) influential work on teachers, have focused on performativity and fabrication and the ensuing ontological insecurity involved in feelings of lack of authenticity, low trust, guilt and insecurity. (Morley 2003; Butterwisk and Dawson 2005; Harris 2005). (Clegg 2008, 4)

The ‘new times’ in higher education are frequently associated with increased feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. It was notable that all the younger academics who took part reported at least one instance of feeling (or being positioned as) ‘inauthentic’ within academia. As discussed below, the primary reasons for this inauthenticity related to: (a) the performative ethos with its emphasis on producing the ‘right’ products, (b) their age, as ‘younger’ academics, (c) their racial/ethnic, social class and/or gender positioning, and (d) their status – this was particularly an issue for contract researchers.

Inauthenticity and performativity (producing the ‘right’ outputs)

As Davies and Petersen (2005b) write, neoliberalism is organised around the constant surveillance, auditing and assessment of performance. The power of this form of governance

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lies in the ways it is not simply imposed, but is taken up internally by subjects who learn not only to perform to external audit, but also to enact a form of self-governance (a governmentalty of the soul, as Rose 1990 describes it). The value of subjects, within neoliberal regimes, is thus assessed by their ability to produce particular products within specified timescales and parameters.

Within the neoliberal discursive repertoire, ‘performance’ produces the subject as a set of outcomes, bottom lines and deliverables, and all subjects thus produced are rendered exchangeable and dispensible in the management of bottom-lines ... The performance of oneself in a neoliberal regime of thought entails a constant slippage between process and product. It is a significatory device through which the subject demonstrates alignment and compliance, and it is at the same time a technology of the self, a performance of oneself as embodied intellectual subject who must find the way to act within and between the contradictions. (Davies and Petersen 2005b, 5)

This folding of power into self-governance (Butler 1997), and the associated instabilities and insecurities which it induces, is exemplified by younger academic Rose’s reflection:

I never feel like I have done anything to the best of my ability, but I am always trying to. I hope that is how my life will continue. I keep on pushing myself and challenging myself and sometimes that doesn’t feel very nice. But I can’t imagine doing it any other way. (Rose)

Within the contemporary ‘corporate’ university, two of the key ‘outcomes’ that academics are increasingly expected (and demanded) to produce are the winning of external revenue for research (and consultancy) and the production of (at least) four ‘high quality’ publications for the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE, the major national research peer review process for UK universities). These are not simply positioned as a prestigious or desirable activities (or as valuable within their own right for advancing scholarship). Rather, they are closely interwoven with discourses of personal and institutional viability, survival and ‘risk management’ (McWilliam 2004).

The younger academics recognised that they were expected to produce bids on a regular basis and that winning external research grants was necessary for their own academic careers, and for the viability and success of their departments and institutions. However, none actually liked the process (e.g. Nikki, ‘I really don’t like bidding’). They were highly critical of the pervasive pressure on academics to ‘bring in the money’ for its own sake, suggesting that this represents an ‘un/anti-academic’ ethos which is symptomatic of the attempt to make universities more corporate and ‘business-like’:

The university is becoming like a company and they are [chasing] fundings and stuff. So now I have to really have [an] industrial attitude in research – I have to chase money and work on projects and stuff. (Gema)

The process of bidding was often experienced as unfulfilling and soul-destroying. This included both the style of bidding (which Nikki described as ‘begging and bragging’) and the experience of rejection:

I think I find grant applications being rejected more painful in a way, because it is more black and white. With a paper you can do it again, or make corrections. Grant proposals are a hell of a lot of work, often for nothing. And once that idea gets lost, because the team you are with might be gone, that is more frustrating. (Joanne)

Across the sample of younger academics, it was evident that those who felt that they lacked (and/or could not produce) these particular products experienced considerable threats
to their ontological (and economic) security, viability and authenticity. As Amerjit also argued, competitive processes such as winning bids and getting articles successfully reviewed in time for the RAE can also disadvantage those nearer the beginning of their careers:

The most challenging thing about modern day academia in Britain is getting grants, filling in those bloody application forms that nobody really knows how to do, doing the RAE stuff and getting reviewed in time. Also bearing in mind that the reviewers are also trying to get their RAE stuff. And I think those are the challenges.

As Hartley (2002) writes, the RAE is a device of stratification and division within UK higher education:

… 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. (Hartley 2002, 203)

As with many practices which produce hierarchies, it is often those who occupy marginal positions within the dominant economy who are most at risk of being rendered illegitimate. Indeed, those younger, ‘new’ academics who had not yet managed to build a publications portfolio experienced considerable stress and pressure (‘I find it quite stressful because you end up with these hoops to jump through’: Lucy), and found their academic ‘worth’ questioned and considerably diminished. For instance, Kate recounted how a previous head of department had explicitly calculated and quantified the value and viability of job applicants through the number of publications on their CVs – rendering ‘new’ (early career) academics illegitimate investments:

Basically when I was in [elite university] they had called someone over from [another elite university] who had changed his department from grade three to grade five in a couple of years. They called him in to say ‘how did you do it?’ And one of his things was don’t buy potential, buy people in their mid-careers that have been successful, and buy their CVs, basically. Don’t buy new ones. (Kate)

The production of the subject as a ‘set of outcomes’ (e.g. a number of publications) thus risked rendering some younger academics, like Amerjit, ‘impossible’:

The fact that there is an RAE coming up, I know I won’t get a lectureship. Because I don’t have four articles published. I know, for a fact, that when people get applications through the first page they turn to is publications, because at the moment people are recruiting for the RAE. So I know, potentially, I might be unemployed for the next two years, because I am not RAE-able. (Amerjit)

This was not only a severe problem for Amerjit in economic and employment terms, but also constituted a symbolic attack that was experienced as deeply personally painful. Kate similarly described the acute pain of being judged inauthentic and ‘unviable’. She recounted her experience of a job interview in which little attention or weight was given to her teaching abilities, nor was consideration taken of the years she had recently spent working to complete her PhD. Instead, her sum value/worth as a potential academic had been quantified and assessed through the lack of publications on her CV.

… being told that everything I had was worth nothing [because I] didn’t have the publications – really it was gob smacking. Because I was trying to write these lectures as well. And it wasn’t
as if you could just sit down and bash out your PhD. And that was my sort of first experience and it was devastating, really. (Kate)

These concerns continued to threaten Kate and question her authenticity in her current post, where despite presenting herself as a passionate, innovative and committed lecturer, she was feeling very insecure and threatened by a recent proposal that all staff must have four articles accepted in time for the RAE:

There are proposals going through about staff development and everyone would have to get so many articles in … Again, I just suddenly felt like I had the rug coming out from underneath me … it left people so shook, because again, as a junior member of staff, that was you. And I actually started looking for work somewhere else, at other universities. Because I felt I may as well jump before I was pushed, in a way … You know, it was really horrible.

These were not idle threats, and various other respondents recounted instances in their own departments where ‘non-research-active’ members of staff had had their academic contracts revoked. Hence those who cannot produce the ‘right’ products at the ‘right’ time are particularly vulnerable to ‘unbecoming’, both economically and/or symbolically.

The insecurities induced by performativity were also felt by those younger academics who were in relatively secure employment, but who were not yet publishing. For instance, Gema and Lucy both talked about their symbolic positioning within their departments as academics who are not (yet) publishing. Gema recognised that she may be ‘looked down’ on in some respects for this (although she countered this by asserting ‘that’s their problem’). Lucy also described receiving considerable attention and pressure to start publishing, and criticised the normative assumptions that underpinned expectations of the ‘speed’ at which ‘becoming’ should take place.

It feels like you can be an emerging academic but you need to show that you are not just emerging but you’ve already blossomed. And I find that quite hard … Which is a sad thing if someone was more than capable of doing research, [but …] just felt unable to jump through the hoops at the times that they are supposed to. (Lucy)

Hence, she felt that ‘somehow your identity is about where you feel comfortable. So if this is an area you are developing then you don’t see yourself as that’. Lucy also flagged up how these expectations are often not backed up by appropriate support mechanisms – the ‘authentic’ academic subject is expected to be the archetypal self-sufficient ‘independent learner’, who already contains and embodied the required competencies and motivation.

I find the RAE hard and I also find it hard when you get kind of breathed on to do something without necessarily [getting] the support for it. (Lucy)

As Leathwood (2001) writes, however, the discourse of the ‘independent learner’ (as the archetypal subject within higher education policy discourse) is premised upon a raft of assumptions reflecting middle-class values and capitals. It is, therefore, little surprise that those who expressed the greatest doubts about their ‘authenticity’ as academic writers were those from working-class backgrounds, and who felt that they required some form of support in order to further develop.

Performativity also shaped the younger academics’ ability to perform aspects of ‘authentic’ academic identity – such as being able to exercise autonomy in directing the content and direction of their work. This autonomy has been identified as a universal ideal
within constructions of academic identity (McInnis 1992), yet, as Joanne explained, in practice it is a privilege, reserved for those who are performing/producing:

As long as you are producing your work, this is the thing isn’t it? As long as you are producing your work you are free to do it how, when, you want to do it. But if you are not … (Joanne)

Thus the new managerial equation of ‘good’, authentic academic identity with the performance of particular outcomes (e.g. winning external grants, publishing to order) increases the fragility and instability of ‘authenticity’ because academics are compelled to keep re-performing these achievements over time – albeit with ever-dwindling resources (Davies and Petersen 2005b). In other words, ‘successful’, authentic academic identities are rendered insecure, temporary and risky within regimes of performativity – the capacity to be seen as an authentic, successful academic is tightly constrained and dependent upon the extent to which the academic can keep delivering (producing the ‘right’ goods) as a neoliberal subject.

Inauthenticity and age (the younger academic as ‘not yet’ legitimate)

As Bourdieu notes, age can constitute a potent principle of division and hierarchy and can be an object of considerable conflict (‘we only have to think of the classificatory and often polemical use of oppositions – old/young, paleo/neob, former/recent, etc’; Bourdieu 2001, 11). Many of the younger academics felt that their authenticity, as academics, was compromised within a value system that places a premium value upon the chronological acquisition of knowledge and expertise.

My age? Yes, in some instances. … I mean, you just sometimes feel that … I don’t want to be moaning here, but some of the more established staff, how they talk to their peers is definitely different from the way they talk to you. This is not the case with all of them – [just] some of them. If they are critical about some of your work, and if you are critical about their work, the way they receive criticism is very, very different from the way they receive criticism from their peers … It is in very subtle ways, it is very hard to pin down … And the problem is, it is not intentional. But they just, I don’t know. (Iness)

As Amerjit noted, age did not stand alone but intersected with other axes of social identity, hence Amerjit felt that his potential academic authenticity was challenged by interactions of age, gender and ethnicity:

I think, again, people just see you as young, but then there are a lot of young academics. I think it is dual. He is a Muslim, young Asian man. So it is tri, you know, he is young, he is Asian, he is a man. Will he struggle with the language? English is probably not his first language. Will he be able to write articles? Would he be able to mark other people’s essays and correct their English, if his English is a bit iffy as well. I do get that sense, as well, you know? (Amerjit)

The younger academic women talked in particular about how a youthful (female) appearance was implicated in their being positioned as ‘novice’ or ‘inauthentic’ academics (and several described how they are regularly assumed to be ‘students’ rather than ‘academics’). Consequently, they engaged in various presentations of self to try and increase their chances of being positioned as ‘authentically’ academic. Several of the women described deliberating over whether to dress as ‘myself’ (and thus have to challenge preconceptions of academic inauthenticity), or whether to dress ‘older’, ‘smarter’/more ‘formally’ (or more ‘badly’, as Kate put it?) in order to appear more authentically ‘academic’. These latter
performances were experienced as uncomfortable and jarred against their sense of self and personal authenticity.

Somehow success comes with older looks … so there I lose […] but I don’t want to look old? I feel young. So what? I gain other things [But] I notice I have a different style of dressing during term time. OK, now it is summer, so I can relax. But even when I come on Saturdays I wear jeans and trainers, which I wouldn’t wear on Mondays to Saturdays. Especially on days when I teach. (Gema)

I hosted a seminar series and invited speakers to come along, and I had moments of agonising. Should I wear a suit? That is not very academic. Should I wear a flowery top and trousers? That would be quite academic, but I hate that look. So actually, what do I normally wear? Jeans and T-shirt. Why don’t I wear that? Because they will think I am a student. So you are sort of wrestling with issues of presentation of self. And having had those arguments in my own head I usually come to the conclusion I am going to go as me, and deal with where that position puts me. It is almost as if I am creating another obstacle, not just my age, but how I present myself. OK, you can misjudge me but then that gives me another obstacle over which I have to prove I can do it. (Rose)

Lucy also described being mistaken for a sixth former on a particular occasion:

I did think maybe I should wear my hair in a bun and wear a suit? But I am not going to change who I am. [Although] I wouldn’t teach in a pair of jeans and trainers … [and] I wouldn’t dream of putting my hair in pigtails now.

Thus being (and appearing) ‘young’ (and female) constituted a barrier that many of the younger academic women felt that they had to challenge by ‘proving’ their academic credentials:

Generally I think your age is there. I don’t think it impacts once you have proved that it isn’t an issue [but] I think people have perceptions that need to be overcome. […] When they first met me they looked at me like ‘oh my God, what is this?’ And I genuinely got the impression they just thought ‘we don’t know who you are, you are young and female and hopeless’ … I felt inferior. (Lucy)

They were looking at me as if I was absolutely nobody, as if I was a student. I was completely insignificant. And it took quite a lot of explaining to make them realise who I was and how they knew me, and we had been conversing by email. And I felt very small, very insignificant, quite pathetic, and doubted myself … It wasn’t a surprise, you know, that they would think ‘oh this young thing in jeans bouncing over saying hi, it must be one of our groupie students’ – [that] was their initial reaction. (Rose)

**Inauthenticity, ‘race’, class and gender**

As noted above, the younger academics’ experiences of ‘inauthenticity’ were also compounded by intersections of gender, ethnicity and social class. Those from working-class backgrounds were particularly likely to experience disjunctures between their own habitus and the middle-class habitus of academia (see Hey 2003; Mahony and Zmroczek 1997). For instance, Rose, Lucy, Amerjit and Kate all talked about feeling unsure of their ‘academic’ abilities:

I never thought I was gifted enough really. I have always been quite unsure academically, and that partly reflects now, I am not sure I can write a paper. (Amerjit)
But I think I felt it was beyond me, almost like the gold standard to work in the university. I don’t think I necessarily felt authentic enough to work in the university and be an academic. (Rose)

Amerjit also described adopting various interpersonal strategies to try and ingratiate himself into the dominant ‘posh’ middle class ethos of his department. This involved a conscious manipulation of his voice and interactional style and a considerable expenditure of time and effort.

I try to be posh-ish. As posh as you can get. So I work on my ps and qs around them. I am quite false with them … I use language and terms I wouldn’t use outside that turf … So there is a pretence, I do pretend to be a lot posher and a lot nicer and deferential than probably I am … So I do try and deploy these strategies ‘let’s go for a coffee’ to try to break in a bit. To be accepted. (Amerjit)

Amerjit’s quote evokes a field which, despite undergoing substantial shifts in recent times, remains somewhat ‘fixed’ in terms of patterns of dominant power relations. Thus, those who do not fit or pass easily within this (white, middle-class) space may be impelled to perform their identities otherwise, in an attempt to ‘break in’ and ‘be accepted’. In particular, Amerjit stressed that it was his ‘race’/ethnicity (and the frequent dominant conflation of ‘Asian’ with ‘Muslim’) that was implicated most strongly in his Othering within the academy. He recounted various instances of being treated differently on account of his Asian heritage (for instance, negative assumptions being made about his literacy skills and abilities) – a situation exacerbated by increased public Islamophobia (Archer 2003). As Mirza (2006) and Allen (1998) discuss, the whiteness of the ivory tower can be alienating, uncomfortable and marginalising of minority ethnic experiences and understandings – a point reiterated by Amerjit, as he reflected on racism as an institutionalised feature of higher education:

There is embedded racism, still embedded discrimination along the lines of race. I really do think it is race … I think people think we have got the legislation, we have got some big minority ethnic name[s] and that is it, we have fulfilled our duty, but no. Deeply rooted in a lot of institutions, particularly older institutions, you still have embedded racism or prejudices and people don’t seem to see them, because they are embedded by these people, because they all come from the same cultural set … They feel they don’t embody racism, they feel I am not racist. And yeah, they are probably not racist, but they embody some forms of superiority.

The issue of gender was raised by both men and women within the sample. Echoing feminist critiques (e.g. Leathwood and Francis 2006), women drew attention to the dominance of masculinist values and practices within the academy (‘I don’t like the way it is so very hierarchical and macho and competitive’: Joanne). They also noted how men were more likely to gain promotion and success.

Yes, maybe, when you are looking profession-wise and tradition-wise, men are preferred. Men are top, and my observation says nationality too. All the managers are British … White British. (Gema)

There has always been a bearded, middle class, white, middle aged man, as director of every research organisation I have every worked in, despite the majority of the staff being female. And when those women do crack the glass ceiling they never quite make it to the top, it seems. But judgements are cast on their leadership, their management, all that kind of stuff, but in a different way than it is for the male directors. (Rose)
Attention was also drawn to the ways in which academic and departmental cultures could favour men (e.g. Nikki described working in a department that was ‘very, very, gendered’ in terms of the unequal allocation of teaching and research responsibilities), and could position some women, but particularly mothers, in difficult ways. Joanne also reflected: ‘I am the only woman in our department […] which does affect me in terms of the research culture in my department, I suppose’. This required Joanne to negotiate a range of gendered contexts, such as the inevitable element of isolation entailed by being the only woman in her subject area, through to experiencing suggestive ‘banter’ from technicians to always being asked to sit on recruitment panels to provide the ‘gender balance’.

However, it was also notable that the two younger academic men also raised gender as an issue. Both worked in departments that have high proportions of women, and both indicated that they had experienced instances in which their masculinity had been problematic. Amerjit felt ‘I still think gender is a big issue’, explaining that in his experience ‘women are more likely to appoint other women’, particularly where they dominate middle managerial levels. Iness also indicated that he had experienced an instance in which his gender was made an issue ‘in an experience that was very, very upsetting to me’.

Thus gendered climates were experienced in complex ways by the younger academics. As Hey and Bradford (2004) write, managerialism evokes a ‘tough’, competitive and masculinist ethos, which can be enacted and performed through both male and female bodies (see also Reay and Ball 2000). And whilst managerialism may offer an attractive and ‘redemptive’ macho identity to some men in the academy (compensating for the ‘spoiled’ masculinity popularly associated with educational spheres), it might also be experienced as negative and alienating by ‘other’ men in the academy.

In/authenticity and employment status: Contract researchers

As Hey (2001) and Reay (2004) discuss, contract research posts are crucial to the intellectual and financial fabric of the academy, yet it is argued that they remain marginalised and unvalued. Contract researchers have thus been likened to the ‘lumpen proletariat’ (Hey 2001) and the manual labourers of academia – those who perform the ‘dirty’ (hands-on), ‘heart’ (emotional) and ‘leg’ work of fieldwork (Reay 2004), and whose labour is appropriated and ‘owned’ by others. As Reay discusses, contract researchers frequently have to grapple with issues of il/legitimacy and in/authenticity, as ‘Reputation and prestige arising from funded research is always vested in the ‘properly academic’ project directors never in the contract researcher’ (2004, 32).

Despite being essential to the perpetuation of research cultures and the ‘knowledge economy’ (not to mention furthering the careers of principal applicants; Reay 2004), contract research workers occupy particularly precarious positions within the academy, enjoying little, if any, stability or security. Indeed, the younger academics who held contract research posts recounted how the difficulties and insecurities of their posts impacted negatively on their lives and their sense of legitimacy. For instance, Iness was ‘very unhappy’ about his treatment over the renewal of his contract (‘first of all they sack you and a couple of days later they send you an extension to your contract’), and Amerjit described the difficulty of trying to live with uncertain, short-term contract research posts:

Well financially I am anxious, definitely. It is so, you know … and that is why I go back to the whole thing about I wish I had just joined a bank, because I would have been somewhere today. Being a researcher is not particularly fulfilling, you know? You are there for a year to two years, you know? I am really anxious, actually. I think, over the next couple of months, even, I have to make a serious choice about what I do. I am constantly making a serious choice.
The feeling of not being in control was experienced particularly acutely:

I know so many people in my position, maybe not as young as myself, but their long-term experience of being in an insecure position has really coloured so much their perception of themselves, their perception of academia, and has instilled, quite justifiably and rightly, so much negativity in the way they relate to their workplace and so on. (Iness)

The contract researcher can be a symbolically marginalised post, as both Amerjit and Iness discussed. For instance, Amerjit was not represented on the departmental staff notice board (‘They know I am not a member of staff and my picture is not on the picture board, where they have the academics’). As Hey (2001) and Reay (2004) discuss, contract researchers are positioned at bottom of academic hierarchies, a point picked up by Iness in his desire for greater ‘democracy’:

I would like to see more democracy in my workplace. There is a rigid hierarchy in my workplace and you can feel it in some meetings, where, OK, we all sit around a round table, but it is *not that round*, you know what I mean?

Iness also described his sense of frustration and marginalisation within the ‘very, very boring’ departmental meetings which he was expected to attend (‘ninety five percent of the things that are talked about have nothing to do with me whatsoever’). This was compounded by the common use of unfamiliar language and terminology that was never explained:

A lot of background knowledge is assumed to exist in people’s minds – but I am not going to interrupt the chair or whoever is speaking to say – excuse me what is that abbreviation for? I might get fired? But also I am not interested to find out, to be honest. (Iness)

Amerjit and Iness also experienced more subtle forms of exclusion and positioning as ‘inauthentic’ through the ways in which their research and contributions are ‘read’, and through interpersonal contact with other academics:

If you are a contract researcher you are never part of the team – people don’t remember your name. Because you are just here to fill a function. You are not about contributing anything to the long term of the department. There is almost another form of intellectual snobbery. We are permanent, we are proper, we are the real McCoy, whereas you are just, you know … oh *he’s a researcher*. (Amerjit)

You know, meeting someone down the corridor, what they say to you, exchange of social jollities. You do feel that all the staff are not overly generous with it … OK, I am happy to say if they don’t want to give a smile and say hello, that is their problem. But you do, however, notice that with their peers it is always – hello, how are you? Maybe it is a very small thing. Maybe this is very trivial. (Iness)

As these extracts demonstrate, the mechanisms through which contract researchers are rendered marginal and inauthentic are not only explicit (e.g. short-term contract) but can also be subtle and enacted in a myriad of ‘small acts’ and everyday injustices which become engrained with the daily cultures of institutions. Despite Iness’ tentative reflection (‘Maybe it is a very small thing. Maybe this is very trivial’), these practices were also felt very deeply.

**Constructions of ‘authenticity’ and ‘success’**

So far I have discussed some of the ways in which the younger academics experienced ‘inauthenticity’. I would now like to turn attention to the ways in which they themselves...
engaged in discursive struggles over the symbols and boundaries of ‘authentic’ academic identity and ‘success’. Hence, despite occasionally feeling inauthentic to some extent younger academics also actively engaged with this contested discursive terrain, trying to position themselves as ‘authentic’ academics.

As discussed elsewhere (Archer 2008), the younger academics constructed their academic identities in a similar fashion to older colleagues (as reported in the work of, for example, Clegg 2008; Davies and Petersen 2005a; Sikes 2005). That is, they constructed their academic identity as a form of ‘principled’ personal project (Clegg 2008, 17), underpinned by core values of intellectual endeavour, criticality, ethics and professionalism. Professionalism was evoked as the embodying of a principled, ethical and responsible approach to work and work relationships, and they all espoused collegiality and collaboration.

In line with their constructions of authentic academic identity as a form of principled personal project, none of the younger academics defined success in careerist or instrumental terms (e.g. they did not name success in terms of achieving particular positions or accolades). Rather, they alluded to notions of ‘self-fulfilment’ (Iness) through their work – which Lucy described as ‘just getting a warm glow inside. Having something to show for all the work you have done’. Similarly, Nikki agreed ‘I think it is all about doing stuff that you quite like. Being in situations where you … feel comfortable and have good relationships with people’. Joanne emphasised the importance of happiness (‘just being happy, having a good work life balance, being happy in my personal life’) and for Rose, success was already partially achieved (‘escape from working class life is success … And being in academia and the value I place on academia as a means of escape, then I have it, I feel successful’).

For contract researchers like Iness and Amerjit, the achievement of autonomy (‘being in control of where I should go and where I want to go’: Iness) and security were crucial to their visions of success:

The long-term, it would be to have a permanent position, to have a home, to be with my partner, and just to live that life, really. Because I don’t really feel as if I am living a life at the moment. I feel unstable. I don’t feel like I have foundations. That would be success. You know? Nothing more, nothing less, it is not about an intellectual journey, I am being real about it … I am not asking for fussing, not asking for affirmative action, I just want to be treated fairly, get on with my life and have stability. That would be success. But I know it will be quite hard to achieve. (Amerjit)

When asked about what makes them ‘feel’ academic, respondents identified three key aspects of ‘being’, ‘having’ and ‘doing’. ‘Being’ academic was constructed in terms of embodied qualities and practices of being intellectual, critical and knowledgeable and committed to scholarship. It also involved being ethical, professional and respectful and being collaborative, collegiate and part of a wider academic community (e.g. Nikki: ‘It is part of being in a community who write papers, review papers, go to conferences’).

‘Feeling academic’ was also related to possessing particular ‘insider’ knowledge:

… becoming knowledgeable about the inner workings of the academic product, I suppose, journals, papers and books and conferences. Having that insider knowledge, I suppose, about how academia works and feeling authentic. (Rose)

This aspect was noted particularly by those from working-class backgrounds, who had had to acquire new forms of cultural capital. The achievement of ‘authentic’ academic identity was also marked for some by the possession of appropriate credentials (‘I have ticked the box in the sense that I have got the academic education, I have done the PhD’: Amerjit).
Finally, ‘feeling academic’ was also conveyed through ‘doing’ – notably performing research-related activities. For instance, Lucy suggested that she felt academic whenever she (successfully) wrote/delivered publications and conference papers. As Rose explained:

> There are things that you do that make you feel academic. There are the ways you construct yourself and you are constructed by others. So, for example, editing a special issue of the Journal, that to me is a very academic pursuit.

This aspect of production and ‘doing’ was also reiterated by Joanne, who constructed contemporary forms of academic identity as characterised by ‘doing’ many roles:

> So we are scholars, but it is one of many things we are now …we are a researcher, a teacher and an administrator, and you have to have the whole lot. More hats to wear.

For some, like Rose, the importance of ‘doing’ academic activities was for enabling her to develop a sense of herself as authentically academic (to render an academic identity thinkable):

> Doing the things … not necessarily to other people, but convincingly to yourself, that you can stand and give a conference paper […] [and] feel confident that I constructed a well thought through and theoretically rigorous argument that I am quite happy to have challenged … producing work that to my mind is credible, engaging, you know?

However, the younger academics were also aware that their highly personalised definitions of authenticity and success were not necessarily recognised or validated within the wider higher education economy. This marked the limits of their personal psychic projects and meant that, despite constructing their own defences and justifications, some of the ways of being that they espoused also ran the risk of being rendered impossible/invisible. That is, personal constructions of authenticity and success had to compete with dominant versions of authenticity and success; hence the younger academics were regularly compelled to engage in behaviours and practices which were unrelated to – or which could even counter – their own notions of authenticity and success.

The younger academics’ active constructions of authenticity (and their claiming of authentic identities) also required the drawing of boundaries around authenticity to the exclusion of others. They were thus involved in challenging dominant representations and claims to ‘authenticity’ and success, in order to actively carve out spaces for themselves with respect to claiming an identity of the ‘authentic academic’. Consequently, they were engaged in discursive struggles over what an academic is, might and should be. Their constructions of authenticity as intellectualism, personal qualities/values (‘being’), possessing appropriate knowledge (‘having’) and ‘doing’, worked to challenge competing constructions of academic authenticity, such as those relating to notions of prestige, reputation and status. For instance, Rose was particularly vocal in her construction of boundaries in which authenticity does not depend upon being recognised as such by others. In particular she challenged notions of academic ‘façade’:

> I think some people can pass as academic by the way they look or the presentation of themselves or who they are seen with or the events they go to. But I don’t consider them to be academic because they lack that authenticity. They are not producing work that to my mind is credible, engaging, you know. (Rose)

Rose continued, ‘I still hold on to those views that it [academia] is a really mixed bag. I think there is a lot of room for dead wood. There are people who lack in talent, in skill’.
Rose was a full-time researcher who heavily invested in trying to achieve ‘authentic’ status, but who also felt challenged and at risk of inauthenticity due to her age, embodied appearance and class background. Her transcript was laced through with her disdain and frustration with those she called ‘dead wood’ – those who, in Rose’s eyes, ‘could wear the academic label’ (e.g. by virtue of their ‘fit’ with dominant academic culture) but who are (in her eyes) undeserving of their ‘officially’ legitimate status due to their lack of criticality or ‘credibility’. Her cutting terminology also highlights the tensions and ambivalences at work within struggles over authenticity – drawing Rose in to a competitive and emotive relationship with other academics over the symbols and meanings of ‘authenticity’.

As previously discussed, Amerjit also occupied a contested and difficult space with regard to being positioned legitimately within the academy (as a contract researcher and as a young Asian man), and he similarly openly questioned the inauthenticity of some ‘proper’ academics:

And there are so many prats academically, so many awful, awful, people who completely monopolise their positions. No professionalism, no … and you know you could do the job ten times better than them. You know you have the skills to talk to people politely. And you know people who are just there through the backdoor. I see people who shouldn’t be there, I really do. (Amerjit)

In other words, the contested nature of academic authenticity was experienced as a particularly fraught battleground by those who felt positioned more marginally and precariously within it. These contestations were not simply a form of competitive one-up-manship, but were located at the core of the younger academics self-constructions.

Achieving ‘success’?

Despite constructing ‘authenticity’ and ‘success’ in intrinsic and highly personal terms, the younger academics’ ability to achieve authenticity and ‘success’ was shaped and constrained by their various structural positioning. As discussed above, the potential for them to feel/be authentic and/or successful was mediated by ‘old’ inequalities relating to ethnicity, social class, gender and age, and was compromised by the audit culture of contemporary higher education, with its insecure contractual positions and demands to constantly produce particular ‘products’ within narrow timescales and with few resources. As Kate put it, ‘I was expected to kind of produce this stuff, but actually the system wasn’t going to allow me to be successful’. And yet, at the same time, they were also taking up and performing aspects of performativity in their struggles to succeed. In this final section, I would like to consider how these tensions and contradictions were experienced by Joanne – the respondent who, from a dominant academic perspective, was one of the most ‘successful’ members of the sample.

In many ways, Joanne was performing ‘success’ in her career: she had won both large and small grants and was classified as research-active, with a good publications portfolio and the editorship of an esteemed journal. She worked in a five star department in an elite university and had recently been ‘head hunted’ for a chair, shortly after her return to part-time work following the birth of her first child. Working within science, Joanne had adopted a personal style which fitted with the gendered ethos of her department, and which appeared to help her to successfully negotiate these challenges (‘character has been quite important. I am quite outgoing and quite outspoken’). Her white middle-class (academic) background, and her career trajectory in a high status field within elite institutions, had endowed her with considerable cultural and social capital with which to strategise and ‘play the game’
I think I am getting more strategic – you understand the game a bit better and how to play it well. And I think that takes time and experience). However, Joanne also recognised that her ability to continue her upwards trajectory was constrained by her age and gender. Despite having the right ‘products’ and a strong CV, her embodied self (as a younger woman and a mum) was simply ‘unthinkable’ as a professor in her elite department:

I would be happy to stay here but I am not sure I would make it as a chair … [LA: Why not?] Just they are very male and I don’t think they really understand … I think I would get Reader OK. I don’t think that is a problem.

Hence Joanne believed that to progress much further, she would have to ‘trade down’ to a lower status institution. Like the other younger academics, she also experienced the pressure of the new managerialist demand for success to be constantly made and remade (‘I am doing all right, but I know I have got to continue’), which threatened to unsettle her sense of success. She criticised the excessive ‘pressures on producing evidence of your worth as a scholar’ – but also, as noted above, was, paradoxically, engaged in actively producing the ‘right’ products. Indeed, Joanne wove this productivity into a (positive) personal identity construction of herself as a ‘do-er’. The intricate ambivalences within this relationship (in which Joanne both criticises the managerial audit culture, whilst also performing and being ‘successful’ as a result of conforming to the demands of performativity) are exemplified by Joanne’s account of her own research practices. She described developing a pragmatic approach to reviewing literature for a paper – as a response to the new ‘fast’, ‘lean and mean’ times:

I am not just being this scholar who is able to sit and read and browse and go to the library and take editions of the journal off the shelf … you would have a quick flick maybe at the titles, but you are not really browsing the actual paper. You are looking at titles, possibly abstract, but [not] much more.

This strategy helped her to produce articles within an increasingly pressured time frame – yet she also recognised that it threatened her own values around the identity of an ‘authentic’ academic (e.g. as someone who ‘reads’ and engages with the substantial content of papers). Thus, despite being in a much more secure position than many of the other respondents, and despite performing ‘success’, Joanne also felt compromised by a ‘greedy’ and insatiable system which renders success fragile and tenuous:

I think the pressure, I don’t want to sound as if I am contradicting myself. I understand why it is there. But occasionally it just goes over the top, and I go – I can’t cope. Just occasionally when that all seems to accumulate and then be detrimental. That is the worst thing.

Hence, like the other respondents, Joanne defined ‘real’ success in personal, intrinsic terms – as achieving a good ‘work-life balance’ and ‘being happy’ in her personal life.

Conclusion
Writing about academia and academic subjects is inherently challenging, particularly for those ‘on the inside’:

… the contradiction which is inherent in divulging tribal secrets and which is only so painful because even the partial publication of our most intimate details is also a kind of public confession. (Bourdieu 2001, 5)
In this article I have attempted to discuss the painful and pleasurable experiences of a group of younger academics, and their relationships to notions of ‘authenticity’ and ‘success’ – highlighting tensions experienced between their own and dominant constructions of the ‘good academic’ and personal notions of value and integrity. In so doing, I have tried to highlight both their understandings of their positions and their agentic strategies and negotiations of their locations. I have attempted to demonstrate the power of neoliberal discourses as productive and constitutive of academic subjectivities, shaping who can ‘be’ authentic/successful. I have argued that the contemporary neoliberal context, with its emphasis on performativity, mitigates against the achievement of secure or stable academic identities. In particular, I have argued that the ‘authentic’ and ‘successful’ academic is a desired yet refused identity for many younger academics, and is especially amplified through matrices of ‘race’/ethnicity, social class, gender and age. Hence younger academics from minority ethnic and working-class backgrounds, and those who are contract researchers, find it particularly difficult to inhabit identities of success/authenticity with any sense of permanence or legitimacy. That is, they must negotiate on a daily basis not only their attempts at ‘becoming’ but also the threat of ‘unbecoming’.

A final note of caution might be expressed, however, with regard to the distinctiveness (or not) of age as a factor in the production of academic in/authenticity. As the literature discussed earlier suggests, the ‘new times’ of contemporary academia, with the increased pressures for performance and production, are, arguably, as likely to engender feelings of anxiety and inauthenticity among ‘older’ and/or more senior academics. Indeed, I would argue that the impact of new managerialism and performativity within the sector has been to render all academic identities more unstable (in which ‘success’ is always under threat and must be constantly re-produced/Performed). In this sense, the identity work undertaken by the participants reported here might be seen as indicative of wider trends and processes in the sector. However, my purpose in focussing particularly on younger academics relates to their position as both a relatively under-explored group within the literature and as the next generation of academics who, having grown up as ‘Thatcher’s children’, might in some ways be expected to experience a greater ‘fit’ with the newer values and practices of the contemporary academic field (see Archer 2008). That they are reporting experiences of tension, rupture and identity conflict is interesting in itself, and contradicts some anecdotal evidence reported within other studies, in which younger academics have been described as eagerly engaging with new performance regimes (Davies and Petersen 2005b). Equally, the finding that they are attempting to adopt critical and reflexive positions in relation to dominant practices and are trying to resist the drive for performativity through the taking up of more ‘traditional’ academic discourses (e.g. around notions of collegiality), might be interpreted as reflecting the ongoing power and resilience of ‘traditional’ constructions of academic identity/culture that, rather than being under threat and on the brink of disappearance, continue to be actively taken up and reworked by the next generation of academics.

References


