

BOTHERED BLOGGINGS AND TROUBLED TWEETS: CONSTRUCTIONS OF STRESS AND CONCERNS FOR EARLY-CAREER ACADEMICS

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Abstract

While recent studies suggest that stress is becoming more prominent for academics, very little research has been conducted on understanding the realities of stress for early-career academics. Through the employment of social constructionist epistemology and theory as a framework for research, our study examines how early-career academics language and construct experiences of stress and concern. We employed a constructionist thematic analysis. This involved selecting a sample of blogs and Twitter microblogs to code and identifying important themes, in relation to stress and concern. Through a preliminary analysis of blogs, we found that there were recurring concerns on work-life balance, a competitive culture that eroded collegiality and social support, and there were worries about the insecurity of work. Our analysis of Twitter tweets found a range of concerns. There were issues of health and wellbeing, being unfairly discriminated against and not recognised by senior academic staff, structural barriers in the application and access of research, publishing issues and advice in relation to accessibility of research outputs, a governmentality on the standards of academic conduct, and concerns on flexibility in relation to time and work life balance. The findings have implications for higher education institutions in the support and career development of early career academics.

Keywords: Blogging, Constructionist Thematic Analysis, Early Career Academics, Stress

1. Introduction

Work stress is increasing in the modern workplace (Safework, 2012; APS, 2013) due to economic pressures, the increasing use of technology and less secure employment. This increase is concerning due to the economic and social impacts of workplace stress.

Researchers have established that workplace stress can place workers at risk of health issues such as heart disease, hypertension, headaches, skin conditions and insomnia. Workplace stressors such as a lack of social support (Cheng, Mauno & Lee, 2014) long hours (Barnett, 2006), a lack of control over one's work (Steptoe & Willemsen, 2004) and perceived unfair treatment (Robbins, Ford & Tetrick, 2012) and job insecurity have been found to lead to poorer health outcomes (Goh, Pfeffer & Zenios, 2015).

Recent studies suggest that academics are suffering more stress and experiencing less satisfaction from their work (Goedegebuure & Van der Lee, 2008; Fredman & Doughney, 2012). The higher education workplace has undergone significant changes over the past several decades. These changes are often attributed to a move to a managerial approach to higher education (Deem & Brehony, 2005). Managerialism has been described, in this context, as "an emphasis on particular forms of accountability, the development of a market-orientation, a focus on securing non-government funding, and increased concern with issues of efficiency and economy" (Anderson, 2008, p. 251).

In addition to shifts in ideology of academic institutions, demographic trends pose a challenge to the modern university. One such challenge is the ageing academic workforce, creating the need to attract and retain early career academics in the near future as a significant proportion of the sector retires (Hugo, 2005).

Early career academics, or those teaching and research staff awarded their doctorate less than five years prior, are more likely to be dissatisfied with their jobs than those later in their career (Bexley, James & Arkoudis, 2011). This frustration and dissatisfaction can lead early career academics to seriously consider their 'exit options', as Petersen (2011) describes the turnover intentions and coping strategies of early career researchers in Australia in her study.

While there have been very few qualitative peer-reviewed studies on academic early career issues, blogs and microblogs (e.g., twitter) have become more prominent in recent years to express concerns, issues and experiences of early-career academics. Academic blogging and micro-blogging have become increasingly popular among academics as ways to promote their research and create academic and social connections (Busch & Jamieson, 2011). Although many academics view blogs as irrelevant because they do not count as peer-reviewed publications (Lovink, 2008), blogs and microblogs have been used to exchange views due to their immediacy of engagement and global reach (Busch & Jamieson, 2011). As there is a dearth of scholarly research examining how academics construct early career issues and experiences through blogs and microblogs, we thought such a focus would be a useful starting place to gain an understanding of the stressors and concerns facing academics during the early stages of their career.

2. Research Approach and Method

We employed a qualitative and social constructionist research design to gain an understanding of how early career academic experiences and issues are constructed. The research is qualitative because we want to gain a thick description, which is a detailed and contextual examination of enactments (in this case, the language of blog and microblog writings) to understand the meaning of those enactments (Geertz, 1973). To enable a thick description, the epistemological stance we used to inform and conduct our research was social constructionist. This stance involves a number of theoretical assumptions. We assume that knowledge is culturally and historically specific in that we contextually construct our understandings (Burr, 2003). These understandings are also constructed relationally in that our common ways of understanding come into being through social exchanges, such as our engagement with texts that are products and productions of social interaction (Burr, 2003). We assume that early career academics write about their experiences through social media to be heard, to inform others and to exchange ideas, but these writings are also formed through previous and current social interactions.

We also assume that language is a form of social action (Burr, 2003). That is, language is not merely a reflection; it has an relational enactment that enables and constrains how we perform our interactions, (re)actions and understandings, determining what we construct as 'real' and meaningful (Foucault, 1982; Gergen, 2003). We assume that early career academics language their experiences to persuade others and how they language this can shape/determine how others react. Rather than assume what we describe and explain of ourselves and others as unproblematic, social constructionism enables us to be reflexive of the action orientation of

language. As Burr

(2003, p. 3) argues, social constructionism “cautions us to be ever suspicious about how the world appears to be.” This encouragement of suspicion in how language enables and constrains our enactments allows us to scrutinise what is just and fair.

For the purposes of this initial research, we are primarily conducting a contextual examination of language in what is ‘made real’ and knowable for early career academics in the context of the current Australasian and global environment with some elements of critical scrutiny. Our research is a hybrid approach of both macro/dark and micro/light social constructionism. The macro/dark component recognises the generative power of language that is contextually connected with social structures and relations and the micro/light component acknowledges the constitutive and interactional meaning of language that is relationally produced to enable various constructions of experience and reality (Danziger, 1997; Burr, 2003).

In line with a social constructionist epistemological stance, we employed a constructionist thematic analysis to examine how early-career academics and researchers’ language affect their experiences of academic life and stress. We used a quasi-inductive approach to the analysis as much as possible in acknowledging, as social constructionists do, that our historical and social contexts shape our interpretations and understandings of what we analyse (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999; Burr, 2003). An inductive focus means that the coding and theme development are primarily directed by the content of the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). However, in employing a social constructionist stance, we openly acknowledge, as Burr (2003) would argue, our philosophical values of taking a critical stance in questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about academic life and we also acknowledge that any interpretation or evaluation is not value-free (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Consequently, after a general thematic exploration, we refined our thematic development through our interests in searching for statements related to stress and concerns of early career academics, so there was also some deductive focus in the latter part of our analysis. As we assume that language actively enables and influences how we enact (Burr, 2003), our analytical engagement with the data also influenced our construction of themes along with the constructionist values we brought to the analysis.

Our purposive sampling formed two ad hoc data corpuses containing blogs and Twitter tweets as microblogs. We selected blogs that examined information on early career academics and academia using broadly termed keywords, “early career academic” and “early career researcher”, through Google (for blogs) and Twitter (for microblogs) to gain an initial impression. To examine the issues of early career academics more specifically, we then applied additional keywords, “issues”, “problems” and “stress”, to the terms in the search engines. Due to the 150-character limit of Twitter tweets, we envisaged that the construction of academic experiences would be pithy in contrast to the elaborative prose of a blog. We, therefore, conducted Braun and Clarke’s (2006) phases of thematic analysis separately for the two data corpuses to cater for the difference in language style and the type of coding used. Due to the large amount of data collected for the blogs, we employed semantic coding (coding what is being said without denoting the implied meaning) (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to construct an initial impression of the themes. For the Twitter tweets, which contained less data to analyse, we used a mixture of semantic and latent coding (coding both what is said and implied) (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to inform our thematic analysis. For the semantic coding, we also used Text Analyser (www.online-utility.org/text/analyzer.jsp) and Voyant (voyant-tools.org) to gain an initial impression of recurrent utterances and then manually coded the texts into themes. Although all information

was publically accessible, we removed

bloggers' names before presenting our findings to minimise the potential for discomfiture of bloggers. We present a preliminary constructionist thematic analysis of themes for the blog sites and a constructionist thematic analysis of the Twitter tweets.

3. Findings

Blogs

Our coding and thematic development of the blogs constructed a number of themes related to stress: Work-life imbalance, competition, and insecure work. Most quotes in our analysis are presented and are representations of a range of utterances that symbolise a particular theme.

Work-Life Imbalance

One academic recognised that being 'switched on' through email at all times was negatively impacting her stress levels.

Unfortunately, my decision to switch off was met with this exact statement: "Well, of course you are free to turn off your emails in the evening, but you can say goodbye to any permanent job if you choose to do so for the long term."

Others articulated the unrelenting nature of their work.

There is a non-stop barrage of emails throughout the night and weekend asking for work.

One commenter who had already left academia found that staff positioned her as not 'cut out' for academia.

When I decided to leave academia, one of my colleagues said to me: Well, not everyone is meant to get up at 5am to write . . .

hmmm.... I wonder if the idea that some people are "cut out" for this and others not is meant to justify something - like the exploitation of adjuncts, or to buttress the myths that academics are special.

A persistent sub-theme we encountered was the necessity to push past personal limits in order to create a publication track record.

With the current crisis in the job market, it is impossible today for a young scholar not to push his/her time limits in order to publish and to find a position that will allow her/him to achieve his/her scholarship.

Although commenters generally understood and acknowledged that their work-life balance was far from healthy, the fear of unemployment or continued insecure employment drove them to be overworked.

I think the thing that holds me back is fear. As a postdoc, I am in a tenuous position. Being in another country on a work visa means that the tenure of my postdoc has no flexibility (well, it can't get drawn out- it can get shortened). So, when I'm done, I need a job... And I'm ready for a job... And I want to be in academia... And there are very few jobs. So, I have fear that I won't

get one of those jobs. And that fear keeps me sitting at my desk in the evenings, after waking up early in the morning, despite the fact that I now have pushed past my ability to be really creative.

Competition for Permanent Positions

Although it would appear that given the challenges and stressors early career researchers wrote about in the blogs, they would construct an experience of support from each other. However, it was common that the competition for the few permanent positions and grants (re)produced an erosion of collegiality and social support.

The competition for funding and positions means that not only the hopes of getting a job are really lousy, but that people become nasty. Like, really nasty.

Insecure Work

Additionally, there was a common sentiment that being in insecure employment within academia constituted 'failing':

But I still lack stability, and I'm still called a failure, and I don't see this ever changing, and I'm tired.

I'm just so very tired.

There is a caste system in this structure, where adjuncts – no matter how senior – remain the untouchables while tenured faculty (and those from top research institutes in particular) form a successful Brahmin caste that reigns over all of us and generally considers us failures as (or at least unsuccessful) academics.

Another early career academic who had not found a tenure track position directed this discourse of failure and insecurity towards himself.

I found my confidence and self worth crumbling as I defensively explained that I'm a research professor, but not tenure track.

Twitter Tweets (Microblogs)

Our coding and thematic development of the Twitter tweets constructed a number of themes related to stress: health and wellbeing, discrimination and recognition, structural barriers, publishing issues and advice, governing the self, and flexibility. Themes are presented below with example tweets as quotes.

Health and Wellbeing Concerns

There were concerns and expressions of the health and wellbeing of early career academics. These concerns and expressions were stated in terms of general worries, depression or feeling down and not getting enough sleep.

@GdnHigherEd very much the comment "tiny minded dolts" - talk to an early career researcher or a phd candidate - stress levels are epic

Went to bed early so that I'd be fully rested by 9am and then overslept by 3 hours anyway, my body is trying to sabotage my academic career 😊

I've just completed a survey on my thoughts/experiences as an early career academic, and now I'm thoroughly depressed

The first quote refers to a reaction (“tiny minded dolts”) to an academic’s comment on a Forbes columnist who conducted a survey and claims that university professors were the least stressed job position in 2013. The use of “tiny minded dolts” positions the Forbes columnists as reductionist and naive in their approach, and the argument, “stress levels are epic” resists the claim to construct a different reality of academic experience that is concerning.

The second and third quotes also form concerns of academia through reflection. Both academics are worried about their experiences, but they pathologise themselves through blaming “my body” and becoming “thoroughly depressed” rather than realising potential or additional structural constraints. These quotes are examples of tweets that position early career academics as having a subjective concern for their wellbeing and consequently encourage others to worry about their condition.

Discrimination and Recognition

During the theme development process, we also found concerns of discrimination and recognition. We considered including this as a subtheme under the theme of structural barriers but given that the Twitter feeds were on the *experiences* of discrimination and the lack of recognition, particularly for women, we included this as a stand-alone theme.

Standard female early career academic moment: Colleague "are you masters or PhD?" Me:" staff". Colleague "oh really?Staff?" #ragefilled

Female, a researcher and taken maternity leave. You'll be marked down for that.

The first quote represents a conversation had with a colleague who assumed an academic was either a master student or doctoral candidate because she was a woman. The hashtag #ragefilled indicates a high level of frustration to the reaction from the colleague who states “oh really?” as statement of disbelief and/or surprise followed by a further questioning of the legitimacy of her position, “Staff?” Such interrogative enactments are problematic in that they constrain the authority status of women in academia. The second quote also refers to the lack of legitimisation of women in academia in that women who take maternity leave are “marked down” in publication status in the proposed British Research Excellent Framework. It is not surprising to note that while women are over-represented in early academic positions than men, they are underrepresented not only beyond the senior lecturer level, but also in permanent full time positions in Aotearoa New Zealand (Sutherland, Wilson & Williams, 2013). Further, in Australia, women in academic positions are also under-represented at the associate professorial and professorial levels (Marchant & Wallace, 2013).

Structural Barriers

In addition to the institutional impediments for the advancement of early career women, there

were also general concerns about structural barriers. These concerns focused on academic freedom, public accessibility of research, and flaws on the metrification of research.

Also structural issues at play here regarding incentives for early career academic experts to make research available to public.

Great post about the problems faced by early career scientists due to flaws in the academic system by ... <http://wp.me/p2emGs-gh>

Both quotes highlight shortcomings in the organisational functioning of academia. “Structural issues at play” denotes that there are barriers that are performed and (re)produced within the system and this demotivates academics to connect with the public. The second quote refers to a blog, arguing that having research judged through high impact factors by hiring committees and tenure committees is an absurdity.

Publishing Issues and Advice

Related to concerns of public accessibility and publishing was a sub-theme of the dilemmas of deciding whether to disseminate research in open access publications.

Some early career researchers may consider it but it's a real challenge. Open access or academic promotion?

"Fully open-access" academic publishing = that'll be £5000 please, dear early-career author... <http://insights.uksg.org/article/10.1629/uksg.257/> ...

These two quotes represent dilemmas faced by academics who wish to have their research accessible to the public through open access. The first quote implies that there are pressures not to publish in open access journals, which are viewed as lower quality, because it would not favour academic promotion. There is a perceived concern among academics who publish in non-open access journals that open access publications have fewer citation rates, limit the impact of the research because many have not obtained high impact factor ratings, and are lower in quality and reputation (Marchant & Wallace, 2013). The other concern is the expense of some open access. The second quote, “that'll be £5000 please, dear early-career author” constructs a sobering reality where academics have to pay open access journals if they wish to make their research fully available to the public. There was also advice and information on the benefits of open access publishing in that the public benefits such as collaborative opportunities and benefits of immediate access for researchers in poorer countries.

Further advice and information was given with many tweets on the benefits of publishing early and often as leading to academic success, which was another sub-theme of publishing issues and advice. Both quotes here are referring to the same article and advise academics to “help” and “set up” their PhD candidate for a “strong” and “successful” academic career.

Setting up your phd students for a strong academic career: help them publish early <https://theconversation.com/predicting-who-will-publish-or-perish-as-career-academics->

18473

Publishing early & often during PhD is best predictor of long-term academic 'success'-new paper ... <http://ow.ly/Ua9gl>

The best predictors of academic publishing? Start by starting early

Such statements including “best predictor” and “help them” persuade and incite the academic to help early career academics as an ethics of best practice. The language setting of such quotes implies that academics should conduct themselves in particular way in that they should “start [publishing] early” and “publish often” to become successful. These utterances reinforce the current status quo in academic culture to “publish or perish” because it draws on discourses of productivity and responsibility where early career academics use such discourses to actively encourage each other to adhere and comply with the cultural expectations of productive publishing. This advising of the self and others can be viewed as an application of a disciplinary gaze, an institutional expectation of normative behaviour (Swan & Brown, 2004). In other words, the quotes not only reflect, but also incite a normative expectation or pressure for early career academics to publish early and often. The implication is that if early career academics do not abide by this expectation and chooses not to publish early and often, or if they do not publish at all, they are potentially positioned as being outside of this normative practice and are potentially constructed as less successful and having an insecure career.

Governing the Self

There were also tweets that produced questions and statements on how the academic self should be conducted. This was referring to a mixture of information ranging from advice about how to survive in academia and protecting the self.

Early career planning and the management of the academic self in the neo-liberal university <http://buff.ly/1SQewEI>

Ah, it's early in his academic career. He'll figure out the protocol soon enough

The best posts I ever did were off the cuff blog posts that I can't write now due to professional consequences as an early career academic.

While the first quote refers to an article that emphasises the importance of planning and managing the self, the second and third quote represents a social consciousness regarding the necessity for a disciplining of the self in relation to academic protocol during one's early career. “Planning” and “management” can be seen as linguistic devices to emphasise the minimisation of the risk of failure. That is, if an early career academic carefully plans and manages their conduct, self-preservation will ensue. However, there appears to be a social awareness of needing to keep within academic protocols. “He'll figure out the protocol soon enough” positions the early career academic as naive but also implies that there is a structural force in play, a “protocol”, that brings academics back into line if they deviate from normative conventions of academic conduct. The third quote reinforces and represents the structural norms that can constrain spontaneity and freedom of expression and “professional consequences” exemplifies uneasiness about deviations from normative academic expectations and the need to take more care regarding academic reputation.

Work Life Imbalance and Time

Another structural concern constituted through recurring utterances in terms of time and work-life balance. This involved worry about the nature of employment as well as giving advice on how to time manage effectively.

As an early career researcher on contract, I think about these issues a lot
<https://www.tasa.org.au/academic-worklife-balance-challenges-for-theory-and-practice/#.VdvNLY3NLFs.twitter>

Protecting your time as an early career academic <http://buff.ly/1WTfySI> *some strategies to avoid getting bogged down*

The first quote represents a constant concern for academics on the pressures of working in academia, while the second quote is an example of tweets that offered advice on protecting time such as saying “no” to things that will not lead to promotion. There were also concerns about working beyond minimum hours with many academics reporting a poor work-life balance.

Conclusion

Our analysis has found a number of concerns that constitute the experiences of early career academics ranging from insecurity to work-life balance issues. While there were differences in thematic constructions, it is interesting to note that work life imbalance was a thematic concern from both the analysis of blog and Twitter tweets.

Winefield et al. (2003) found that lecturers and senior lecturers (Level B and C in Australia) reported the highest levels of strain and the lowest levels of job satisfaction. Consequently, they experienced physical and mental manifestations of stress (Winefield et al., 2003). In our analysis, we found that insecurities of tenure contributed to early career academics pushing themselves beyond the normal requirements of the job, creating a poor work life balance. Given that working long hours (Barnett, 2006) and experiencing a lack of control over one’s work (Steptoe & Willemssen, 2004) results in poorer health outcomes (Goh, Pfeffer & Zenios, 2015), work life balance is a serious issue for early career academics that is important to research further.

Constructionist research, such as this, gives early career academics a voice and enables us to understand more fully their experiences of work concerns, which is important if we are to attract and retain new scholars in higher education. A more in-depth critical discursive analysis could reveal ways in how we can construct new realities of wellbeing and (re)address the structural contexts of universities so that there can be healthier working environments for early career academics.

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