Re-thinking Academic Staff Recruitment and Retention in South African Higher Education Institutions: Towards a Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

This conceptual paper sought to develop a conceptual framework that brings together the concepts of subjectivity, agency and identity as key analytical tools to understand the construction of identities. The paper reviewed two sets of literature that frame differently the construction of identities. The first set of literature is on conceptualisation of identities, and the second set of literature is on theorisation of identities. The paper argues that identities are not static, rather forms of subjectivity of an individual that are subject to change overtime depending on the own sense of agency. In this paper, wider social context and workplace context are found to be pertinent in the identity formation. To this end, the paper pointed out that narratives of what it takes to be an academic are also pertinent since they illustrate how individuals become academics, how they navigate or maneuver through systems, and the challenges they face. The conceptual framework applied in this paper helps to make a link between key sets of concepts guiding this paper to understand processes, experiences, and practices of becoming an academic.

Keywords: Subjectivity, agency, identity, discourses, discursive practices

Introduction

Academic staff recruitment and retention is one of the major challenges facing higher education in South Africa today. This is characterised by the inability displayed by South African universities in recruiting and retaining black academic staff members. Fewer than 10 in 100 of South Africa's university professors are black. The latest available data from the department of higher education and training shows that nationwide, 76% of professors are white, 5% are Indian and 4.5% are coloured (DHET, 2015). In terms of race, statistics on the profile of academic staff in the country's public universities show that while there has been considerable change, the situation is not yet reflective of the demographics of the country (Webbstock & Sehoole, 2016). This paper reviewed the relevant literature on the construction of identities. The analysis in this paper focused on many experiences of becoming an academic given different motives for abilities and identities that individuals bring from different contexts. On the one hand, the academic experience results from external circumstances such as the environment wherein one works and the social interactions and practical arrangements for working and living. On the other hand, the experience results from individual qualities such as existing and imagined future identities, perceptions of abilities or barriers, and having or lacking own sense of agency. Thus, some complex interaction of these external circumstances and individual qualities creates the unique experience. The paper tries to answer a specific question on how the literature understands the

construction of identities. To answer this question the review deals with two sets of literature which frame differently the construction of identities.

The first set of literature focuses on conceptualisation of identities, and the second set of literature focuses on theorisation of identities, that is the interactionist perspective. In articulating these sets of literature we try to develop the argument that the construction of identities is a reflexive and continuous process. In exploring how academics construct identities, it is imperative to find out whether this process influences identities as sets of meanings that define who one is as an occupant of a certain role, a member of a certain group of community or possesses a certain attributes that identify them as unique individuals. It is for this reason that the symbolic interactionist perspective deemed to be relevant in understanding the construction of identities because it pointed out that the self is developed from the mind, interaction with others as well as people's own perceptions and interpretations of situations. Two theoretical perspectives of identity namely social identity theory (SIT) and identity theory (IT) further clarify the interactionist approach. These theories suggest that identities are constructed either in 'the situation' or in 'social relations'. Thus, the review allows us to develop a conceptual framework that tries to establish a linkage between the main sets of literature on the construction of identities. We applied this conceptual framework in the paper to understand how academics construct their identities as the basis for remaining and continuing in the academic fraternity or not.

Conceptualising identity

The definition of identity varies as per review of literature. Some scholars view it as one-ness or same (Gripsrud, 2002), self-description (Deng, 1995), label attached to someone (Bamberg, 2010), interaction with others (Stone, 1962), self-distinguish (Jenkins, 1996), images attached to someone (Moore, 2001), and one's self-concept (Lawler, 2008; Hogg & Abrams, 1998). From the vast conceptualisations of identity, Moore (2001) argues that identity is a mixture of an individual's personal experiences and images emanating from the socialisation with friends, family, peers and media. On the one hand, for Oyserman, Elmore & Smith (2012) identity makes up one-self-concept and on the other hand, Hall (1996) viewed identity as constructed rather not natural. In the conceptualisation of identity three main bases of an identity emerge: role identity, social identity, and person identity. As far as the role identities, they are attached to networks interaction as per a particular situations and contexts respectively (Carter & Fuller, 2015). As per Stets & Burke (2003) role identities are meanings attached to a role and together with the expectations attached to its social position as such defines who we are and how we behave and provide a sense of purpose and meaning in life (Hunt, 2003), signal identities and enable individuals to categorise themselves allowing others to pre-empt their behaviour (Leung, Zietsma & Peredo, 2014).

Conversely, Burke & Stets (2000) indicate that social identities are understood as meanings attached to social group with similar views in the same category. On the other hand, Burke & Stets (2009) further content that members of the same group may differ in terms of the ideal attributes. As in the case of person identity as one of the bases of an identity Burke & Stets suggest that it signifies the peculiar meanings that define one-self that exemplify the unique and distinct individual from others as the basis

for one's self-concept (Burke & Stets, 2009). It is for this reason that person identities are attached to behavioural norms that is influence by lived experiences hence it is argue that person identity is not limited to one's self-concept rather operates across different roles and situations (Cote & Levine, 2015). This is in line with Burke & Stets (2009) who opine that person identities may influence the meanings across the role and social identities.

The above sets of definitions and levels of identity are relevant for this paper since they provide holistic description and interpretation of who academics are and how they find meanings for their identities. To that end, they are also pertinent to answer the main research question of this paper: *How do experiences and meanings attached to being an academic relate to the construction of identities in a selected university in South Africa?* In the light of the above sets of definitions and levels of identity it is argued that academic identity enhances well-being and productivity of academic staff and further play an integral role to improve their teaching and learning skills (Lieff, Baker, Mori, Egan-Lee, Chin & Reeves, 2012). As in the case of this paper, the construction of identities ought to demonstrate one's self-concept (Wendt, 1992) including the manner in which individuals perceive themselves with others in the social relations (Jenkins, 1996). As alluded by McAdams (1999) identities are derived from internalised and evolving story that emanated from the past, present and future that help individuals to negotiate meanings for their identities (Brown, 2014).

It is within this background that in this paper academics used images, labels and stories to express their identities that are useful to assist individuals to give meanings and structures to their settings and experiences (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). This is supported by Backhouse (2009) study on pedagogies and student experiences who argues that experience results from an interplay between the subjectivities constructed by the individual's past and emerging identities, and the structural elements of the intersecting contexts that they inhibit. She further believes that the structural elements, the range of contexts in which academics engage, and the identities of the academics are not static. Thus, as actors in the systems they are capable to act change them depending on their own sense of agency that is in turn influenced by the discourses of the contexts and the subjectivities they produced (Backhouse, 2009).

The symbolic interactionist perspective

For the purpose of this paper symbolic interactionist found to be relevant since it gives rise to relationship with other identity theories as mentioned above. It is for this reason in that proponents of interactionist such as (Cooley, 1902; Thomas, 1923; Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969) do not provide full account to the construction of identities rather laid the foundation for other emerging scholars. On the one hand, symbolic interactionists hold the view that self is formed from other's responses to individual or group (Stryker, 2008; Hunt, 2003) while on the other hand they believe that individuals act based on meanings objects have for them since meanings are continuous and shared interactions (Carter & Fuller, 2015). To this end, symbolic interactionists believe that identities are attached to cultural expectations linked to social position in the social structure since 'who' one is in social relations defines one's self-concept or character. As a way of advancing or providing clarity to symbolic interactionist both SIT and IT were developed to establish how identity is constructed in the situation and relations (Vryan, Adler & Adler, 2003).

It is within this background that this paper adopted both SIT and IT in that they articulate identity construction as the result of social interaction in a particular situation. These two theories are relevant to this paper since they present main perspectives of identity theory and social identity theory and maintain that even if they differ, they do differ in emphasis than in kind, and that combining the two theories can provide meaningful integrated approach to 'self' as suggested by Stets & Burke (2000). In the same line the study by (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) argue that the self is a reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories of a particular group. For Turner, *et.,* (1987) herein lies a pertinent distinction between these theories. On the one hand, they indicate that SIT view the process as self-categorisation and on the other hand, IT view it as identification through which identity is formed.

Social identity theory

In order to understand identity formation this paper introduced SIT that views social identity as meanings attached to social group with similar views and identifications (Hogg & Abrams, 1998). For them, first we categorize people in order to understand and identify them in terms of social categories such as black and white or educator and learner. By knowing what categories we belong to, we can understand things about ourselves and be able to define appropriate behavior according to the groups that we belong to. We then adopt the identity of the group that we belong to and act in ways that we perceive members of that group act. According to Hogg & Abrams (1998), one will most likely behave within the norms of that group. As a results of your identification with that group, you will develop emotional significance to that identification and self-esteem that will be dependent on it. After we categorize ourselves within a group and identify ourselves as being members of that group, we tend to compare our group (the in-group) against another group (an out-group).

This is in line with Stets & Burke (2000) who indicate that on the one hand, in-group dimension of identity formation is linked to positive judgement, on the other hand out-group to negative judgement hence it is relevant to this paper in that identity construction are basis to determine whether academics remain and continue in the academic fraternity or not. Thus, individual's identities are derived from the social identifications or groups they belong while the set of social identities making up that individual's self-concept is unique (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). To maintain your self-esteem, you and your group members will compare your group favorably against other ones in terms of attitudes, beliefs and values and behavioral norms. This helps explain prejudice and discrimination, since a group will tend to view members of competing groups negatively or positively (Hogg & Abrams, 1998).

Identity theory

For Stryker (1980) in identity theory self-categorization is attached to the construction of one's identity that is depending on the classification within a particular social structure called 'roles'. As Stryker (1980) put it unlike social identity theorists, identity theory focuses on components of social structure in the sense that individual recognize each another as occupants of positions (roles). In the same line McCall (2003) is of the same views that the classification in terms of roles generates meanings in the form of expectations with regard to others' and one's own behaviors. Central to the discourses of identity theory, an identity is the classification of the self as an occupant of a role in terms of the meanings and expectations linked with that role and its responsibilities thereof (Burke and Tully, 1977; Thoits, 1986). For Burke (1991) these meanings and expectations are the basis for a set of principles or guidelines that guide behavior. To this end, Freese & Burke (1994) exemplified the classification as things including self and others in relation to concept of resources that sustain individuals and interactions as pertinent component in identity construction processes. It is argued that one's identities constitutes the self-views that emanate out of the reflexive activity of self-classification with respect to membership in a particular groups or roles in that individuals perceive themselves in line with meanings attached to structured society (Turner, *et al*., 1987).

In summary, the construction of identity through interactions within social structures seems to be affected by other forms of identities individuals bring with them. This is the case of individual's past and emerging identities, and the structural elements of the intersecting contexts that they inhibit. The scholars indicated the fact that identity is intertwined with other identities with which an individual negotiates through discourses of interaction with others and within a particular structural enabling or constraining factors. Thus, the experiences of academics in the HEIs in South Africa can be understood in terms of an interplay between the structural elements and subjectivities produced by their multiple intersecting contexts. The paper identified structural elements that can contribute to an improved experiences. These are commitment, motivation, passion, enjoyment, time management and balancing the roles, a range appropriate teaching and learning processes, opportunity for social and emotional support, and concept of resources that sustain individuals and interactions as pertinent component in identity formation. In addition, contexts each have discourses that produce particular subjectivities. For

individuals entering academic fraternity with identities that are aligned with those of the contexts in which they work, the experience is less problematic. Even those who aspire to identities that are in line with the subjectivities of the context are capable of negotiating the academic experiences because they are motivated to change themselves depending on their own sense of agency. Thus, the experience is more problematic for academics whose existing identities are not aligned with the subjectivities produced by the contexts in which they work, and who are unwilling to change themselves. They need to manage this lack of alignment if they are to remain and continue in the academic fraternity.

A conceptual framework for understanding the becoming of academics

The literature review so far has given us some concepts that are very useful to capture the process of the identity formation. The paper brings together the concepts and articulate them as a frame. There seems to be different opinion of identity formation. On the one hand, there are those who advocate the idea of identity formation as classification of the self as an occupant of a role in terms of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its responsibilities (Burke and Tully 1977; Thoits 1986). On the other hand, there are scholars whose argument is that identity formation as meanings attached to social group with similar views and identifications (Hoggs & Abrams, 1998). Differences between these two perspectives seem to signal the wider divide between the two sets of literature we reviewed. One that gives emphasis on the self as occupant of particular role and the other that focuses on social group. The issue, then, becomes how to understand the making of academics from the two perspectives, given that both of them offer pertinent insights on the process of how identities are constructed. There is a possibility of reconciling these two perspectives by looking at how key concepts speak to each other from one perspective to the other.

The perspective that emphasises on the workplace context rests on the notion of cultural factors from which discourses and discursive practices are at the core of identity formation. More precisely, identities are said to be constructed through discourses (narratives) such as ambition, autonomy, enjoyment and commitment on what it means to be an academic (Down & Warren, 2008). These discourses also include stereotypes (Davies & Harré, 1990; Hytti & Heinonen, 2013), metaphors (Davies & Harré, 1990; Wee & Brooks, 2012), and images (Davies & Harré, 1990). Identities are also said to be produced through discursive practices such as beliefs and practices in the processes of de/identification with others (Rigg & O'Dwyer, 2012) and practices of self-making and being made (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Moghaddam, 2014). In this paper, both cultural factors (discourses and discursive practices) should be viewed within the specific context in which academics constructed their identities.
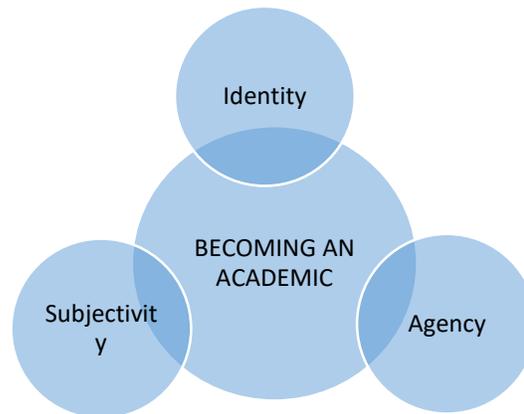
Figure 1: A conceptual framework for becoming an academic

The conceptual framework emanating from the literature builds on the assumption that becoming an academic is a continuous process depending on an individual's subjectivity in relation to social structure, more precisely, workplace context and the wider social context. In that sense, it seems pertinent to think that there are cultural factors in both workplace context and wider social context. So, to understand how identities are constructed within these all experiences, the key concepts guiding this paper are: identity, subjectivity, and individual own sense of agency as the diagram illustrates in Figure 1 in this section. These concepts speak to cultural factors of both the wider social context (friends, family and media) and the workplace (colleagues, academic departments, and research group). As one of the central framing concepts of this paper, subjectivity is used to explain the range of experiences that individuals have. As per Deem & Brehony (2000) experiences are fragmented and often depend on the individual so that it is possible for two academics in the same academic department to have very different experiences. To understand these differences we turn to the concept of subjectivity. As explain by Mikula (2008) the concept subjectivity can be understood to mean an individual's perception of the self as constituted by and mediated through language, culture and society that is produced by social and cultural discourses.

In this paper, the concept is used to understand how a wider social context positions academics and how academics position themselves towards workplace on becoming an academic. Ultimately, subjectivity helps us to understand processes, experiences, and practices through which academics are made and make themselves when they are exposed to discourses of cultural factors of both the wider social context and the workplace context. Discourses and discursive practices allow for multiple possibilities of

subjectivity of which a particular configuration is called identity, that is who am I. Thus, identity is a temporary fixing of subjectivity, that is the space of potential identities (Mikula, 2008). This distinction is not always clearly articulated in the literature and subjectivity and identity are both used in explaining experiences of academics in this paper. In this paper, discourses include stereotypes, metaphor and images that are used to describe experiences and processes of becoming an academic. Some of these factors include descriptions of an academic as someone who has ambition for growth, commitment, passion, and has autonomy. As far as discursive practices, it is understood as a set of beliefs and practices the paper takes the concept of de/identification as how academics make choices based on experiences of socialisation either to be like those with whom they are related or to be something different from what they were socialised with.

Thus, the structural elements, the range of contexts (wider social context and workplace context), and the identities of the academics are not static in the sense that academics as actors in the system may navigate or maneuver through to change them. Depending on their own sense of agency in that in turn influenced by the discourses of the contexts and the subjectivities they produce, academics may be able to a) change a context to make it more conducive for themselves; b) change the configuration of the context; or adapt their own identities to align to the existing context. In this paper, the context is understood to be a set of factors that influence processes and experiences of becoming an academic. It is used to refer to the challenges of becoming an academic within a particular time, places, and social space. Finally, these sets of concepts guiding the paper frame the paper to capture workplace experiences academics navigate or maneuver through and how discourses normalise becoming an academic as something enjoyable and desirable.

Conclusion

As stated earlier in this paper, the review of literature aimed at looking how the construction of identities is understood. We started by clarifying that identities are not static, rather forms of subjectivity of an individual that are subject to change overtime depending on the own sense of agency. The paper dealt with mainly two sets of literature: on the one hand, one that gives emphasis on the conceptualisation of identities and on the other hand, one that theorising identities. The wider social context and workplace context are found to be pertinent in the identity formation. Central to this are discourses and discursive practices of socialisation and de/identification within the academic fraternity. Narratives of what it takes to be an academic are also pertinent since they illustrate how individuals become academics, how they navigate or maneuver through systems, and the challenges they face. The conceptual framework applied in this paper helps to make a link between key sets of concepts guiding this paper to understand processes, experiences, and practices of becoming an academic.

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