Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Critical Reflections on Tenure, Promotion and the Audit Culture in Academia

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Abstract

The paper explores the tenure and promotion process, a key moment in the audit culture that is now pervading universities. Using this particularly daunting appraisal process as an example, we draw attention to the lack of critical reflexivity in relation to academic practices, a tension between the moral imperative to engage in reflective practice in relation to our research, and the lack of, even actively resisted, critical questioning of certain academic practices, like tenure and promotion.

Introduction

We bring to this preconference on ‘professional lifelong learning: beyond reflective practice’ some critical reflections on lessons learned about academic culture. This inquiry emerged from our separate but parallel experiences of tenure and promotion review in two different Canadian universities. We start with ourselves as a basis for examining the normalized mechanisms of power and control that infuse the ordinary conditions, norms and value of academic work. The impetus for this inquiry came from the dissonances we routinely encountered between our scholarly commitment to reflexivity and the tacit systematic inducements not to relate such questioning to the institutional practices we encountered in our everyday academic work. Nowhere, in our experience, did the taboo against interrogating institutional practices resonate more greatly than when it came to the mechanisms for performance appraisal.

The Non-Reflexive Academy

Our experiences resonate deeply with Paul Rabinow’s (1986) observation that “reflection upon our own social, political, economic and cultural locations within the academy is one of the greatest taboos” (p. 225) and Jane Rowland Martin’s (2000) note that higher education too often “teaches that just about everything is a legitimate object of understanding except itself” (p. 41). As Hey (2001) emphatically states, “until we can bring to the surface and publicly discuss the conditions under which people are hired, given tenure, published, awarded grants and feted, ‘real’ reflexivity will remain a dream” (p. 67) Our analysis takes a Foucauldian perspective (1977) wherein the mechanisms of power are enacted through processes of normalization rather than prohibition.

When it comes to addressing issues of power and control in particular, the limited reflexivity in the academic gaze becomes particularly apparent. The tendency, as Diane Reay (2004) points out, is to “[look] out on the wider world for evidence of moral and ethical failure, neglecting self-scrutiny” (Reay, 2004, p. 38). In an earlier work, she (2000) attributes the habitual difficulty within academic institutions to engage in critical self-questioning – so often held up as the hallmark of the inquiring mind – to the “impossibility of challenging elite representations in elite contexts” (p. 19). It is far easier to identify and critique the social construction of power and
privilege in just about every other setting than your own back yard. She draws on the work of Kate McKenna (1991) to make the claim that, in the context of academic life, “for the most part, the manual/mental division of labour, the erasure of bodies, the denial of location and the institutional hierarchies of authority and subordination have still not been problematized” (as cited in Reay, 2000, p. 17).

**This Doesn’t Feel Empowering**

In this analysis we take seriously our emotional response to the tenure and promotion process. Since this was a recurring theme in our corridor talk, we turned to Alison Jaggar’s (1992) analysis of how structures of feeling and emotion are integral to, not separate from, epistemology and the making of meaning in institutional contexts. Jaggar challenges the prevailing positivist orientation towards the relation between emotions and knowledge wherein “the intrusion of emotion only disrupts the process of seeking knowledge and distorts the results of that process” (p. 159). For Jaggar, the view of emotions as external to, and a distortion of, knowledge reflects a powerfully influential form of hegemonic control within traditional social institutions (like universities). This control, however, is never total. Individuals also have what Jaggar calls ‘outlaw’ emotions, or emotions that are not conventionally acceptable within the ordinary values and norms of institutional life. Experiencing such emotions in isolation can lead to doubts about sanity. For women, many of these emotions are what Jaggar considers ‘feminist emotions,’ which she argues are crucial to constructing feminist theory.

Outlaw emotions stand in a dialectical relation to critical social theory: at least some are necessary to develop a critical perspective on the world, but they also presuppose at least the beginnings of such a perspective….Outlaw emotions can help in developing alternatives to prevailing conceptions of reality by motivating new investigations. (pp. 160-161)

The tenure and review process left us feeling like we were located in Foucault’s panopticon, the prison system whereby inmates could be monitored by guards but the gaze could not be returned. To help us to understand this sense of surveillance we turned to the work of Stephen Ball (2001, 2003) and Louise Morley (2003) who provide cogent interrogations of the expanding “audit culture” in many educational institutions. This orientation, in their view, has negatively impacted on the morale and career satisfaction of many educators and academics. Ball’s focus has been on U.K. schools and how practices of management have shifted away from trust and professionalism towards new regimes of constant monitoring and measurement. Morley’s analysis is also based in the U.K., with a more specific focus on the higher education context. Similar to Ball, Morley examines the way audit practices become enmeshed in an invisible web of power in which internalized norms and values serve to regulate academic career trajectories and to suppress critical knowledge.

**Beginning with our Everyday Lived Experiences**

The value of reflexively examining the ordinary details of our own working lives as feminist academics, from within the critical frameworks we espouse, cannot be underestimated. As Hey (2001) emphatically states, echoing Rabinow, “until we can bring to the surface and publicly discuss the conditions under which people are hired,
given tenure, published, awarded grants and feted, ‘real’ reflexivity will remain a
dream” (p. 67). In particular, as feminist scholars, if we seek in our own research to
understand the subjectivities being formed by institutional conditions encountered by
other women and other workers in circumstances less privileged than our own, then
our own experience as workers within higher education is a valuable – and we would
say essential – place to start (Hey, 2001; Ozga, 1998). If we don’t speak publicly
about, and critically examine the problematic conditions of life and work within our
own academic walls, then our credibility as critics and analysts of what is going on in
the world outside them is bound to suffer accordingly.

The methodological approach we have taken in this inquiry is shaped by Dorothy
Smith’s (1987, 2002) notion of institutional ethnography. According to Smith:

…institutional ethnography aims at uncovering, from the standpoint of people
located in a definite institutional site, the progressive despoiling of people’s
local and particularized control over their everyday lives as the expansion of
ruling relations continually displaces and expropriates their self and mutually
generated relations, their own knowledge, judgment and will. (2002, p. 39)

There are strong parallels between Smith’s view of ruling relations and Ball and
Morley’s notion of the audit culture. A central feature of institutional ethnography is
its orientation of inquiry around issues, concerns or problems that are real for people,
“from the standpoint of their experience in and of the actualities of their everyday
living” (2002, p. 18). It takes as a valid and central focus of inquiry the kinds of taboo
phenomena that often come up in the “corridor talk” Rabinow refers to above –the
things people find themselves returning to over and over again in conversation, such
as the sharing of confidences, complaints, miseries, and fears about the things going
on in one’s life. However, institutional ethnography is not limited simply to the
description of problems or articulation of experiences. The essential project is to
proceed from identification of local conditions to analysis of the relations of ruling
that permeate those conditions. The work of the institutional ethnographer is “to
discover these relations and to map them so that people can begin to see how their
own lives and work are hooked into the lives and work of others in relations of which
most of us are not aware” (2002, p. 18).

Following Smith, our inquiry unfolded in a series of stages. It began simply in
conversation, as we talked about our respective struggles with the tenure review
process at our different institutions. As friends and colleagues who have known each
other and followed each other’s lives for over a decade, these conversations were not
novel or unique for us, or – at first – even immediately recognizable as research data.
It was simply Shauna and Jane, meeting at conferences or phoning each other out of
the blue, each time gaining both insight and relief from the opportunity to talk openly
about the everyday realities of our working lives. A turning point came when we both
were feeling particularly challenged by some of contradictions and constraints of the
tenure review process, and decided to move beyond dialogue to analysis. The next
step was to create a script or narrative of some of the recurring themes of our
conversations. From this script we could then examine our talk as text. We became
readers of our own story/ies, creating a space for theorizing our own subjectivities, a
path of inquiry that illuminated how what felt like very private local struggles were
tied to extra-local relations of ruling. Our process was iterative; as we reviewed our
dialogue, we searched for others’ theorizing of the normalizing practices in the academy. These explications generated more conversation and ultimately a broader conceptual framework for interpreting the power relations embedded in our everyday discourse.

I’m dancing as fast as I can: Performativity and fabrication

Ball (2003) pays particular attention to how policy technology, which he defines as the “calculated deployment of techniques and artifacts to organize human forces and capabilities” (p. 216) operates to maintain the audit culture as a managerial ethos based on intense reliance on “monitoring systems and the production of information.” (2003, p. 216). Both Ball and Morley are informed by Power’s (1997) earlier analysis of the “audit explosion” in western institutions, where there has been such an extraordinary rise in activities where fiscal and performance activities are constantly being monitored and measured. To be audited, however, requires a degree of subjugation and subordination to the audit process. “To be audited, an organization [or individual] must actively transform itself [or herself/himself] into an auditable commodity” (Shore & Wright, 1999, p. 570 as cited by Ball, 2001, p. 11).

According to Ball, the two main processes that characterize the audit culture are the mechanisms of performativity and fabrication. He describes performativity as a mode of regulation that uses ongoing judgments, comparisons and displays as a means of subjugation and control. “It is the data-base, the appraisal meeting, the annual review, report writing, the regular publication of results and promotion applications, inspections and peer reviews that are the mechanics of performativity” (2003, p. 220). Individuals working under such regimes – teachers, researchers, academics – operate under a constant sense of being judged, by criteria that are not always clearly spelled out or consistent. The result, according to Ball, is that “[we] become ontologically insecure: unsure whether we are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others, constantly looking to improve, to be better, to be excellent” (2003, p. 220). Morley similarly identifies how quality assessment procedures can exploit a range of feelings of guilt and inadequacy, and generate a sense that only that which can be documented is worthwhile.

Jane: This captures something central to the whole dossier and tenure-review process. It’s not that being evaluated is problematic. I don’t have any problem with that at all. But there’s something about the way it happens that seems to detract from rather than enhance what I feel like I bring to my work. I’m always looking over my shoulder, wondering if I’m going to be judged and found wanting, if I can’t account for what I’m doing in terms of what goes in the evaluation dossier.

Shauna: When I fill out my cv, a collection of lists and tables, much of my labour feels trivialized and ignored. There is no room in that text to honor the relational aspects of what we do. When I’m working with students and community groups, I feel like I’m working as hard as I possibly can, doing what I was hired to do, and doing what I love to do. But when it comes to the tenure review process, it’s as if all that work and passion suddenly becomes invisible. There seems to be little understanding of the time it takes to establish relations and to work respectfully. This kind of community orientation is also suspect. It becomes evidence of how I’ve focused my energies in
the wrong place. So this work either counts for zero, or counts against me. I’m struck by way the cv quantifies our labour to make it easy to measure.

For Morley, the relationship between the observer and observed becomes insidious, where norms of compliant self-representation on the part of the observed become internalized and more difficult to recognize and contest. Ball states that the question of who controls the field of judgment is a crucial part of the performative surveillance regime. “Who is it that determines what is to count as a valuable, effective or satisfactory performance and what measures or indicators are considered valid?” (2001, p. 6). These are the questions that hang in the background and somehow seem to be part of the taboo; there’s no mechanism to raise them directly.

Shauna: Exactly. The decisions are made by closed-door committees. Individuals being reviewed have very little influence on establishing the criteria for evaluation. You get hired to do community oriented and feminist work but when you actually attempt to do it, it doesn’t measure up by the usual benchmarks of scholarly publication in elite academic journals. That’s what I’m really running into now. As a feminist scholar who is committed to and was hired because of my activist and community oriented research, much of my work is difficult to document in the traditional academic cv which puts certain kinds of products at the centre with all other activities judged in relation to these products. At this moment of peer judgment, all my community-oriented activities, including the making of a video and two community/popular theatre productions, matter little. Indeed, when I ask folks who’ve reviewed the document about these ‘products,’ they looks surprised and ask if I forgot to include them. They are there, but their placement in the document creates a form of reviewer amnesia. There is great irony here because I have often described the focus of my research as learning experiences and contexts that are “off the radar” – places and experiences rarely studied and certainly not understood. So my academic work is off the radar too (and not understood). Therein lies the problem – it’s technological. Fix the radar machine! Refereed journal articles are definitely on the radar (I do have them…I really do…but I guess not enough).

Jane: Another part of it, for me, is that there are so few opportunities to actually talk about how things really are. I would actually relish the opportunity to sit down with the Rank and Tenure Committee, in a spirit of open dialogue, and talk about what I’m doing – what I think is working in my teaching and advising, and where I’m still learning and growing; what I’m most proud of in my research and writing, and where I’m feeling stuck or challenged or provoked. But it all happens in secrecy. You translate yourself into an artifact which is scrutinized by one committee in a closed room, and then discussed by another committee in another closed room, and then after long silence you get a letter saying whether or not you “pass” or measure up. It’s as if every human thing has been expunged from the process.

Ball goes on to say that all this emphasis on performativity contributes to the production of fabrications that provide the performative gaze with the kind of “look” it calls for. Appearance and impression are more important within regimes of performativity than substance and truth. To meet the demands of performativity, what ends up being produced is “a spectacle, or game-playing, or cynical compliance, or what one might see as an ‘enacted fantasy’ which is there simply to be seen and judged” (Ball, 2003, p. 222). Hey (2001), building on Ball’s work, uses the notion of
fabrication to describe her experience as a contract researcher in the U.K. university sector:

We hope that if only we – work harder, produce more, publish more, conference more, achieve more in short ‘perform more’ that we will eventually get ‘there’. But of course…it is the ‘getting’ and the ‘there’ that ensnares us all in these performative times….The tendency for ‘fabrication’ [becomes] an occupational necessity….From the production of a convincing cv (to gloss our casualisation as a seamless ‘master’ narrative of a faultless professional history), through to a presentation of self as a workaholic who will take up the slack within the research process…we are constantly invited to re-invent ourselves as impossible paragons of productivity. (p. 80)

As Hey states, it is the presentation of self that becomes the key focus of attention. What gets lost or diminished behind the façade are the conditions of trust, truthfulness and authenticity. There is a confusion, in Morley’s terms, between the narratable and non-narratable facets of quality and of reality. In Ball’s (2003) view, “we become uncertain about the reasons for actions. Are we doing this because it is important, because we believe in it, because it is worthwhile? Or is it being done ultimately because it will be measured or compared? It will make us look good!” (p. 220).

Jane: So true. Every time I update my cv or re-construct my dossier, I feel like I have to invent myself all over again. My research interests seldom follow a single track, and I often feel like I’m groping my way forward in the dark. This is what I understand to be the essence of the process of inquiry. You get lost. You stumble around. You go down blind alleys and get stuck there for awhile. But in the cv and the dossier, you have to literally “compose” yourself as if you were following a clear, step-by-step research plan that leaves little room for surprise, serendipity or confusion. It’s the same feeling I get when I go to the doctor for a check-up, and have to answer all those lifestyle questions. You know: when was your last period, how often do you have sex, how many drinks do you have a week? I feel so terribly delinquent for not having a flow chart that I can pull out of my briefcase, showing how I’ve got my life engineered and scripted, down to the last martini or condom. I feel like I have to construct a kind of fiction of pre-planned orderliness, to prove that I’m not lacking, that I’m a legitimate, grown-up human being.

Shauna: Hey’s comment about creating a seamless narrative really hits home. My four years as ‘gypsy’ or ‘just-in-time’ knowledge worker involved teaching in different institutions, coordinating different programs—a rather chaotic and fragmented academic life. In filling in the texts that represent who we are, we must now stitch this piece work into a glorious, intentionally-patterned quilt. This issue of uncertainty was a key aspect of those gypsy years. But any confessions of uncertainty, it seems, are proof of some kind of deficiency or moral failing.

Jane: The other part of it is the point about questioning your own motives. Things can become so calculated. Last year I was absolutely horrified to find myself actually weighing whether or not I should take part in a volunteer activity in the community because of how it would look on my cv. It wasn’t about altruism or a principled belief in acting for the common good or even doing something I wanted to do, but simply, “will it look good on my cv? Will it help or harm my case for tenure? ” This is an
Shauna: It reminds of another piece of survival advice that I’ve received. Before you get tenure, just follows the rules, pump out the articles, don’t piss anybody off and don’t take on extracurricular activities. After you get tenure you can do these things. It seems so backward. And if you follow this advice, you surrender so much of your own values and commitments, you wonder if you might ever get them back.

Closing Thoughts

An underlying problem with all this, of course, is that one of the reasons why universities have become more influenced by audit technologies is the dwindling public support for higher education in many countries (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) and the subsequent need to both justify that public money is being well spent, and to seek financial support from other means. It is this entrepreneurial wind that has made performativity and fabrication such characteristic features of the prevailing weather in education and other public sector domains. The wind-chill that works its way into the bones and under the skin isn’t necessarily (or only) the “chilly climate” of patriarchy resisting change, but of fiscal belt-tightening leading to increasing demands for measurable accountability and policy “relevance.”

Given these conditions, what is to be gained from the process of publicly examining the structures and forms of power in which, as academics, we find ourselves immersed? We maintain with Foucault, Jaggar, Rabinow, and Smith that it is at the level of micropolitics and the minutiae of the everyday that the real workings of power are most clearly visible. We similarly hold that the effort of scrutiny is rewarded by things other than fiscal return (i.e., the getting of grants) or significant change to the system. For one thing, one of the hopes we hold out in going public with our experience is that our stories, and our analysis, will resonate with others who share our sense of struggle within and against the routine norms of academic life. One of the most corrosive aspects of academic audit technologies is the epistemological limitations they impose on the pursuit of knowledge. Not only are emotions rendered suspect, but the practice of critique itself is overshadowed by the impetus to accommodate and fit in. A second corrosive aspect of the audit culture is its individualizing and isolating effect. The judgments associated with performativity are inevitably competitive and comparative in nature, resulting in a sense of suspicion and isolation. The space for collective exploration of shared experience – much less collective action – becomes seriously compromised.

One result of bringing these experiences into the open, we hope, is that other academics – feminist and otherwise – will recognize a sense of kinship between the struggles we have articulated here and their own, with the concomitant relief that can be felt in the realization that one is not simply “going it alone.” With this realization there is more possibility to create space for collective critical analysis that would inform structural change. We hope that sharing our struggles is part of the process Jaggar (1992) speaks about in her discussion about alternative epistemological models which would “demonstrate the need for theory to be self-reflexive …[and] explain how the reconstruction of knowledge is inseparable from the reconstruction of ourselves (p. 164).
By bringing our corridor talk into the open, or as Dorothy Smith argues, making the everyday problematic, we hope to put experiential flesh on the bones of the theories we use to explore the workings of power in contemporary institutions. Although, as Morley and Ball point out, forms of resistance are inevitably implicated in the structures they seek to resist, at least they indicate that – however partial – resistance is possible. The fact that we can write this article indicates that the spaces for resistance remain present and valued within the academy, despite the encroaching restrictions of audit practices. Although institutional reflexivity remains largely taboo territory in academic culture, the more real transparency that can be achieved in exposing the problematic everyday, the greater hope there is that critical knowledge and authentic subjectivity is within our reach.

References