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Creating a Positive Casual Academic Identity Through Change and Loss: Prising Open the Cracks

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Book chapter: Creating a positive casual academic identity through change and loss

As higher education becomes commodified, there has been an increase in academic staff to accommodate rising student numbers. This growth, however, has not equated to increases in continuing positions. In fact, fixed terms and casual contracts have become the preferred model of employment in Higher Education; and in Australia, universities have the third highest number of casual workers across all industries (Kalleberg 2003). Its prevalence has made casualization an accepted and normalised form of employment, but long-term job insecurity has had a negative impact on casual academics' well-being (Broadbent, Troup & Strachan 2013). This chapter describes one practitioner's account of the challenges of casual work and the ongoing pursuit of tenure, but rather than dwelling on the difficulties, the author explores the potential richness of an identity based on impermanence and uncertainty. She draws on the literature of retired academics and identity theory to illustrate the generative spaces within change and loss, and the agency within an undefined and incoherent identity.

Since this chapter reflects the intimate account of one casual academic's experiences, it is written in a personal and reflexive style to "maintain[s] a connection between my personal and academic self" (Warren 2016, 3). The author attempts to bridge the personal and academic by sharing personal insights on the concepts of identity and loss introduced. Through this process, she seeks to question the norms of academic writing (Ronai 1998), as well as to depict the, ". . . back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience" within the writing process (Ellis 2007, 14).

Why write about the casual academic identity?

Identity is a common subject of inquiry as it reflects important questions concerning human thought and behaviour (Churchman & King 2009; Badley 2016). Inquiry around professional identity is driven by questions such as, "Why people do what they do? How do members or a group understand of who they are? How does this influence their personal and professional lives?" Our identity is pivotal as it frames our experiences and affects our dealings with others; the ways in which we define ourselves impact how we engage in and construct reality with others (Stryker & Burke 1996). In *Composing Academic Identities: Stories That Matter*, Badley (2016) argues that humans undergo a life-long quest to find out who they are to avoid the discomfort of insecurity and the unknown. He asserts that this knowledge about self helps us to position ourselves within the world and in relation to others, and proposes that individuals undergo this positioning process and "compose and search for a core identity to prove their existence and to verify that they are not imaginary beings" (377). Identity is subsequently regarded as being constructed narratively as it undergoes the continual reflexive process of being defined and redefined within changing contexts (Ylijoki & Ursin 2013); it is temporal and evolves through ongoing lived experiences (McClean & Price 2016).

Identity is often the source of debate because of its complexity. Identity theory suggests that self-concept naturally comprises of multiple identities, which arise from daily encounters and responses to environmental demands (Papa & Lancaster 2016). These identities surface through diverse encounters with people who hold different perspectives and ways of being (Aveling, Gillespie, & Cornish 2014). It has been likened to an 'argument' as individuals justify and provide meaning to the differences within their thoughts and actions (Remmik, Karm & Lepp 2011) and can become a significant point of interest when these differences collide. For example, as an individual's identity is constructed by multiple different identities that are shaped by diverse contexts, tensions can arise when these identities compete with or are incompatible with each other (Badley 2016). This may be the case for the casual academic identity, as casual workers often desire security and permanence despite their temporary contracts. I felt these tensions as a casual academic I yearned for stability and certainty within a series of year-long contracts; I therefore attempted to create a measure of consistency by maintaining a flow of work within different research and teaching roles. I also tried to improve my

chances of tenure by writing publications based on topics that I believed could generate funding or impact. Years of such work had made me feel disparate and fragmented; I proficient in most areas but an expert in none and I had no clear identity to refer to or a compass or map to direct me. Like many others, I wanted to explore the concept of identity for some clarity to understand my purpose as an academic. This notion is similarly expressed by Levin and Shaker's (2011) study of full-time non-tenured (FTNT) faculty, who they perceive as having, "incoherent or conflictive identities" (476).

I belonged to a marginalised group in academia, individuals without an office or a name plate to indicate where they sat. This anonymous group forms a part of an overwhelming majority of staff who are employed on a casual or short-term contract basis. The growth of casualization within the Australian higher education workforce has been highlighted in a study by Larkins (2011), which has documented an 81 percent growth of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) casually employed academics between 1996 and 2011. Larkins (2011) estimates that casual academics undertake 50 per cent of the teaching load, including up to 80 per cent of first year teaching load. Since a FTE casual can range from one to 16 persons, this equates to twice the number of casually employed academics than those in continuing and fixed term contracts (May, 2011). This long-term instability and uncertainty has had a strong negative impact on casual academics' well-being, and over half of the 1203 casual researchers who had been surveyed in the Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) national study expressed that "uncertain job prospects" was the most challenging part of their work (ACOLA 2012, 16). Levin and Shaker (2011) also relate some of the difficulties associated with the uncertainty, stating that, "Full-time non-tenured (FTNT) faculty teach, research, administer and serve their institutions just as of those with tenure, but they lack permanent employment protection, an acknowledged role in institutional governance, and an established or well-understood position in the academy" (1462). Unfortunately, there is no clear pathway from fixed term to permanent employment due to the lack of ongoing academic positions (Broadbent et. al 2013, 279).

The increasing number of non-permanent staff has led to a unique work force structure labelled as the 'core-periphery' model, which embodies a small core of permanent staff and the majority on fixed term contract staff in the periphery (Kalleberg 2003). This hierarchical positioning of workers creates an 'organizational insiders versus outsiders' effect, where the outsiders on the periphery protect the employment conditions of the core labour force by meeting the market's supply and demand for work (Kalleberg, 2003, 158). In this model, workers are shaped according the position they occupy. For example, casual academics need greater ingenuity to 'fall back on their own resources to construct their own employment biographies, negotiating the hazards and opportunities in inventive ways' due to the lack of a career path (Allen & Henry 1997, 184). Without a discernible 'career path,' they cannot be promoted and progress to higher academic levels (Broadbent et al. 2013). Their employment opportunities are further limited as they undertake work that is devalued by the institution. Levin and Shaker (2011) affirm this lack of agency for casual or non-permanent staff who are unable to "control their destiny. . . [as] their principal work, teaching, is undervalued by the academy" (1480). Before reading the literature, I had imagined that I was on a career path as I engaged in similar responsibilities as tenured staff, but it became evident that there was no career progression without a work plan.

My search for a coherent casual academic identity

My casual academic identity felt incoherent and problematic due to its inherent inconsistencies. Levin and Shaker (2011) describe academics in non-continuing positions as having a 'hybrid' or 'blended' "identity, as they are experts in the classroom but amongst the tenured staff, they become, 'subalterns, as their placement on the academic hierarchy diminishes their influence and power" (1479). After reading about the casualisation in higher education, I questioned why I continued to persist even after a decade of such work. My desire to continue was strong despite the lack of opportunities to secure a continuing position. Levin and Shaker (2011) disclose their surprise at how many non-permanent staff

are willing to sacrifice to become permanent staff, where most casual and fixed term staff continue their work despite its lack of stability. They bring to light the strong attraction of academia. Like the contingent staff in Levin and Shaker's study, my own desires to become an academic were deeply rooted in childhood aspirations. These aspirations were planted as I watched the struggles of my immigrant parents, who laboured in low skilled work despite having once been highly paid professionals. The academic identity represented the legitimacy of a highly educated and qualified profession and I pursued it whole-heartedly to bring meaning to my parents' suffering. Such associations between work and meaning have been described by Papa and Lancaster (2016), who propose that professional identities are ascribed 'societal meanings,' which signifies a membership to a community that adopts 'shared connotations' that characterise the group (48). An academic's identity is assigned to positive meanings of intellect and prestige that characterise higher learning institutions. By attaining the positive associations of working in higher education, I believed that I could validate my parent's suffering.

Despite my aspirations to acquire greater legitimacy and validation, acquiring a tenured academic position was difficult. My casual academic colleagues and I would disclose our mutual exhaustion and helplessness over unrealised hopes of permanency. I would see one skilled worker after another leave for a more secure position outside of academia, and in despair I would ask myself, "How could I wait any longer? What if I was still in this position ten years from now?" Levin and Shaker (2011) talk about the dissonance expressed by non-permanent staff as they enjoy the work but are not satisfied with the work conditions, as they state, "Although teaching matches their tastes, the non-tenure-track role does not match their aspirations" (1480). Finally, I was offered a continuing position outside of academia, but I still found myself hesitating. I enjoyed academic work and found it difficult to let go of the hope of tenure.

The changing, undefined and peripheral identity as story that matters

The unsettling reality of a contingent and peripheral 'academic' identity was a topic had personal value as it reflected my concerns for the future. Badley (2016) urges us to write about such 'stories that matter' as inquiry should reflect topics that hold personal meaning (377). With an identity that was difficult to fathom, accept or manage, I knew I had come to a topic that mattered. My approach to my impermanent status was unsustainable; it left me over committing to work 'just in case.' I knew that I could not continue for long without burning out. Something had to change. Since I could not change my casual work status, I decided to adopt a different perspective on my impermanent status. Up until now I had regarded my peripheral identity as having little value because the work was so diverse and disparate. I picked up odd jobs as they were offered, which limited my confidence, creativity and sense of agency as my time was constantly governed by others. In my academic publications, I also lacked the confidence to write about personal topics that mattered to me as I was too busy seeking a 'legitimate' academic identity. In other words, as tenure became my goal, I had lost sight of seeking personally meaningful and enjoyable work. Levin and Shaker (2011) equally affirm how concerns for the lack of legitimacy, status or equity can detract from non-permanent academic's sense of agency. Changing my perspective ultimately made me more curious about my casual academic identity.

As I searched for core qualities that defined my casual work, I kept returning to the theme of 'loss.' I had collected a lot of random and miscellaneous work experiences whilst working on short term contracts, but I had dismissed them for being inconsistent and less valuable. Looking deeper and questioning what I had gained or internalised, I saw the benefits of continuing losses. My work-life involved a series of roles and responsibilities that would ultimately come to end; this meant I needed to adapt and evolve according to new work. Change and adaptability became my defining qualities and I wanted to know whether they held any real value. To explore how academics construct loss and change, I began reading the reflections of retired academics. I read about their attempts to develop a

new and meaningful identity despite entrenched beliefs that the end of work life is without functionality and purpose (Bradley 2016; emerald & Carpenter 2014; Richardson 2014). These retirees describe how the loss of work triggers a loss of identity that poses difficult and sometimes overwhelming challenges. This notion is powerfully conveyed by Richardson (2014) who depicts retirement as “fall[ing] off a stage’ to indicate both the loss of identity and status of being an academic” (1134). She documents the abrupt fall from grace as the retired academic is no longer the focus of everyone’s attention. Richardson (2014) speaks of avoiding the term ‘retired,’ in the same way cancer sufferers avoid naming their disease for the fear of what is implied, as she observes, “It is hard to let go of the identity, status, and perks that being a professor confer. You pass as smart, even if you aren’t; you can claim to know more than you do, and others accept the sham . . . But when you retire you become dispensable” (9-10). Badley (2016) equally depicts the retirement as the decline and decomposition of a highly regarded identity, where the loss of the academic identity equated to the loss of being ‘somebody’ who matters.

On the other hand, identity loss is also considered to be an opportunity to re-envision and identity to construct new and authentic identities based on deeper and more meaningful interests (Bradley 2016; emerald & Carpenter 2014; Richardson 2014). Identity disruption is depicted as a rich source of understanding and an opportunity for retirees to choose how they wanted to orient themselves rather than ‘falling into’ their identities (Papa & Lancaster 2016). Badley (2016), for example, uses his retirement to explore his new identity and to redefine himself outside the higher education landscape. He defines identity disruption as a source of inspiration and new learnings, as being retired means being free of the previous associations to compose, to speak and to write without worrying about “research criteria” or one’s “impact factor” (381). emerald and Carpenter (2014) similarly elaborate on the openness, possibility and vulnerability inherent to retirement. They provide an analogy of retired academics embarking on “a journey without maps” as they become disconnected to their previous identities and experience confusion at the sudden freedom. Both argue how retirees can emerge from their struggle with the loss of identity, to redefine themselves with greater authenticity. This notion of finding value and worth in disruption is further noted by Richardson (2000) who states that, “Each story I begin to tell is interrupted. Right now, the interruption is from deep within: body history, emotional history. Do I have the time, energy, emotional space to be in that previous traumatic event now?” (467). Richardson is driven to write from these places of mystery; she demonstrates how identity disruption offers new possibilities to write about stories that matter.

The literature on retired academics reveals how individuals with a fixed notion of professional identity often experience a greater sense of loss when their roles come to an end (Richardson, 2000; Badley, 2016). These reflections on the heavy loss of a fixed identity led me to ask myself, “What else was there to gain through an identity characterised by fluidity? I thought about these retirees who had heavily invested in their work lives experienced significant loss or disruption of identity after retirement. Without their work, they must have felt that their lives no longer held any value. Identity theory relays how disruption ensues after the loss of a core role (Papa et al 2014). In terms of job loss, the impact on well-being is particularly significant if individuals attributed a high level of value to their work (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg & Kinicki 2005). By the same token, individuals who were accustomed to loss and change did not experience such severe disorientation or crisis after the loss of work. Loss would only strengthen rather than disrupt or derail identity. I felt that this would apply for casual academics, who possess a multi-faceted based on a series of short term projects and teaching periods. The casual academic identity evolves with the rhythm of contingent work; they have no core identity to protect or to preserve as multiple roles are undertaken to ensure there was always something to fall back on.

Despite my attempts to flee from uncertainty, others have argued that it is an escapable trait of being human. Badley (2016), however, proposes that a fluid identity is a part of our human condition, as individuals do not have a core or central identity and that our search for an “authentic or core or

essential or fixed or real identity is a story that does not matter . . . [as] the notion of a real, authentic self is, in this view, just a delusion, a fantasy. The quest for an authentic, true self is, at best, fraught and, at worst, a wild-goose chase” (382). Identities are also considered to be fictional as they are constantly being composed and decomposed, which means that what is finally constructed or being constructed is a fragmented and changing whole (Clegg 2008; Davies 2004). Badley (2016) consequently refers to our lives as a bricolage as our life encounters form “incomplete and partial texts. . . that are pieced together” (378). Rather than being a grand narrative, our lives are constructed by multiple story lines and plots that undergo re-description and re-composition; our identities are therefore narratives in progress (Calder 2003). Such changes can be highly positive; individuals can be more empowered to have greater agency in recomposing positive selves by rescripting their lives (Clegg 2008; Badley 2016). Living consequently entails deciding on which stories are useful to us and recomposing our identities according to personal meanings that we value. elke and Carpenter (2014) express similar sentiments, as they write, “I need to adjust and adapt to maintain who and what I am and who and what I have become; now resigned and retired, I have the freedom to disengage, reengage and realign who I am” (1146). Through this flexible and empowered lens, Bochner (1997) gives an example of how he can reinterpret and reframe even the most challenging stories, such as his relationship with his deceased father, to “reclaim [his] past” (430). The casual academic identity illustrates how identity is the on-going construction of the smaller identities that make up the whole, rather than a real, core or authentic self. It is through these reconstructions of self that we can exercise greater agency over our lives.

Generative spaces within the cracks: composing and recomposing our academic identities

Considering that our lives involves constructing plot lines rather than a grand narrative, it is important to reflect on the multiple changing stories that we live by. In his attempt to construct authentic and meaningful stories, Badley (2016) refers to Heidegger's advice to cherish and be inspired by “our most important words,” arguing that these words are significant because we identify ourselves through them (379). Charmaz’s (1994) research on chronically ill men provides a vivid example as she illustrates how these men seek to live normal lives by preserving aspects of self that they have valued, which she describes as ‘maintaining essential qualities, attributes, and identities of this past self that fundamentally shape the self-concept (278). Papa and Lancaster (2016) refers to these efforts as an independent 'self-construal' which encompasses a self- concept that is buffered against a loss as it “embod[ies] relatively stable ways of interacting with the world' that are not so affected by the disruption or loss of a role” (49). Badley also suggests that these personal meanings and essential qualities are words to live by. He explains how these words are a way of expressing who we are and a means of exercising our academic freedom. Richardson (2001) affirms this point by suggesting how “people who write [stories] are always writing about their lives” (34). As a casual academic, the words that I wanted to explore reflected the positive agency inherent within change and loss, rather than the negative associations of illegitimacy, uncertainty and instability.

If openness was essential for growth, I considered the act of asking questions to be more significant than having the answers (Brodkin 2009). As I reflected on my search for generative spaces between the cracks of uncertainty, I began searching for new meaning amongst ‘ruins.’ It was only then I was able to see the richness in what was previously unnoticed or dismissed. One way I attempted to pursue meaning in my disparate identity was to explore non-traditional research approaches. I experimented with new writing styles and research topics. Rather than writing about ‘legitimate’ topics, I expanded my reading and writing to less familiar but meaningful areas such as the body, illness and the casual academic identity. I wrote from such places of dissonance to explore its hidden potential. Haynes (2006) expresses similar views of engaging in research, as she explores her identity as an academic and mother. She states:

Conducting the research, however, brought about an opportunity for personal reflection and development. . . I shed some guilt, gained in confidence, understood why I had sometimes been uncomfortable as an accountant, affirmed my love and commitment to my children, and began to develop a new identity as an academic. In such a sense the research was cathartic, and part of my own 'project of the self' (Haynes, 2006, 216).

Conducting research into personally meaningful matters lies at the heart of inquiry. Haynes (2006) asserts that it is fundamentally impossible to "separate reason and emotion" (218); whilst, Bochner (1997) argues that academics become more transparent about their alienation from research, as he writes, "It's about time we wrestled more openly and collectively with these problems. Instead of hiding the pain many of us feel about the ways we are unfulfilled by the life of the mind" (434). Haynes illustrates this view by choosing to write and research about her personal experiences balancing motherhood and an accounting career. As she undertakes research with participants who share common life experiences, she perceives a shift both in herself and her participants and comments, "boundaries in relationships were shifted, values and ontologies were redefined, and emotions, painful and positive, were experienced. These cannot be ignored in the research process as they affect the outcome of the research" (218). She finally concludes that undertaking research is like going on a journey that leads to unintended personal growth.

Researchers who choose to write about 'epiphanies' are consequently pattern seekers who examine their experiences in relation to those of others (Raab, 2013). The patterns that emerged from my explorations revealed that identity was fluid, complex and paradoxical entity. This revelation came as a surprise, as I had sought the opposite. I had desired tenure to attain security and certainty; I believed that this was the only legitimate path in academia. It was only after finally leaving the debate of permanent and non-permanent work aside, I could see the generative spaces in the cracks of my peripheral academic identity. A fluid academic identity was beneficial as it made me more proactive in searching for less familiar research topics and ways to express them. Bradley (2016) similarly concludes that academic identity encompasses this ongoing process of composing and recomposing rather than reaching certainty through a final, complete or authentic self, we can only attempt to establish a "temporary (that is, unfixed) reflective equilibrium" (382). As composers of academic identity, he argues that we should continually move forward to construct our lives depending on what matters to us. In my case, the concepts of change and loss held deep personal meaning. Badley (2016) illustrates this desire to write about 'what matters' by revealing how he intends to construct his identity in post-retirement by pursuing new ways of writing, moving from:

Traditional or conventional modes to approaches that are more experimental or flexible or even looser. As post-academic writers, they could attempt to write more simply by admitting themselves as identifiable agents within the process of writing and not as subjects who must be excluded from that process in the service of some spurious 'objectivity' (383).

I continue to engage in similar forms of experimental writing to explore the complexity of my casual academic identity. Behar (2009) acknowledges that such writing is not without its risks as she discloses how her vulnerable writing attracts equally vulnerable readers, who are drawn to the writing that resonates with them. She describes such readers as not wanting to be "alienat[ed] from themselves or from those whom they seek to understand and eventually write about" and further warns readers to only follow her if they "don't mind going to places without a map" (112). I imagine that Behar readers are driven by the same motivations that drive me to write about change and loss; I think we all no longer want to be alienated from ourselves. I understand how fear can alienate, whilst vulnerability creates bonds that connect people to each other. Dewsbury (2014) speaks about letting go of fear through writing from one's desires. He reflects on the word apprehensive in relation to the exciting possibilities inherent to writing authentically:

Where does that leave me? Apprehensive. But wow, what a great word, apprehensive: to apprehend, but not be certain; to be apprehended, to arrest, to be arrested, to be caught dumbfounded in the flow of someone else, something else, a breeze, a warm glow of sunlight – ‘affect: to understand, practically, not intellectually (151).

I am motivated by similar aims as I attempt to write about my casual academic identity to apprehend its strangeness and possibility. Like Behar, I also seek to find my significant words to acquire greater authenticity and meaning. This means writing about topics that matter deeply, such as an identity based on loss and change. Finally, I write to reach out to others who struggle with an ‘undefined, peripheral and contingent’ identity to help them see the rich possibilities within its ‘cracks.’

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