

University reform and the research practices of sociologists

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This Paper

- What are the everyday research practices of the sociologists in the study?
- How is the form of their research enabled and constrained in current contexts?

Outline of the PhD

- How do the everyday activities of individual academics across their careers contribute to the reproduction and transformation of academic life?
- How do their everyday activities intersect and interact with processes of institutional and policy change?

Outline of paper

- Practice-informed approach
- The research university in historical context
- The RAE and the 1993 White Paper
- Empirical data – how can we conceptualise the relationship between research practice and university reform? – 4 suggestions

'Practice' approach

- It is in the performance of everyday activities that institutional and social structures are reproduced and transformed
- "...a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (Reckwitz, 2002:249)

Institutions

University 1

- Large civic university (1880)
- Recent merger
- No. staff: 29
- 2001 RAE (Sociology): 5*
- 'World class research'

University 2

- Post-1992
- No. staff: 35
- 2001 RAE: 3a
- 'for World class professionals'

University 3

- small civic university (1903)
- Sociology with social policy
- No. staff: 26
- 2001 RAE (Social policy): 4
- ?

University 4

- Merger (ex-CAT, Univ) (1967)
- No. staff: 21
- 2001 RAE: 4
- 'Bursting with choice'

Research & the university

➤ Humboldt (1810)

➤ "...the social and political conditions for the collective pursuit of truth lie in the independence, academic freedom, originality, integrity and equality of the 'republic of science'." (Polyani 1962 in Henkel, 2000)

➤ Merton (1973)

Research reform (RAE)

Practices will involve activities that:

- Meet RAE definitions of research (e.g. sole authored)
- Target high status journals
- Time publications to fit with RAE
- Favour shorter term projects
- Follow 'mainstream' – methodologically & thematically

Research reform (1993 White Paper)

Practices will involve activities that:

- Enable work to be collaborative
- Involve variety of stakeholders
- Involve trans-disciplinary teams
- Involve different outputs and forms of communication

The research of sociologists

- 'Vertical'/'Top down'
- 'Institutional'
- 'Horizontal' (daily path)
- 'Biographical' (life path)

Institutional

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Institutional

University 1: Large civic

- EU funding makes her research possible.
- Their criteria don't effect her work.
- The funding is valued by the dept for both RAE & post-RAE strategy.
- She is given a lot of research time.
- The majority of her research time is spent at European meetings & bidding for funding.
- PI and RAs/PhD students
- Trade-offs made in publications

University 2: Post 92

- Research is a 'hobby'
- University not interested
- Blurs the boundaries between different areas of work.
- Mainly research writing 'a labour of love'
- Unfunded, ethnographic, local, long term community studies.

Horizontal

“...when it comes to workload, there’s always a distinction... there are things that are important and things that are urgent... teaching’s urgent because you need to prepare it for the next day...I think that increasingly people are exercised by those types of urgent things... I mean I’ve just been in meetings all day.”

(New lecturer, small civic)

Horizontal

“...those types of seminars, sometimes you sense that they’re almost treated as peripheral to what we do... Like on a day-to-day basis there are more important things than turning up to listen to other people’s research”
(new lecturer, small civic)

Biographical

- Political economy of academic jobs
- Find a home, make a home, homeless, nomads
- Research topic – fashion, personal life
- Personal – where to live/ family ties
- To have an 'academic life'. A way to be ourselves?

"... after a point you realise it's just you... it's one of my pleasures in life. It's what makes me, me." (Senior lecturer, large civic)

Conclusions

- New/additional/complementary starting points to understand the relationship between everyday practices & university reform
- Combining them in different ways can assist understanding of the empirical world
- By analysing from these different perspectives can understand the influences on our own work in more detail

Conclusions

“I could give you the answer that we publish our work and blahblah, but ultimately it’s the capital that we’re struggling over in the field. And ultimately when I was publishing those articles, I was in a position where I was on a fixed term contract, and I thought, yeah I want a job, where do people look at you for jobs – in your publications... I knew when I sent it to Sociology that it was a better journal than the online journal of poorington university...” (New lecturer, small civic).