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Occupational Identity on the Edge: Social Science Contract Researchers in Higher Education

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**Abstract**

Throughout the higher education sector in the UK, recent decades have witnessed the increasing use of fixed-term and part-time labour, to the extent that around 50% of academic staff are currently employed on fixed-term contracts and in excess of 90% of researchers are employed on fixed-term contracts. Despite the importance of their contribution to the sector as a whole, relatively little research has been undertaken on the lived experience of undertaking contract research. The objective of this paper is therefore to explore the reality and complexities of contract researchers' working lives and the occupational identities and self-images which contract researchers construct and maintain.

**keywords:** contract researchers; fixed-term contracts; social sciences; occupational identities; higher education; marginality.

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# Occupational Identity on the Edge: Social Science Contract Researchers in Higher Education

## Introduction

Throughout the higher education sector in the UK, recent decades have witnessed the increasing use of fixed-term and part-time labour, to the extent that around 50% of academic staff are currently employed on fixed-term contracts (Bryson and Barnes 2000: 189). One of the principal rationales for this trend has been articulated as the drive toward a more 'flexible' and cheaper workforce in order to cope with increasing student numbers (Kogan *et al* 1994). Within the wider economy, human capital and post-Fordist theories (Harvey 1989) about the contemporary world of work have been heavily influential in the demand for workers to be more 'flexible' (Barlow 1995). One of the principal means by which employers have engineered such flexibility has been to increase casual, part-time, and contract work, and these forms of employment constitute an increasingly important feature of the labour markets of the leading capitalist countries (Lane 1989, Mayne *et al* 1996). Generally, workers hired on short-term contracts labour under less favourable conditions and with less pay. Within the higher education sectors of such states, the 'flexible' work force has proliferated (Parker & Jary 1995, McInnis 2000, Shumar 1997).

Since 1980 numbers of contract researchers have increased fourfold, whilst simultaneously the number of permanent research posts has decreased from 13% to 4% of the total (Bryson and Barnes 2000: 199). In 1998 there were 28,596 staff employed on research grades, a staggering 96% of whom were on hourly-paid or fixed-term contracts (Bryson and Barnes 2000: 194-199). The gender balance within contract research reflects the general structure of academia, with women under-represented at senior research grades and over-represented at more junior levels

(Court *et al* 1996: 25), and proportionately much more likely to be employed on a fixed-term contract in every category (Bryson and Barnes 2000: 214).

Despite the importance of their contribution to the higher education sector as a whole, it is clear that in comparison to academics employed on 'permanent' contracts, fixed-term staff suffer considerable inequalities. Poor salary structures, inadequate pension provision, reduced holiday entitlement and sickness provision, lack of security, and little if any career development, make it extremely difficult for many to sustain a 'career' in this sector of academia. Very few contract researchers manage to achieve the more senior grades of the salary structure, despite considerable experience.

The inadequacies of the contract labour system as a means of training and maintaining a skilled research workforce have frequently been highlighted (NATFHE n.d; AUT 1995). With the annual turnover of contract researchers estimated to be between 35%-50% (Bryson and Barnes 2000: 204), even if the deleterious consequences for individual researchers are left out of the equation, it remains a highly wasteful process for the higher education system as a whole when the employment of skilled and talented researchers is so fragmented.

In 1996, in recognition of the problematic nature of contract research careers, the bodies representing Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the Research Councils, the British Academy and the Royal Society agreed a Concordat on Contract Research Staff Career Management (CVCP 1996) to establish a framework for improving the management and career development of contract researchers. Unfortunately, there is recent compelling evidence that the working conditions of contract researchers remain fundamentally unchanged (Bryson 1999; Bryson and Barnes 2000).

Academic interest in higher education contract researchers has developed in recent years (Patrick 1998; Bryson and Barnes 2000; Freedman *et al* 2000) with much of the focus upon surveys charting the inferior pay and conditions, and the lack of career trajectory characteristic of contract research. A more limited range of qualitative material examines the impact of such poor conditions, and there also exists a small number of personal accounts.

Although contract researchers represent a growing pool of expertise, little is known about the work routines and daily practices of their occupational lives (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 1998; Allen-Collinson 2000). Indeed, present knowledge about the reproduction of academic occupational culture remains relatively sparse (Delamont *et al* 1994; Blaxter *et al* 1998; Abbas and McLean 2001), and the limited amount of published research has tended to focus upon teaching staff, with scant attention paid to other occupational groups within higher education (Delamont 1996; Edwards 2000).

### Method

In an attempt to fill this lacuna, research on the working lives and occupational experiences of contract research staff was conducted.<sup>1</sup> Initially, judgment sampling (Burgess 1984) was used to select the group, and snowball sampling (Creswell 1998) supplemented the initial trawl so that eventually a range of diverse sites was selected. Interviews were undertaken with 61 social science contract researchers, 59 of whom were employed at 11 English and Welsh universities, one was currently unemployed, and one, with considerable experience within the UK, was employed at an overseas university at the time of the interview.

The research was designed with the objective of capturing as wide a spectrum of contract research experience as possible. The sample covered traditional academic

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<sup>1</sup> The research team comprised the author and Dr John Hockey, University of Gloucestershire.

social science departments (n=10) and specialist research centres (n=10), in the fields of sociology, socio-legal studies, social work and policy, politics, psychology, planning and education. The researchers ranged from novice research assistants on their first contract, to senior research fellows with over a decade of experience. The interviews also spanned those employed on relatively long-term contracts (3 years or more) to those who were employed on a day-to-day basis. The gender breakdown was 37 women and 24 men. Interviews were in-depth, semi-structured, tape-recorded, and were designed to elicit data on various social relationships, motives, aspirations, coping strategies, learning processes, and conceptions of identity.

The primary purpose of the study was not to generate statistical generalisations but rather to explore the complexities of contract researchers' working practices and their subjective experiences. In common with much qualitative analysis, extrapolation from the data relies on 'the validity of the analysis rather than the representativeness of the events' (Mitchell 1983:190).

### Work and identity

On the basis of its insecurity, inferior conditions and status, contract research may be deemed a *marginal* occupation (Bilson 1988: 188) within higher education. The primary objective of this paper is to examine the occupational identities and self-images which contract researchers construct and maintain. Work has been identified as one of the central ways in which individuals evaluate themselves and are evaluated by others, thus constituting a core part of 'social identity' and 'the self', as Everett Hughes (1959) long ago noted. Additionally, Becker (1977: 178-9) underlined the importance of occupational titles for connoting a great deal about the characteristics of their bearers to the wider social audience. The perceptions of that audience in turn influence the occupational identity of the title-bearers. Thus, contract researchers' conceptions of self-identity are influenced both by their occupational peer group, who constitute 'significant others' (Cooley 1983) and also

by the wider audience of the 'generalised other' (Mead 1934). As has been noted, the very nomenclature of 'contract research staff', 'research assistant' and so on can be seen as demeaning and inappropriate to the qualifications and experience of such staff (Research Careers Initiative 2001: 6).

Researchers' own conceptions of how the institutional 'generalised other' viewed them were reflected in value-laden phrases such as 'casualised labour' and 'academic migrants'. The interviews clearly revealed the shifting and complex nature of occupational identity amongst researchers, contingent upon an amalgam of biographical features (cf Stanley 1990: 209), such as educational or professional socialisation, and previous work experience. Individuals enter their occupational role carrying biographical baggage, and how they experience and engage with this role is also dependent upon the individual biographical resources brought to the occupational context. This paper seeks to provide a depiction of occupational identity as it is constructed, deployed and reconstructed by contract researchers.

### Biographical differences

In common with entry to all occupational groups, individuals entering contract research bring with them a multiplicity of biographical elements. However, the interviews revealed certain distinct patterns of biographical heritage which exerted a strong influence upon the subsequent development and maintenance of occupational identity. These patterns related to the differing entry routes to the occupation, where three distinct groupings emerged from the data.

The first and smallest group had entered research via what might be termed 'unorthodox' routes. Of this group, three (5%) of the researchers (all women) had originally commenced work on a research project in a secretarial capacity and had subsequently transferred to the role of researcher for a variety of reasons, including staff shortages. On occasion these staff had occupied dual roles, as both secretary

and researcher, for a limited duration. In a similar vein, two of the male researchers (3%) had started as technicians servicing projects in computing or quasi-experimental areas, and had incrementally taken on more research-specific functions before achieving full researcher status. A second group had entered research via more orthodox routes, accompanied by considerable academic capital (Bourdieu 1988) in the form of social science first and higher degrees. A third group had both degree-level qualifications and also professional qualifications.

These differing routes to research resulted in different vocabularies of motive (Mills 1940: 909). For interviewees with professional or occupational experience in fields such as health, social work and law, the principal motive for entering contract research and tolerating such a marginal status with all its attendant insecurities, was often articulated as the desire to promote social and political change. This motive was linked to conceptions of occupational self which valorised social justice. Contract research was consequently perceived as an opportunity to influence their fields, both practically and positively. The research was viewed as a potential instrument of change (cf Carr and Kemmis 1986; Whyte 1991) and the research craft (Ravetz 1971) as a valuable addendum to the array of practitioner and professional knowledge and skills already possessed. For this group, their self-image(s) were still at least partially located within their earlier occupational experience (cf Parry 1997: 126), which was subsequently bolstered by new research skills and the ability to stimulate practical change, as one described:

**I'm very practically orientated ... and I want to see practical results. Mostly my input has been on a micro-level with local agencies, doing bits of research on how they work and trying to stimulate them to change for the better. I'm a specialist in helping practitioners, that's how I see myself...**

(Research Fellow, Department)



These 'practitioner researchers' frequently constructed the 'practical' self in opposition to the category of 'academic'; a role with which they manifestly did not identify. Indeed the term 'academic' was often employed pejoratively, as shorthand for research perceived to be non-applied, impractical and far too abstract. Abstraction, in the form of theory generation, was much denigrated in contrast to more esteemed practical abilities used to sustain a rather utilitarian occupational identity (Becker 1972). A somewhat similar form of self-concept was also held by researchers who had entered research via 'unorthodox' routes. Possessing little formal academic capital (Bourdieu 1988), these individuals had achieved researcher status on the basis of technical skills and competencies. For example, one Research Associate explained:

**When you get into research as I have, it's on the back of doing lots of the technical donkey work on lots of projects...crunching out the data on big data sets, sorting out software problems, all that sort of stuff. I don't have the academic background that the Research Director has, or even most of the researchers, but I am good at sorting out problems! So I suppose I am here as a problem solver, that's okay, because that's how I see myself really.**

A different kind of biographical heritage was evident amongst researchers with a formal socialisation in the social sciences and humanities but without practitioner training. Their occupational self-images were grounded in a prolonged disciplinary socialisation based on a set of academic values. The existence of a specific academic value system has been noted by numerous commentators (Merton 1973; Evans 1988; Becher 1989; Wilson 1991). Whilst acknowledging differences in the formulations of this value system, it is possible to identify certain common elements,

including: the pursuit of truth, academic honesty, acceptance of reasoned criticism, open transmission of knowledge, and a belief in academic quality.

In addition to this generic academic identity existed extensive sediments of subject knowledge, creating a disciplinary lens through which to perceive the self and the social world (Keiser 1970: 233; Sarsby 1984: 130). The greater the intensity and duration of the disciplinary socialisation, the greater the identification with the relevant discipline (Delamont *et al* 1997a, 1997b). The following quote contrasts academic imperatives with the more pragmatic concerns which dominate most contract research output:

**So I found I was second-string on a lot of different projects – projects that I knew nothing about ... things which are deadly boring, and I had no interest in. I thought, ‘I’m compromising’... It was the sort of place where there’s no value given to publications or scholarship, you just do the job, get the report out...**

(Research Fellow, Centre)

As indicated, individuals arrived in contract research with different constellations of motives, and there were researchers who admitted to somewhat less ‘committed’ motives for engaging in research, confessing to essentially opportunistic motives, such as: being ‘glad to get off the dole’, ‘happy to work like this because it fits in with childcare’, and ‘fairly satisfied with doing this as I needed a stop-gap between real jobs’. Although the biographies of some of these individuals did include significant amounts of academic capital (Bourdieu 1988), stimulating social change or furthering academic knowledge were clearly of no significance. Alternative priorities ranged from childcare to developing a small business. Within this group, there emerged a relationship between part-time status in contract research and differing conceptions of identity. Some individuals had experience of full-time research work, but had

moved to part-time mode, whilst others had never engaged with contract research on a full-time basis. These part-time researchers all gave precedence to self-identities external to the research work, for example:

**To me the importance of what I do here has diminished over each contract. I have always loved boats. After years of being involved with them as a hobby, I now work part-time down the dock ... Well, there is a certain amount of flexibility attached to doing research, and I can fit the boat work in because of that, and because I'm now part-time here.**  
(Research Fellow, Department)

Some full-time researchers acknowledged that the contract researcher role represented a temporary occupational phase, a brief episode before seeking more permanent employment outside of academia. These individuals were invariably on their first or second contract, usually of short duration, and had accepted the work out of financial necessity rather than real ambition or interest, primarily due to happenstance or serendipity (Miller 1983; Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997); for example:

**It's a stop-gap really, it's a way of earning money whilst I'm looking for a permanent job. No, I don't want to be an academic and I don't really see myself as a researcher ... I sort of fell into doing this because basically I find statistics easy. I just do that, run the data, which is about housing, but quite frankly it could be about anything. I'm not involved with it like a lot of people around here.**

(Research Assistant, Centre)

In common with all occupational groups, individuals bring to the domain of contract research different stores of biographical experience, which generate particular

vocabularies of motive, and sustain particular occupational identities. In effect, the researchers studied possessed a composite occupational identity, some elements of which were shared with others and some more idiosyncratic. Most of those with an academic pedigree had entered contract research in the hope of securing a permanent academic post, and expressed the wish to extend their disciplinary knowledge thereby substantiating their claim to an academic identity. In contrast, for others, their most meaningful identity 'props' were firmly located outside higher education, and their primary motives were functional: a job and remuneration. Despite these differences, all those interviewed emphasized the importance of the 'craft' skills (Ravetz 1971) which secured continued employment and constituted a significant factor in sustaining their work self-image.

#### Identity in context

Clearly, occupational identities are constructed and practised in context, and the interview data revealed that the different contexts in which contract researchers plied their trade had a significant and differential impact upon them. This was particularly evident for those whose identities were permeated by academic and social action concerns. The occupational locations at the time of interview can be categorised as follows (one researcher being unemployed at the time):

- (1) academic departments which only occasionally hired researchers, usually one or two at a time: 5 departments; 11 researchers;
- (2) academic departments which normally had several researchers on a range of contracts: 5 departments; 17 researchers;
- (3) research centres which normally had larger numbers of researchers on different kinds of contracts: 10 centres; 32 researchers.

Researchers situated in category (1) departments confronted a number of practical problems which influenced their conceptions of identity, as they often found

themselves the solitary contract researcher. Consequently, the cycles of research work (eg design, implementation, report submission) did not coincide with those of other researchers, to the detriment of peer communication, support and cohesion. There was little or no development of collegial support networks of researchers facing the same kind of pressures and economic insecurity so prevalent in contract research (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 1998: 497). As a result, the development of craft expertise and confidence in the occupational self was a difficult and faltering process, particularly for novices. Without the peer transmission of 'tacit knowledge' (Polanyi 1983; Gerholm 1990; Delamont and Atkinson 1995) central to the effective practice of contract research, confidence in practising the craft was often hard won, predominantly through trial and error, sometimes costly.

Additionally, researchers in these isolated contexts indicated that permanent staff often seemed reluctant to engage intellectually and socially with them, due to their temporary status (cf Davis 1965). This is perhaps not surprising given the increasingly pressurised environment of university life, with its emphasis on the regulation of both academic time and outputs (Parker and Jary 1995: 328). This, in conjunction with other indicators of 'inferior' status, both material (salary, pensions, etc) and symbolic (for example, lack of a staff mail tray or 'pigeon-hole', exclusion from social events) rendered somewhat problematic the construction of a positive, valued working self. Perhaps the most potent symbolic and material indicator researchers highlighted was the inferior accommodation assigned to them. Indeed, office accommodation ranged from no office at all: 'I was told to go and work in the library for three months', to work spaces which ostensibly should have been condemned on health and safety grounds. The compound effect of these negative factors was described vividly below by a Senior Research Fellow who reflected on a difficult entrée to contract research:

**When I started off I had a real hard-time. There I was, a 22-year old Research Assistant, never having done any empirical research, on my own in a leaky portakabin a quarter of a mile from the department. No one cared about me and most members of staff were not even aware of my existence... The Prof in charge of the project was always away in Europe and just told me to get on with it, so isolation and fear of not being able to complete the fieldwork, let alone write about it, were major aspects of my introduction to being a researcher.**

(Senior Research Fellow, Centre)

Similar narratives of struggle were articulated by interviewees who had undertaken periods of employment in analogous departmental contexts. With the benefit of hindsight, however, researchers tended to view this period and the successful surmounting of their difficulties, as something approximating a *rite de passage* (cf Van Gennep 1960), which proved influential in the establishment of a more confident occupational identity, endowing researchers with an ability to cope with the vagaries of subsequent employment in contract research.

In contrast to this kind of solitary struggle, researchers in the other two locations generally reported an easier *entrée* into the world of contract research and a smoother transition to the occupational role. The physical conditions tended to be much improved, and more fortunate researchers often 'luxuriated' in purpose-built accommodation. Additionally, there was a critical mass of colleagues on hand to transmit the 'craft' of contract research, including the technicalities of undertaking research specifically in a contract environment; a task often qualitatively different from purely academic research (Allen-Collinson 2000: 162). There was considerable collaborative activity amongst researchers in order to gain further contracts and fend off the perennial spectre of unemployment. Knowledge of research opportunities constituted a highly valued resource, and it was interesting to note how freely such

information circulated between peers. Along with such 'gifts' (Mauss 1967) of information, invitations were proffered to novice colleagues to collaborate with more experienced researchers in bidding for, and working on projects. Via inclusion in this peer network, individuals also gained intelligence about the preferences of putative sponsors and developed expertise in the art of constructing research bids. These networks, and the opportunities afforded by them, helped build and sustain researchers' confidence in their ability to handle the craft of contract research, and to achieve some degree of occupational stability. Gradually, evolving over time via an interactive process between peers, sponsors and the world of research, self-images are generated, grounded in the minutiae of contract research, so that there develops an occupational identity sufficiently experienced and confident to deal with the demands, complexities and vagaries of an often precarious trade:

**I went to \_\_\_ as a Research Fellow and I was told that my area is education ... then I'm told I'm going to be an expert on secondary education which I knew absolutely nothing about, but I am suddenly the resident expert there. When I started a new area, I used to be terrified that I would not be able to hack it, because it would be something completely different – but that doesn't frighten me any more... it's just a technique like any other... Now I think, well, anybody can throw anything at me now and I could do it.**

(Research Fellow, Department)

### Identity tensions and solutions

As individuals labour in the contract research trade, they incrementally construct through daily praxis an occupational identity based upon the knowledge and skills necessary for accomplishing their work routines. However, the data revealed various tensions created by inhabiting that very identity. For all of those interviewed, unease about the working self became apparent in a number of ways. Researchers with

dependants and/or who were the principal family wage-earners experienced internal conflict between their self-image of a capable researcher and the ever present threat of unemployment, and expressed unease about that part of themselves which chose to occupy such a precarious and marginalised work role. In the words of one Research Fellow:

**You take risks being a contract researcher, that's part of being this kind of researcher, but the problem is if you have a family it's a BIG risk!. I've never been really happy at the degree of risk, of the possibility that suddenly I'm 43, on the dole, with a mortgage, wife and kids... I've never really felt happy with the part of me that has decided to do this kind of work.** (Research Fellow, Centre)

Tension persisted between the researcher's maintenance of a confident occupational-self and her/his position of institutional marginality. Frequently reminded of their inferior position within the hierarchy of the institution, contract researchers found the validation of work identity rested primarily on feedback from peers and research directors, and their own self-evaluation of competence. Marginality, both in material and symbolic forms, had the capacity to erode a confident occupational self, and it undoubtedly required periodic 'identity work' (Goffman 1961; Snow and Anderson 1995: 253; Prus 1996: 152) in order to prevent such erosion. The intensity of the identity work and the need actively to maintain a positive self-image varied according to particular temporal points during the contract. For example, at the point of commencing a new contract, little identity work was necessary as the very act of securing the contract provided a powerful validator of personal effectiveness. In stark contrast, the second half of contracts, invariably regarded as highly 'pressurised', required considerable amounts of identity work. As the remaining contract time began to peter out, and a new contract had to be sought with some urgency, researchers felt their identity under a degree of threat.



It was clear from the interviews that researchers who were both inexperienced and working in isolated contexts found the shoring up of a positive occupational identity considerably more difficult than did their counterparts enmeshed in peer networks. However, even the latter who had attained the top of the limited hierarchy of research grades, were keenly aware that the negative impact of their institutional position had to be monitored and guarded against. As one Senior Research Fellow admitted:

**At the back of my mind, there's always the thought that I am not a full member of this university, and then up jumps the insidious thought 'Why? Why have I not been made permanent, why am I not good enough?' When those kind of thoughts arise I try and think of all the positive things I have achieved in this Centre.**

There also existed tensions specific to the 'social justice' orientated group of researchers. As has been noted, contract research is a pressurised business where increased output within shorter time-scales is demanded by funders (Pirie, 1997). It is under these constraints and pressures that the vast majority of this kind of intellectual labour operates. As a result, researchers are habitually short of time, struggling to meet sponsors' deadlines, whilst simultaneously obliged to devote time and energy to securing another contract. Time is very evidently at a premium and researchers evolve various 'strategies' (Crow 1989) for dealing with time, one of which tended to pose a strong challenge to their conceptions of identity. In the terminology of the researchers themselves, time for writing and submitting new bids for funding, was obtained by 'squeezing' or more commonly 'stealing' time. In this framework, time was conceptualised as a commodity stolen from the existing project in order to enable the drafting of new project bids. As researchers' practical competency develops, this tactic allows them to complete certain projects in a very efficient fashion, and consequently to 'free up' time:

**After a while you become really good at doing these kind of projects, you almost have a sort of template in your head, so you can turn them around very quickly. That means out of the number of days budgeted for the project you can sometimes *pinch* some time to write proposals for future research... [my emphasis]**

(Research Fellow, Centre)

In addition to 'manufacturing' time for submitting bids, researchers also used the technique of building into their original project proposals adequate time for drafting subsequent bids. Their informal stock of knowledge allowed the calculation of how much time was *really* needed to complete the proposed research. This duration was then supplemented by the incorporation of 'writing time' into the proposal timeframe, carefully concealed under a different heading.

As was clear, for those researchers concerned with social justice objectives, these kinds of strategies engendered a fair degree of disquiet and tension. The occupational self which valorised improving public sector organisations was found to be actually implicated in strategies of 'time-stealing' from those same organisations. This was perceived as particularly lamentable as it ultimately resulted in financial costs for organisations obliged to operate in a climate where 'time is money' (Loft 1995). As one Research Fellow admitted: 'I used to get guilty about doing this when the research was for some small charity, and what you are doing is effectively stealing time which they have paid for'.

Confronted with such tensions, researchers utilised various 'techniques of neutralization' (Sykes and Matza 1957: 668), to justify their strategies. Some individuals convinced themselves that stealing time was in effect a measure necessary to achieve the longer-term research objective. As one researcher

reasoned: 'If I don't get another contract, research in this particular area will just not get done, so I feel some days pinched from them is not such a crime!'. Another technique was to emphasize the potential impact upon the wider social welfare infrastructure should researchers fail to secure another contract. This they contrasted with their own mildly 'illegitimate' behaviour. As one Research Fellow rationalised: 'If I end up a recipient of the dole that will cost the system much more than me lifting a few days from the Department ... to write bids'. A further option was for individuals to stress the greater practical impact upon policy which their earlier research had achieved: 'I like to think we (research group) have made a difference in changing policy on \_\_\_\_ issues, that's happened because bids which were written on "nicked" time were successful, so a tiny bit of social deviance helps the cause!'.

For those researchers for whom academic and disciplinary concerns were foremost in terms of identity salience, a further source of tension and identity strain was evident. These individuals encountered difficulties and frustrations in inhabiting an occupational role which, for the most part, offered few opportunities for academic output. It is worth recalling that the great majority of contract research work in the UK is undertaken for, and funded by, local authorities, charities and government departments whose priorities rarely reflect those of academia. Coupled with the increasingly short-term nature of contracts and the near constant search for new posts, this meant that the time, energy and opportunity for scholarly, academic reflection and publication were severely restricted or non-existent. Anger and frustration resulted, accompanied by considerable anxiety that time spent in the occupational role had eroded disciplinary knowledge and academic identity. The following kind of comment was pervasive, particularly from Research Fellows who had completed several years of contract time:

**You know I have been gradually losing it as time has passed...I mean academic knowledge. It's a bit ironic because you can hear some of the**

**regular members of staff moan about not being able to keep up with their area because of their lecturing loads. That's a joke compared to people like me; I have lost it with sociology in its entirety, let alone an area. I don't know what postmodernism is!**

(Research Fellow, Department)

Prolonged engagement in contract research, where the need for specialist disciplinary knowledge is often very limited, means that discipline expertise begins to recede into the past, as the stock of subject-specific knowledge is eroded. Alarming, along with this decline in subject knowledge, researchers are acutely aware that, in contrast, disciplinary knowledge itself is continually growing and their capacity to keep pace with such rapid expansion is severely stretched. Caught between the vanishing disciplinary past and the ever-expanding disciplinary present and future which seem to be accelerating beyond control, researchers find the consequences for intellectual identity are dire:

**All that time I put into learning that body of theory and I can't hang on to it... I've got no time to hold on to what I knew, let alone all the new work which has emerged since I finished my doctorate... Intellectually I am reduced, stunted I suppose, that's what I feel as I go about my umpteenth report for social service departments.**

(Research Fellow, Centre)

The longer researchers spend in the contract research mode, the more they tend to lose the basis upon which their academic vocation (cf Smith 1991) and disciplinary identity were initially founded. The active response of many was to engage in various forms of identity work (Goffman 1961) in a desperate attempt to retain their former 'gloried self' (Adler and Adler 1989). Such identity work was found to be influenced by elements of the work context. Thus, researchers might find positive support if

surrounded by peers whose conceptions of identity were also discipline-based. Whilst a critical mass of researchers helped individuals to construct and sustain confident occupational self-images, a key factor was undoubtedly the presence of colleagues who shared a similar disciplinary commitment (cf Delamont et al 1997a and 1997b). At several interview sites researchers benefited from a strong disciplinary ethos and the valorisation of both academic and practitioner-orientated output. In other locations, however, such 'props' to disciplinary identity were largely absent because practitioner concerns and output took precedence, and researchers were consequently obliged to revert to individual identity work.

One important form of identity work cited was involvement in teaching the discipline. This seemed to hold considerable symbolic potency for researchers, as reflected in comments such as: 'I teach two hours a week in the evening, so the historian in me is not dead, yet!'. Some researchers confessed to 'making bargains' with the occupational self so that, for example, putting sustained effort into their official project might be rewarded by permitting oneself the luxury of reading one academic paper each week. Other attempts to sustain intellectual connections included social and leisure activities with disciplinary colleagues within the institution in preference to socialisation with fellow contract researchers within their department. As one indicated: 'This is not the kind of Centre where one takes regular lunch-hours, but when I do, I go over to the bar, where S\_\_\_ can always be found, the only other anthropologist in this place ... She speaks my language'. Some researchers retained membership of disciplinary and professional associations, even when there was no immediate possibility of being able to undertake research in the subject area. By a range of devices, this particular group of researchers attempted to sustain an academic identity, despite having to devote their efforts primarily to projects offering few opportunities for disciplinary interest or academic output.

### Conclusion

This paper has examined the construction and maintenance of occupational identities amongst a group of social science contract researchers in the UK higher education sector. For these researchers, conceptions of identity hinged upon a number of factors, including: their biographical resources and academic capital, the nature of the locations in which they worked, and their prior occupational experience of contract research work.

On one level, there existed a certain degree of homogeneity in terms of how the occupational self was viewed. Researchers articulated a set of common, shared understandings of their individual and collective positions of relative marginality within the institution (Bilson 1988). They emphasized repeatedly their lowly status within the academic hierarchy, and the essentially transient nature of the job, as reflected in self descriptions such as: 'intellectual nomads', 'casual labour', and 'peripheral staff' which peppered their discourse. Further commonalities included a stock of shared knowledge, craft competencies and skills, ranging from methodological expertise to more tacit, informal knowledge such as how to cultivate and manage sponsors to maximum effect. Such knowledge, skills and competencies constituted a valuable resource upon which researchers drew in order to construct more positive occupational selves in the face of a potentially negative institutional position.

In contrast to this relative homogeneity, a degree of differentiation was also found to exist, grounded in biographical differences and varied work experience. Such differences were predictably evident in relation to factors such as disciplinary and professional backgrounds, but also emerged in relation to the meanings attached to contract research as an occupation, and its identity salience (Stryker 1987; Wells and Stryker 1988). Certain inner tensions were evident amongst researchers, and the paper has attempted to chart these, and to describe the methods employed to resolve or at least to manage the consequences, as researchers strove to sustain self-confidence and self-belief in the occupational self.

The link forged between work and identity has been theorised generally by Hughes (1959), and more specifically by Parker and Jary (1995) in terms of intellectual labour within higher education. There has been posited a strong connection between *how* individuals work and *who* they perceive themselves to be. Perhaps surprisingly, contract researchers, often marginalised within mainstream academia and dogged by inferior status and prospects, plus financial insecurity, continue to make such a sustained and highly significant contribution to the research output of UK higher education and thereby to bolster the financial well-being of the sector as a whole (Bryson and Barnes 2000). The importance of their 'identity work' should not therefore be underestimated, for it is on the basis of this work that credible occupational identities are constructed and sustained, and in turn the considerable and demanding labour of contract research work continues to be completed effectively.

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