Book review

Doing Academic Careers Differently: Portraits of Academic Life

Sarah Robinson, Alexandra Bristow, and Olivier Ratle. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2023. 458 pages, eBook.

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Doing Academic Careers Differently: Portraits of Academic Life

Research has identified a legacy of hierarchy within higher education. Although critical studies have been critiquing dominant traditions, addressing institutional limitations, and advocating for diverse scholarship, there has been little focus on the restrictive expectations of academic professionals. *Doing Academic Careers Differently* reimagines academic trajectories through metaphorical 'galleries', challenging traditional academic norms. It argues for recognising diverse career paths and addressing the detrimental impact of conventional expectations on individuals' well-being and authenticity.

The Red Queen to Alice: *Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!* (Lewis, 1998: 42)

Historical research has suggested that 'the history of higher education in Britain […] has left a legacy of hierarchy and fragmentation' (Perkin, 1987: 22). Calls to challenge the status quo followed even from the most traditional academic disciplines (Silver, 2006; Menis, 2020). For example, in their introduction to critical legal studies in 1987, Fitzpatrick and Hunt (1987: 1-2) suggested that academics engaging with this 'movement' 'share a rejection of the dominant tradition' in an 'environment in which radical and committed scholarship can thrive in diversity'. Significantly, they recognised that higher education and institutions 'work to buttress and support a

pervasive system of oppression'. The existence of limiting 'monolithic tradition' was recognised, but the movement argued that there are no justifiable reasons for giving in to domination and hierarchy. Accordingly, this was to disturb the order created by the 'culturally constructed nature of social existence' (Hunt, 1987: 8). Recent research has confirmed that the hierarchical social structure is reproduced in higher education institutions (Croxford and Raffe, 2014).

Doing Academic Careers Differently offers to challenge the assumptions of what an academic should do and who they should be. It aims to prove that academic careers can advance in different ways and that there is no one way of becoming and being an academic (p.iii). The challenge of the limitation of academic practices is also reflected in the 'writing differently' approach (e.g. van Eck et al., 2021) taken by the authors; the collection is presented metaphorically as an art exhibition of (written) portraits of academic life. The authors draw on the power of personal experience (by using vignettes and drawings) as an alternative knowledge creation (Scholz and Szulc, 2023). Predominantly from the Business discipline, but not only, the eighty-two contributors address bold themes with an inspiring sense of honesty and reflexibility. The exhibition space is huge, and it consists of nine galleries.

The tour starts with the Meandering Careers gallery. It might require comfortable walking shoes, as it recounts the muddy journeys between and across 'teaching', 'research' and 'academic service' in the neoliberal university (Daddow et al., 2023). Against careerism is next; this gallery has many benches because it requires pausing and meditating. Then, we reach the Navigating Belonging observatory. Polaris Academicus is the star that shines most brightly (p.93); it is the one we are told the 'excellent' academic should follow (Thornton, 2013). However, the observatory reveals so many other stars for us to explore. The Nurturing Careers gallery also has many benches, but

these are mainly for restoring and replenishing wellbeing. The next gallery, The Hall of Mirrors, is the riskiest to enter; it reflects, distorts, and blurs the line between reality and constructed beliefs and expectations (Knights and Clarke, 2014). The last galleries follow: The Transgressive, The Late Entrance, The Living Precariously, and finally, The Hunted Gallery. These galleries showcase stories that are usually, if not always, hidden, and yet, these lives have challenged the unquestionable traditional assumptions of academic survival.

Doing Academic Careers Differently might not always be easy to follow; the writing is cathartic, personal and emotional. Yet, the boldness of the sentiment to recognise other experiences is impressive. And for this reason, the text is inspiring. However, this is not all. The authors aim to develop critical academic career studies by problematising the normalisation of academic career trajectories; they unveil the effects and demands of the expectations to comply with academic conventions on individuals' wellbeing (pp.1, 143) and the tension it creates between teaching and research (Khoo, 2021). The text evidence that doing an academic career successfully, more commonly than not, might take different routes other than the romantic notion of traditional academic accomplishment (p.13) [where the sceptics might sum it up as an anxiety conducing ticking box exercise towards the achievement of a 'title'].

Clinging to tradition is not necessarily a bad thing. However, when reenacting at graduation ceremonies the 11th Century practice of robe-wearing, it could be educating to consider that its power relations significance challenges the more modern value of inclusivity (p.133). In *Doing Academic Careers Differently* the authors recognise that their academic identity has not always been authentic and that they have sustained counterintuitive norms (p.192). Indeed, academic identity is shaped early on by a limiting survival narrative: follow a narrow scope of research (p.23); publish or perish

(p.40); publish in highly ranked journals (p.365) and well-known book publishers; publish narrowly defined academic outputs (p.384); be affiliated to a well-renowned university (p.387). Other cultural expectations remind us that if we fail to comply, we do not fit in; these include attending conferences and networking, chasing promotions (p.152), and bidding for funding (p.198). This limiting culture does not account for individuals' diversity; instead, the fatigue accumulated by an unproductive workload depletes the mind-space for creativity, inspiration and imagination, hence making the career journey unsustainable (Seibet et al., 2024).

In the concluding remarks, the authors ask the reader: 'What are you going to take away?' several items are precious here. First, it is desirable to reconsider the institutionalising meaning of 'success' (Eiras and Huijser, 2024). This does not need to conflict with academic standards, but it needs to be paired with recognising non-traditional academic trajectories. It is key to be critical of practices and narratives that reinforce the culture of 'falling short', in the same way we are critical of practices driving inequality. As best put by Anne-Wil Harzing (2023), being an academic is an art form. Art is an expression of communication, collaboration, imagination, and creativity – it needs to be authentic.

The Jungian Psychoanalyst Dr James Hollis reminds us (2024 at 35:06 min):

> Life is short, we are here very brief time, and the summons is to live your journey as honestly as you can; and when you do, it ultimately serves other people […] it is not self-absorbing, it is humbling.

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