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# Gender, disembodiment and vocation: Exploring the unmentionables of British academic life

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## Abstract

Anthropologists have developed an important corpus of work on embodiment and social agency. But what of the academic bodies involved in the production and reproduction of these ideas? Is an institutional habitus of scholarly disembodiment one consequence of contemporary academic practice? Drawing on research and our own experiences, we describe what we see as the ‘disembodied vocationalism’ fostered by departmental and institutional cultures. Using the case of social anthropology we explore the gendered expectations and silences that continue to exist within British universities.

## Keywords

academic vocation, anthropology, embodiment, gender

In recent years, scholars have called for empirical investigation of the changing political economy of contemporary higher education. In *Killing Thinking*, Evans argues that contemporary academic life needs ‘urgent anthropological investigation’ (2004: ix), while in one of his last public lectures Bourdieu called for the objectivization of the social world of the anthropologist and her practice:

not only her social origins, her position and trajectory in social space, her social and religious memberships and beliefs, gender, age, nationality, etc., but also, and most

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importantly, her particular position within the microcosm of anthropologists.  
(2003: 283)

Similarly, Gledhill (2002: 79) has called for us 'to consider the broader social processes that guide the formation of individual scholars and their habitus'. This, he suggests, would involve asking questions about personal social biography as well as examining 'the effects of peer pressure, rewards, and disincentives within academic communities' (2002: 74). Yet where are the ethnographies of academic departments? The few ethnographic studies of universities that do exist focus on students (e.g. Holland and Eisenhart, 1990; Moffatt, 1989; Nathan, 2005) rather than academics; the latter are largely the subject of novelistic attention.

At an informal level we all possess embodied knowledge of the reproduction and ongoing definition of our discipline: who gets which jobs where, who is invited to give keynote lectures, etc. Yet despite this embodied knowledge of academe as a hierarchical institution, it is the disembodied ideal of the republic of letters that continues to motivate us and which draws new scholars in. To invoke 'vocation' returns us to Weber's famous lecture, 'Science as a Vocation' (2004 [1918]). At the start, Weber acknowledges the haphazard politics, the 'unusually high degree' of chance, and unpredictable 'external conditions' shaping academic lives and bodies, but, he insists, the main focus is on 'something else', namely 'the *inner* vocation for science' (2004: 7); 'this strange intoxication' (2004: 8). Weber's powerful defence of the scientific vocation, with its focus on 'self-clarification' and 'inner consistency', is predicated on the importance of avoiding imposing or suggesting 'a particular point of view' (2004: 27). By implication, it disqualifies an attention to scientists' own bodies, lives and frailties. The effect has been to make career paths unamenable to analysis and to disguise the ways in which academic work is related to broader configurations of power. Yet although academic work is not 'obviously embodied' in the same way that being a sex worker or a bouncer is (Morgan et al., 2005: 2), it is still work, and all work is gendered and embodied (Morgan et al., 2005: 1). There is therefore a gendered effect in disembodiment representations and understandings of academic work.

Weber gave his vocation lectures in 1918, in the context of the German Revolution, a time at which 'the old constitution of the university' had become 'a fiction' (2004: 4). He argued that an extraordinarily wide gulf had opened between the external and the internal reality of academia. At such times, reflection on one's understandings of the world becomes necessary. We believe that the present moment of neoliberal restructuring likewise necessitates reflection. Even though academia is a 'relatively autonomous social space... endowed with its own rules, irreducible to those of the surrounding world' (Bourdieu, 2003: 284), we ignore the relation to the wider world at our peril. As Roseberry (1996: 18) argues, the structure of the academic labour market is increasingly similar to that of the wider labour market marked by 'flexibility' and casualization.

The emerging model of academic subjectivity within the audit regime is clearly at odds with the ideal of the republic of letters and the idea of democratic citizenship

within it. Yet there has been little analysis of the relationship between neoliberal restructuring and the production of new academic hierarchies and their bodily effects, particularly between those in permanent posts and those on short-term contracts.<sup>1</sup> As casualization increases and the new model becomes more coercive, a class of semi-citizens on short-term contracts has emerged. In the current moment of restructuring, it seems important to ask why reflections on these processes are so scarce? What are the consequences of this willed schizophrenia? Who and what does the silence serve?

In this article, we aim to move the boundaries of what can be discussed. Our hope is to contribute to opening up a space that will allow us to speak about the structural changes and inequalities that are transforming our discipline and universities. We are adept at anthropologizing ourselves through gossip in everyday contexts, and so in some ways we 'know' about these issues through gossip or backstage talk. They are rather harder to write about. Our aim in this article is to bring embodied, backstage knowledge into focus, and to reflect on the contradictions that structure contemporary university life, and its gendered implications.

Is it really that difficult to turn an analytical gaze on academic lives? Has there not been a huge amount of work done by social scientists on the changing shape of the university? Whether it be work exploring the effects of the Cold War on anthropology and debates about ethics (Mills, 2003; Nader, 1997), the commodification of higher education (Shumar, 1997), the influence of audit culture (Shore and Wright, 1999; Strathern, 2000), the changing shape of the professoriate (Halsey, 1992) or the nature of disciplinary communities (Abbott, 2001; Mills, 2008), anthropologists and sociologists have been prominent commentators.<sup>2</sup> Much of this work turns on a critique of the impact of neoliberal policy reforms on academic infrastructures. There can be an undertone of elegiac loss and nostalgia, especially when it implicitly harks back to a mythologized 'golden age' (Annan, 1990; Collini, 2003) of UK higher education. On the other hand, anthropologists' own narratives of self-making, such as *Critical Journeys: The Making of Anthropologists* (Neve and Unnithan-Kumar, 2006) avoid discussing institutional politics.

Sangren has recently noted that there is 'considerable systemic resistance within anthropology to studying its own knowledge practices' (2007: 13). This resistance makes the realization of a reflexive anthropology of anthropological knowledge 'a very daunting task indeed' (2007: 15). Sangren further argues that the 'social organization and ethical norms of our profession' prevent a genuine reflexivity, and identifies 'etiquette' as one of the most important forms of anthropology's 'systemic defences' (2007: 15). Would breaking the 'etiquette' lead to a 'free-for-all denunciation' (2007: 16), as he suggests?

We offer an alternative explanation. Is it that we care deeply – possibly too deeply – about the disembodied ideals invested in the republic of letters? Has Weber's ideal of disembodied science become our own 'folk model' of academia, coexisting uneasily with embodied experiences that contradict the republican ideal? Or, to put it more crudely, might our reluctance to question the system stem from

our own complicity with the contradictions that sustain the academic economy? But this may be complicity with a purpose. Perhaps we make a space for our intellectual agency by systematically downplaying the influence of the social forces structuring universities and our own bodily practice. We suggest that successful academic practice often involves the skilled production of disembodied knowledge. In this article we explore the implications of this contradiction and probe how subjects who are differentially located in academic hierarchies are affected by it (see also Young and Meneley, 2005: 3).

Drawing on Weber, we put forward our case for 'disembodied vocationalism' in three ways. First, we review existing literature for clues to the systemic silences. We go on to discuss the changing demographics of our discipline. Finally, we weave in personal accounts from individual women and men working within the field of institutionalized social anthropology. Our aim is to begin to develop an account of the gendered political economy that structures contemporary academic practice. This then is a story about anthropology, about British academia, and about the changing nature of the contemporary workplace.

While perhaps not as gripping as accounts of academic misogyny or departmental philandering that pepper many campus novels, our 'evidence-base' is more robust. This article draws on an ESRC-funded study of the 700 students who completed their doctorates in UK anthropology departments between the early 1990s and 2003 (Spencer et al., 2005). We managed to track down email contact details for 600 of these students using departmental alumni lists, personal connections, their past supervisors or simply 'Googling'. More than 300 responded to our appeal for help, nearly all of whom completed on-line questionnaires. Around half of these held, or had held, academic positions, whether within or beyond anthropology departments, in the UK and around the world, while the remaining half had pursued careers outside the university. Those in universities were a cosmopolitan group, with less than half being UK nationals, almost 60 percent female, and an average age on completion of 35. Only a minority followed a classic career path direct from school and an undergraduate degree. Many brought with them extensive work and policy experience, particularly in health and development. In order to follow up the themes in the questionnaires, we selected around 25 of the group of university-employed respondents for follow-up interview (either face-to-face, or by phone). They were chosen to broadly represent a range of different academic constituencies (e.g. those in tenured posts, on fixed term contracts, in anthropology departments, etc.). In the end, we carried out 20 semi-structured interviews. In their reflections on their experiences and career plans our respondents were disarmingly vocal and frank.

## **A sociology of the republic of letters**

Our interest in this topic arises partly from our own experiences. Like other academic novices (see e.g. Okely, 2007) we were drawn to academia by the ideal of the republic of letters and the 19th-century idea of 'self-cultivation' expressed in the

German concept of *Bildung*. Yet we found that we needed to reconcile the disembodied ideals – that ‘strange intoxication’ – with the embodied practices of institutional life. This predicament is not new, but academic practice is increasingly defined by the new ‘research economy’ (Ratcliffe and Mills, 2008), the exchangeability and commodification of research knowledge enabled by the logics of financial accountability (audit, impact, engagement, value for money). The research economy, through the technologies of the RAE, Full Economic Costing and bibliometrics, is changing academic working practices and redefining the nature of scholarly value. Yet laying bare the political economy of this restructuring would not capture the hold that the idea of vocation has on us.

Of the many metaphors used to describe academia, that of a ‘republic of letters’ is often invoked by academics themselves. When we talk of being a ‘good citizen’, we evoke a tacit and implicit understanding of a democratic world of equals.<sup>3</sup> In a critical analysis of another imagined republic of letters – that of literature – Casanova convincingly argues for a startling contrast between ‘the fable of an enchanted world, a kingdom of pure creation, the best of all possible worlds where universality reigns through liberty and equality’ and the actual working of its ‘peculiar economy, the “unequal trade”’ (2004: 12). We find the parallels between Casanova’s literary world and those of academia intriguing. Like the literary world, the academic republic of letters ‘is quite separate from the ordinary world’, yet relative autonomy is by the same token relative dependence (2004: 349); like writers of fiction, academics are dependent upon institutional supports, such as publishers, funding and publicity, etc.

As Casanova sees it, the history of world literature is ‘one of incessant struggle and competition over the very nature of literature itself’ (2004: 12). In order to take part in this competition, it is necessary ‘to believe in the value of what is at stake, to know and to recognize it’ (2004: 40). It is this hegemonic belief, Casanova argues, which allows literary space to operate. If instead of literary value, we read scholarly or intellectual merit, the parallels are obvious, as is the downplaying of structural forces in determining relative value and position. In a North American context, Young and Meneley notice that ‘the hegemony of ideologies of meritocracy... is almost absolute in the academy’ (2005: 8), even when everyone knows at the same time that many other factors influence careers. In such a world, Casanova argues that the ‘inequality of the transactions that take place... goes unperceived, or is otherwise denied or euphemistically referred to’ (2004: 42). The dominant representation of the literary world of letters as of ‘free and equal access in which literary recognition is available to all writers’ (2004: 43) glosses over a reality that is in effect suggestive more of empire than of republic. In Casanova’s account, inequality is primarily based around nationality (with its close links to language), although she does also acknowledge other principles for structuring inequality, such as gender. Yet the continuing dominance of the representation of the fable of an enchanted world serves to obliterate ‘all traces of the invisible violence that reigns over’ the world of literature so that its power relations are systematically denied (2004: 43).

Scrutinizing tacit micro-practices, rendering them explicit and analysing their rationales, gives important insights into questions of disciplinary reproduction. In the next section we discuss ways in which feminist anthropologists have sought to open up debate about disembodied ideals and 'unmentionable' experiences.

## **On taboos, unmentionables and fish**

Where can one find sociological and ethnographic accounts of academic life that both capture the everyday gripes of academic micro-politics and offer insights into the larger pressures of neoliberal reform? Hints and allusions are dropped in personal accounts, end-of-career pieces and academic biographies and autobiographies. Overall though, very little is written about academic careerism, favouritism, personal rivalries or social discrimination (but see chapters in Meneley and Young, 2005, for discussion of the North American context). Why is it so difficult? What holds academic investigators back?

Toward the end of his life Leach wrote 'Glimpses of the Unmentionable in the History of British Social Anthropology' (1984), in which he argued that an appreciation of the 'non-sense' of our discipline is fundamentally important if we are to understand anything about the history of our discipline. This in turn means that 'the sociology of the environment of social anthropologists has a bearing on the history of social anthropology' (1984: 3). Leach chose to focus on history rather than the contemporary situation because he thought '[i]t would cause too much offense', if he were to discuss still living scholars. Perhaps it was even a bit offensive to himself, for, as he admits, he was not 'at all frank about just where I fit into the social scene' (1984: 3). For Leach the unmentionable was class, clearly a difficult issue in his own life as he attempted to reconcile his iconoclasm with life as Provost of King's College, Cambridge. And while he acknowledged that he too was a snob, he only hinted at the murky complexity of the 'social conservatism and arrogance' (1984: 6) nurtured by anthropology's fascination with the academic 'elite'.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the problem is related to the embodied, habituated and unself-conscious character of the practices we are trying to get to (Rabinow, 1991: 66). As Marx suggested, people do not notice contradictions in their own society: 'A complete contradiction offers not the least mystery to them. They feel as much at home as a fish in water among manifestations which are separated from their internal connections and absurd when isolated by themselves' (1959: 760). It is indeed difficult for the fish to describe water; academic fish ourselves, we cannot leave the water, but we can begin to point to some areas of 'complete contradiction'.<sup>5</sup>

Anthropology developed as the study of others and, despite a growing volume of 'anthropology at home', studies of the white middle class (who constitute the majority of academics) are still scarce. Access issues apart – and these are not trivial – is ethnographic fieldwork in an anthropology department conceivable, except subliminally? After all, as Bourdieu has noted, bringing the backstage to the front can easily be seen as a 'sacrilegious transgression' (2003: 283). Similarly, Casanova argues for the world of literature that 'so great is the force of denial and



rejection in this world that all works that in one way or another address questions that are dangerous and prejudicial to the established literary order find themselves immediately opposed' (2004: 9). However, if we collude in keeping the gossip to the corridors, we make it hard to challenge entrenched and tacit practices (Rabinow, 1986: 253). Yet would not a true ethnography of the discipline render its fieldworker a perpetual stranger to the profession and the discipline? Would anyone ever employ him or her? We do not know the answer to these questions, but note that the inherent paradox of participant observation is made especially acute. Then there is the double challenge of first making the familiar world of academia unfamiliar and then to represent it textually in its very own language. Since the ethnographer's concepts in this case are the same as those of their informants, it seems a difficult task. This might explain why novelists have reaped such rich dividends where sociologists and anthropologists have failed to tread.<sup>6</sup>

Gatrell and Cooper have argued that, within academia, the female body remains marked with the male body as the tacit ideal: 'Academic production is shrouded in masculine norms and values surrounding the rational and competitive pursuit of knowledge that facilitates the conquest of nature and the control of populations' (2008: 214). The monastic origins of the scholarly habit created a gendered palimpsest on which much has turned. Historians of the Enlightenment have similarly demonstrated the ways in which women were excluded from the 'public' spaces of science (e.g. Haraway, 1997). As Ardener's (1984) and Sciamma's (1984) work on academic wives shows, such 'traditions' have also been used to justify the exclusion of women from academia. This history explains why feminist anthropologists were some of the first to write reflectively about academic practice, with frank accounts of fieldwork, such as those by Elenore Smith Bowen (a pseudonym for Laura Bohannan; see Bowen, 1964) and Powdermaker (1967). Caplan suggests a link between a gendered division of labour within academia, with women as the 'lumpen-intellectuals', and the pioneering role of early reflexive work on fieldwork by women anthropologists (1988: 16).<sup>7</sup> Certainly, as women started making inroads into academia and as the women's movement grew, feminist anthropologists started to address the sharp inequalities they faced in their workplaces.

In the early 1970s, the London Women's Anthropology Group compared the trajectories of male and female anthropology students at three London University anthropology departments. Already then, women constituted a majority among undergraduate students, whereas at PhD level women represented only just over a third. Among teaching staff the proportion of women was smaller yet, dwindling to one woman professor out of eight (Caplan, 1975). In a piece reflecting on the reasons for the weeding out of women the higher up the career ladder ones goes, Barker (1975) discusses a number of circumstantial or contextual factors that directly and indirectly are prejudicial to women; the micro-practices and unmentionables that a reflective anthropology of anthropology needs to include. Most of these are echoed in our material collected in the early 2000s (see below). It is not surprising that feminist anthropologists should be among the first to reflect on the unmentionables: not only did they meet with institutional resistance to their



intellectual project, they were also daily confronted with ‘gendered lessons’ that contradicted the ideal of the university as a disembodied republic of letters (Okely, 2007). As ‘space invaders’ (Puwar, 2004), they were not in a position to ignore the boundaries they transgressed. However, feminist anthropology remains better known for its epistemological insistence on ‘locating’ ethnographic knowledge claims (e.g. Abu-Lughod, 1991, following Haraway, 1985) than for its critique of academic practice.

Based on survey data from 1969, 1970 and 1972, Barker notes that anthropology students tended to be of upper middle-class background; little had changed since the early 20th century, when Leach did his anthropology training. Although as many women as men obtained first-class or upper second-class degree in the early 1970s, more men than women planned to continue with graduate studies, and there was also a marked difference between men and women in terms of how many had even thought of the possibility of an academic career. Of those who did go on to postgraduate study, women had a poorer completion rate than men, especially for doctorates. However, by the early 1980s, women’s completion rates had become equal to those of men, yet only 17 percent of tenured anthropology posts in UK universities were then held by women (Okely, 1983).

The emphasis on prolonged fieldwork in the discipline put special pressure on women, who were less likely than their male peers to have partners who were able and willing to accompany them. Barker notes that many early women anthropologists remained unmarried. Marrying another anthropologist who shared their area of expertise made it easier for women to get to the field, yet upon return this turned to disadvantage as, then as now, it is difficult for an academic couple to find work in the same university if both share the same regional expertise. Having an academic partner can therefore in the end be a disadvantage to women’s mobility.

Barker also raises the issue of relationships between supervisors and their students, with male and female students receiving different degrees of constructive and career-enabling support, and finally the different valorizations of male and female colleagues. If a man refuses to sit on committees, is very disorganized, fails to turn up for lectures, or does not mark essays, etc., people may assume he is ‘having problems’, but may still consider him ‘brilliant’. If a female colleague behaves similarly, she is more likely to be labelled ‘neurotic’ or ‘frustrated’, or to be seen to have conflicting domestic demands that are detrimental to her work (Barker, 1975: 543–4). We can all think of anecdotes about male disciplinary ancestors, whose ‘eccentricity’ is never seen to have impinged on their ‘brilliance’. The lack of similar anecdotes about female ancestors not only speaks of the gendered nature of anecdotes as a genre, but also suggests that the same behaviour, which would likely label a man ‘eccentric’ might give his female colleague a reputation as ‘difficult’. As we know from corridor gossip, being seen as ‘difficult’ may well translate into unemployability, especially in such a small field as anthropology where gossip networks are strong. It is not gratuitous to spell these examples out; rather it is part

of a reflexive exercise that seeks to map our classificatory categories (Bourdieu, 2003: 285–6).

In an article reflecting on her own career in anthropology, Okely (2007) gives examples of the blatant and daily discrimination she experienced when she set out on an academic career in the 1970s. These include being challenged about borrowing rights at her university library because the librarian did not believe that she, a young woman, was a member of staff; being denied access to accommodation because she was an unmarried woman; and having to conceal a commuting relationship so that her ‘commitment’ to her department was not in question. In a similarly reflective piece looking back at her career, Banks (1999) recounts some of the hostility and discrimination she experienced as a woman sociologist of working-class background starting her career in the 1950s. She became the first ever woman to hold a chair at Leicester in 1973. These reflections on the gendered hierarchies of academia in the 1950s and beyond make nostalgia for the past ring a little hollow. A golden era, perhaps, but for whom?

Both Okely and Banks started their careers before the onset of equality legislation, and both acknowledge the changes that this has brought. Yet, looking back, Okely cautions that formal equality legislation is a Pyrrhic victory; audit culture brings with it the demands of bureaucratic accountability and new constraints on intellectual freedom (2007: 230). In a post-feminist world, the gender and class inequities of the republic of letters remain, and remain unmentionable.

## **The changing landscape of the social science labour market**

What do we know about the changing shape of the social sciences? Collectively, the field seems to be in rude health. With growing numbers of faculty, and a virtual doubling in the number of PhD students over the last decade, the days of Thatcherite austerity have gone. While anthropology remains a determinedly specialist interest (only 250 staff are employed in anthropology departments), its students are well-placed to obtain employment elsewhere.

But look a little closer. This expansion has come with strings attached. Research funding in the UK has been zealously responsive to the political obsession with creating a knowledge-based economy driven by university-based innovation. The growth of interdisciplinary research agendas and centres in the social sciences and policy research reflect the fashion for user-oriented, ‘type-2’ knowledge production. This comes at a social cost – the continued reliance on research staff as a new reserve army of academic labour (Gibb, 2004). Despite European Union legislation to protect fixed-term employees and efforts to reduce their use, more than two-thirds of new academic staff now start on fixed-term contracts (UCU University and College Union, 2007: 2). The benefits that accrue to established staff mean that it is hard to challenge this use of casualized labour, leading to what DiGiacomo (1997) calls the new ‘internal colonialism’ exploiting adjunct faculty. One could argue that casualization allows individual academics to respond flexibly to research opportunities, and offers opportunities for new researchers and graduates. On the

other hand, it can result in the irresponsible ‘outsourcing’ of teaching responsibilities onto poorly paid ‘contingent’ faculty, as has been common within the US academy (Nelson, 1997; Nelson and Watt, 2004).

How are these changes affecting a small and relatively autonomous field such as social anthropology? Academic anthropology was pioneered at the LSE, and has strayed little beyond the ‘Russell Group’ clique of elite universities, leading to a predominantly white and middle-class undergraduate profile. But, like others, the discipline has benefited from a growth in student numbers, both in the lucrative market for Master’s courses, but also in doctoral students. The number of anthropology PhDs each year rose from around 50 in the 1990s to more than 90 by 2005 (Spencer et al., 2005). The LSE continues to train more than one-third of the academics employed in UK anthropology departments. Cambridge is in the number two spot, and many of its non-UK students obtain jobs across the world, given an increasingly international academic labour market. But expansion has also brought some institutional diversification: UCL and SOAS now train more students than Oxford, once centre of the anthropological universe. The doctoral community as a whole is an increasingly cosmopolitan one, with less than half holding UK nationality, reducing to about a quarter at LSE and other elite departments. Almost two-thirds of students are female. Amid this diversity, ‘race’ is not seen as an issue within the discipline, partly because of the fraught politics that surround the term (see Mills, 2008, for a history of sociology’s engagement with the topic), but some British ethnic minorities are markedly absent, among both students and staff. Our focus here is primarily on gender, but the fate of other ‘marked’ bodies also deserves attention. The LSE’s status and influence ensures that the department continues to reproduce the discipline, while seeming to resist the policy expectations that over the last decade have emphasized timetabled efficiency utility in the doctoral training process. In our research LSE students spent an average of 18 months on fieldwork, up to six months longer than other departments (we found some evidence of the personal confidence imbued by this institutional habitus and associated disciplinary capital in our interviews).

In line with broader shifts in the social sciences, the gender composition of academic teaching staff in anthropology has slowly changed over the last 25 years. Back in 1983, 82 percent of teaching staff were men (Riviere, 1985). By 2001, however, this figure had reduced to around 55 percent. In that year 170 female academics were employed as anthropologists (within and beyond anthropology departments) in the UK, compared with 210 men. The gender disparity was most marked at the professorial level. Here 45 males held professorships, exactly three times the number of women (15). The only grade in which women outnumbered men was the researcher grade, with 60 percent of the 80 posts held by women. Five years later, the overall gender balance remained unchanged. Among the professoriate, three further men had been appointed, and two women (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2006). Thus while the proportion of female PhD students now reflects the gender profile of anthropology undergraduates

better than in the 1970s, the numbers demolish the argument that gender equality in senior posts is merely a matter of time.

Evidence suggests that more than 60 percent of those who complete doctorates in anthropology initially go into academic employment. But with very few new anthropology lectureships being created, job opportunities are largely dependent on the replacement of existing staff. Thus only a small minority of each PhD cohort is guaranteed a career in the field. What happens to the rest? Research into anthropological career trajectories suggests that the employment 'cake' can be roughly divided into four (Spencer et al., 2005). One quarter of the cake is made up of tenured faculty within anthropology, while a second quarter consists of short-term research and teaching staff within the same departments. Another quarter are those on similarly vulnerable contracts in other social science fields, while the final quarter obtain permanent posts in other social science departments, such as in Religion, Sociology and Development Studies.

This division is gendered: men are disproportionately likely to gain permanent posts within social anthropology, while women are more likely to be found in posts outside the field, especially in fixed-term posts. This chimes with other evidence, which reveals that disciplines such as anthropology successfully 'export' their students, many of whom gain employment in interdisciplinary settings or within other 'importer' disciplines (Mills et al., 2006). But is this testament to the discipline's adaptability, to an emerging gendered stratification of the anthropological job market, or simply to the survival strategies of individuals within it?

Over the last two decades, many UK universities have sought to boost their reputations and rankings within the controversial six-yearly Research Assessment Exercise. These exercises began in 1986, and amount to a massive system-wide peer-review exercise paid for by the government's funding council, where nominated disciplinary representatives spend up to six months confidentially reviewing and rating the work of their colleagues. At stake is not just status within the research 'league table', but also the proportion of funding available to departments for research and training activities, and so it is in the interests of universities to get the best possible rankings. The results can be divisive, especially if some staff are not 'submitted' to the exercise on the grounds of having poor research profiles, and are instead expected to do more teaching to free up time for others to pursue their research. This trend is supported by the increased use of one-year teaching fellowship posts, with a heavy set of teaching responsibilities and no time allocated for research or for writing up publications. Yet for as long as teaching is undervalued within institutions, such posts remain marginalized and low status. With positive teaching evaluations, a good teacher can end up having a teaching-only post renewed for a number of years. While any job is appealing to those whose doctoral grants have long since run out, one has a steadily decreasing chance of gaining a permanent lectureship, and no guarantee that teaching appointments will be made secure. And what of those who are unable to move department, city or discipline to take up a succession of such posts?

## **Flexible selves and academic mobility**

Within the social sciences, social anthropology has a reputation for insularity. Cognate fields both admire and resent its organic solidarity, its theoretical influence and its methodological purity. They are perhaps less aware of its internal hierarchies and status games. In what follows we draw on people's personal accounts of these rules and constraints, the academic agency expected of them, and their individual responses. We bring life to the statistics through interviews conducted with a range of junior academic staff. As we analysed our conversations, gender 'troubles' became increasingly visible. We were particularly struck by the way that three of the eleven women we interviewed, forced to constantly compromise their family commitments, had left full permanent lectureships. We knew of no similar cases involving men and began to reflect on what factors at a structural and institutional level give rise to these pressures.

Some take the expectations of mobility and flexibility for granted, and are given the support to juggle the different expectations of work and life. Michaela, a young female scholar holding a Cambridge 'post-doc' (a funded research fellowship), described how her academic family background made an academic career the norm.<sup>8</sup> Asked about why she chose to do a PhD, her response was simple:

Academia comes with my upbringing. Both my parents are researchers, and have doctorates. I didn't see any other model in my nearby environment. They have been very supportive.

She was unusual in having conducted doctoral research while having young children, based in her home town in southern Europe. She insisted it made no difference, in a way that hinted less at insouciance than surprise:

Having children, also...no, I don't think it has really influenced my life as a student.... It didn't really make a difference in my case because my PhD was on religious culture and so I didn't have the children with me during fieldwork.

She went on to have two further children, while holding a research fellowship in France, and now holds a permanent post in a German university. Building an academic career often depends on a willingness to be mobile and to take a succession of short-term appointments, but this respondent made light of her domestic and caring responsibilities.

What of the future for those who are less mobile, or whose research profile is less highly rated or in demand? We interviewed a number of individuals who characterized their postdoctoral experience as a matter of surviving on short-term teaching and research contracts. Jason, who had held such a post for three years, bemoaned the career trap he found himself in, and how he now no longer gets considered for permanent academic posts because he was not seen as having

published enough high-quality articles:

What does it do to one's sense of identity? I was interested in teaching fellowships. I get on well with various people – I carry on, but get a feeling that there is a degree of resentment. They were saying I'd been given a chance.

Jason admitted that his own 'naivety' was partly to blame: 'Because we began as older people, we did what we did because we wanted to do it, rather than because it was an ideal career path.' His views about age were reflected in the statistics. From our survey, we found that of the 20 respondents now teaching in anthropology departments on temporary contracts, nearly half had completed their doctorate after the age of 35, suggesting that these older students were disproportionately likely to end up holding temporary teaching posts.

If teaching-only posts reflected an age hierarchy, fixed-term research contracts were strongly gendered. Women were particularly over-represented (71 percent of those employed) in academic posts outside anthropology departments. One female researcher, Zoe, felt that there were 'structural things that make women go after research jobs. It is not just necessarily that they want it all.' She described the consequences of seeing 'women in the department sidelined' or the 'men getting the permanent lectureships', and felt that 'these are strong messages that dent the post grad/doc self-esteem' and 'create a self-perpetuating picture of inequality'.

Among those just starting out on their academic careers, stories of the need for mobility, flexibility and adaptability were common. Peter, from Scandinavia, described how, after three years as a contract researcher, he and his wife were prepared to go to wherever the first job came up:

I applied I think three times altogether for a job back home and didn't get one. If I had, we would have gone there. But, as I say, all over Britain I was applying to anthropology, sociology, anything that I thought I might fit into.

Sometimes insecurity is felt in very small ways. In one department, the hierarchy is made evident in the pigeonholes. Permanent staff have their own pigeonholes on one side of the corridor. Meanwhile, fixed-term contract researchers have to make do with pigeonholes labelled by the title of the project, rather than by the individual staff names. In myriad ways, from who gets invited to attend meetings to who one speaks to at coffee, symbolic hierarchies make themselves felt (see also Wilmore, 2004).

## Academic time

Departmental seminars remain key sites of disciplinary imaginary (Spencer, 2000), and some departments enjoy nourishing their seminar's reputation for rigour, if not debasement. Perhaps that is why the seminar ritual remains sacrosanct, often with



senior staff speaking first, and the doctoral students remaining silent. This is how a female, Cambridge-trained anthropologist remembered the seminars in her department: '[It's] that whole thing where you bring your poor speaker along and there's this competition basically to ritually humiliate them.' Most seminars are held in the late afternoon, supposedly to ensure that the intellectual debate continues in a nearby hostelry. This nexus of alcohol, fraternization and disciplinary socialization through embodied performance of intellectual one-upmanship may suit some, but not those who have families to care for. Whether an aggressive seminar culture with 'high levels of dysfunctional behaviour' (Spencer, 2000: 20) is conducive to intellectual innovation, is open to question. It certainly can have the effect of silencing those who feel insecure or are disinclined to participate in this kind of debate (see also Knights and Richards, 2003: 227). As the same person continued: 'you know, it's an interesting exercise [seminars] but I, personally, think there are better ways of generating intellectual discussions'.

A different sort of temporality is visible in the turnover (or lack of it) of academic generations. The demography of university expansion in the 1960s and 1970s has had intriguingly gendered consequences. When a cohort of staff are appointed at the same point, a departmental culture can develop that is very difficult to change. This was the case in the former department of one of the female lecturers we interviewed, where reputedly even the Dean of Faculty had left because of the number of gender-related job tribunals. Teresa had also decided to leave, but confessed that it was 'gruesome that I gave up a permanent job – it was one of the toughest decisions I've ever made'. While she felt she had achieved 'a great deal professionally', and had the 'competitiveness to establish herself as a woman and an academic', she had worked hours that were 'probably illegal by international labour laws ... but one of the difficulties is that we love our jobs'. Her commitment led more and more students to flock to her courses, while she was also given heavy administrative responsibilities.

In our conversation she reflected on some of the unmentionables that sour collegial life – and in particular snide comments and misogynistic remarks that are 'insidious and insert themselves into the politics of the department at every turn':

When you are a young academic, you don't compete ... that wasn't when these comments were made. It was only when I progressed, that these comments are made, when you show you can compete on the same grounds as they can.

Teresa acknowledged that the pressures on her were made worse by the end of a marriage:

At the time I was in no position to laugh at – I had no support to turn to at home ... and there is still an expectation that children won't disturb the career of a male ... I realized that something was wrong when my daughter was the first to arrive at school, and the last one to leave every day – it's not right.



Again she pointed to the strange lack of ethnographic awareness of life outside the department:

The time for meetings is always set at impossible hours – departmental meetings at 4.30, and so they could go on for hours...with agendas of 30 points. Among the permanent members of staff in anthropology in my department – there were two women and ten men – of the ten, some didn't have children, and those who did had women who were looking after them.

What did she feel she could do in response? 'The only way to fight these issues is to take them up with Heads of Departments and administrators – but that's a big job – I don't want to be on a war-path with colleagues, I have better things to do.' But she did have her own theory about the reason that some men – and some women too – downplayed the importance of a 'family-friendly' workplace: 'there is a cosmological greatness in intellectual achievement that is so averse to reproduction'. Teresa's experiences and her decision to leave her permanent job were not typical, but they did reflect concerns and experiences that other women also voiced. Although we also spoke to men who were committed to their families and to sharing household responsibilities, none articulated a direct tension in their working lives.

What of those people who decided not to pursue a post-doctoral career in the first place? One woman responded to the research by questioning any notion that career paths were intentional or planned. She felt that 'people may make particular choices that set limits on their professional opportunities' and went on to note 'my own choice was to have a job that allowed me time for my family and other interests; for this reason, I have sort of avoided pursuing a career in academia'.

## **Disembodied vocationalism**

The interviewees repeatedly returned to their domestic and family commitments. One could argue that academia's origins in the monastic communities of Oxbridge of the 13th century have left a legacy of an unworldly self-image and even an implicitly anti-family outlook. At its best, this sense of self-sacrifice and cloistered disregard for worldly things is a source of intellectual autonomy and disciplinary strength. It may partly explain the single-minded (one might even say overwrought) commitment to academic work articulated by many of our respondents. But it may also explain why people with families to look after find the routines and pressures of academic life so difficult.

Half of our interviews were conducted with women. Some were prepared to question this expectation, and to call the academy to account. As Serena, a junior lecturer in an elite department, noted:

Yes it is a vocation, but that doesn't mean that there aren't other things in my life. When I compare myself to my contemporaries, who are male and unattached, and put

in more hours...they are the ones who are going to get the top jobs. Ultimately I don't want to sacrifice my family life for a career...it's never so simple.

She felt that women 'do end up having to compromise – we've been taught we can have it all... but we can't'. This was, she averred, a difficult thing to say, when 'societal individualism made structural explanations unwelcome'. Like Teresa, Serena had also found that many young male academics in her department had 'full-time' wives to look after the children. Another noted that 'women are brought up to see things outside of work as just as important as work, and men who adopt a [similarly] holistic approach to life suffer from the same thing'.

One of our respondents pointed to the difficulty of getting universities to take these issues seriously. She described a meeting on gender issues in her institution, at which a Dean meeting women academics to discuss 'gender issues' was unable see why the negotiating strategies employed by male academics, such as threatening to leave to go to another university in order to secure a promotion, were related to gender, or that women were far less able to bargain in this way to secure pay-rises because they tend to have partners with their own careers and because of their domestic commitments.

A rather different, if strangely parallel, account of the recipe for success came from Moira, a more senior LSE-trained anthropologist now working at another major UK anthropology department. Rather than downplaying the consequences of having a family, she was ruthlessly explicit about her career strategizing:

If you want an academic career you have to start on year one of your PhD with publication strategies and everything.... It's quite easy to become marginal, if anthropologists as academics aren't playing by the new institutional rules [of] collaboration and inter-disciplinarity.

Moira went on to describe her total commitment to the field, while also acknowledging 'the whole obsessiveness of anthropology':

One or two kids is manageable, but it is not possible to have more, given the self-absorbing nature of this vocation. You can't do this thing for five days a week, and not do it at weekends.... You should also look at how many women in academic professions have kids. That's the key question – caring responsibilities of all sorts – academics who are permanent academics just care for themselves.

Aware of the rather cynical vision she is presenting, Moira wittily mocked her own extreme sense of vocation: 'in a sense what allows me to do anthropology is the take-away around the corner'.

What she is less explicit about are the many small acts of disciplinary inclusion, endorsement and affirmation that may have accompanied her training and doctoral experience, and helped her develop in confidence, acts that less assertive women

(and those training elsewhere) may not have received. A Cambridge-trained woman articulated some of these informal sides to disciplinary training:

We actually thought we were better than everyone else, which of course is utterly wrong... it may have been the anthropological training but it was as much the institution... I'll give you an example. It's like there are a group of academics here and we'll sit around the table and you can spot straight away who went to Oxbridge because those people are more articulate or more confident in being articulate, more confident in expressing their views, more confident being the first one to ask a question because we were trained to do it.

Many of those trained at elite departments explain their later career success in terms of 'luck', a category that surely merits more analytical attention:

I was quite a lucky person... most of my thesis was first draft and almost good enough at that point, not just to get the PhD but to get into a book standard so... I mean I probably was lucky.

On her PhD topic, the same person reflected: 'It was a bizarre combination of chance. I mean how much of our lives are under our control and how much of what we end up doing is just by luck? I don't know.' Other female respondents were more open about developing one's academic capital and confidence. Hannah described her research training at Oxford as 'ambiguous in terms of confidence', with 'lots of support... but also an intimidating experience, particularly in research seminars, which are very hierarchical, where you feel you have to earn your entitlement to speak'.

Increasingly, anthropologists are competing in an international labour market. The dominant trend has been for US anthropologists to take posts in UK institutions, but occasionally the direction is reversed. Matthias, a UK-trained Eastern European anthropologist who obtained a tenure-track job in a top US department, was very perceptive about what had worked for him: 'It depends on [shaping] the dominant trend... hegemony in academia is achieved through networking, creating trends and space to pursue your own ideas.' He went on to acknowledge the importance of creating a doctoral training environment that had 'a balance between intellectual ethos and careerism', and that worked at 'creating awareness and motivation'.

These pressures were not simply discipline-related. One had a post in a multi-disciplinary research environment, but found that collaborating in research teams with non-social scientists was taking her away from her own interests. The multiple expectations placed upon her made life particularly hard:

The multi-tasking was overwhelming... my work was my life. How do people do it?... You are expected to be as aggressive in your teaching as with your research. Most of us over-estimate our abilities to multi-task.

It may have been a coincidence, but respondents not trained at Cambridge and the LSE were more likely to acknowledge that they had found the academic career structure confusing. As David, a British postdoctoral fellow put it: 'It seemed shrouded in mystery how you got from one thing to another.'

To what extent are the tensions between our disembodied vocationalism and dedication to the republic of letters on the one hand, and our embodied experiences of performative, gendered hierarchies on the other, peculiar to anthropology, a field that has historically rewarded the solitary iconoclast and the lonely fieldworker? Certainly, there is a disciplinary dimension at work, and one could argue that there is something fundamentally self-alienating in the ethnographic method (long periods of fieldwork, often conducted alone) that makes it hard to switch off from 'being an anthropologist' in order to nurture the rest of one's life. Indeed, some anthropologists would question the 'work/life' dichotomy, and argue that an anthropological sensibility is core to their being. But it is not just anthropology. There are also historical and structural forces at work, as shown in the voluminous higher education literature on gender inequalities (e.g. Acker and Piper, 1984; Knights and Richards, 2003; Leathwood et al., 2009; Morley and Walsh, 1996). Recent work has also shown how gender equality issues have become tied to managerial reform. Despite institutional reforms, the pressures to be continually 'productive' in research terms, despite the implications for one's caring and family responsibilities, remain, and indeed have become more acute.

## Conclusion

Academic idealism is a strange thing. The utopian republic of letters motivates many and perhaps explains the disembodied nature of disciplinary vocationalism. It is an abstraction that would draw the attention of any anthropologist in the field, and yet, as our respondents demonstrate, it implicitly structures their feelings, passions and working lives. The glaring contrast between this disembodied ideal and our embodied knowledge makes it that much harder to challenge the expectations of audit culture and its demands on our working practices, our time and our productivity. This disparity is not unique to anthropology, but for a discipline that prides itself on highlighting divergences between rhetoric and practice, this lack of reformist activism is perhaps surprising. It may be that a strongly held individualism prevents disciplined attention to the parallel experiences and shared fate of other academics within an increasingly proletarianized workforce.

Our aim in this article has been to outline the contours of what a genuinely reflective anthropology of anthropology would need to examine, and to reflect on the 'unmentionables' that accompany our working lives. If we fail to do so, we collude in obscuring the systemic and structural inequalities that continue to undermine our ideals. This is especially important as a commodity logic restructures society and the academy, and the ideal becomes increasingly detached from broader questions about the gendered political economy of work.

Within academia, short-term posts are still seen as somewhat anomalous; a grey zone of semi-citizenship in the republic of letters, for whom permanent tenured staff feel limited degrees of solidarity. In an academy where one is measured by one's ability to publish, collegiality and the free exchange of ideas is eroded. This is important to all academics, not just for those suffering from job insecurity and underpayment.

Is Bourdieu partly to blame? His work on universities has been very influential, but much of his work can be critiqued for its agonistic vision of social relations. There is little space in it for reciprocity, care and empathy, or indeed for vocation, all of which could be seen as core aspects of academic practice. His lack of attention to the relationality of pedagogy and the research encounter perhaps explains why his determination to lay bare the scientific field doesn't quite work. It doesn't grapple with our sacrifice made on behalf of academic idealism, with our willingness to work long hours, and the way we downplay the relationships that nurture our vocation. This, as much as the risks that Sangren identifies of a 'free-for-all denunciation', explains the limits of sociological reflexivity.

We have argued that academics create an epistemological space for intellectual agency by systematically underplaying the lived social relations, times and spaces that equally sustain academic life. In this way, academic knowledge is doubly disembodied knowledge. It is not enough to argue that greater attention to these relations will expose the 'true' workings of intellectual life. The unmentionables will continue to define academic practice.

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### Notes

Subject to review and available space in future issues, the editors will be happy to consider further comments and reflections on the issues raised by this article from readers inside and outside of the UK.

1. Gatrell and Cooper (2008) note a similar gap in literature on work and gender in general.
2. Cognate fields have been hard at work too. There is a growing body of work in higher education studies, some of which focuses on the gender implications of managerial reforms (e.g. Morley, 2003). This work, however, is often neglected by the other social sciences, partly because it tends to be dominated by empirical interview-based accounts, with relatively few monograph-length studies. The growing volume of work within Science and Technology Studies, even though it particularly focuses on the natural sciences (Latour, 2000), offers new analytical insights for this field.
3. By contrast, 'ivory towers', with its connotations of seclusion and withdrawal from the world, is not one that we have heard academics use to describe their world. Okely uses it in her reflective piece 'Gendered Lessons in Ivory Towers' (2007) exactly to emphasize her experiences of exclusion as a woman academic.

4. Others would suggest that anti-Semitism was equally an issue for mid-century anthropology, an issue hinted at by Goody (1995). For an account of how sexism and discrimination affected the career of Ruth Benedict, see Mintz (1981).
5. Martin has vividly described her difficulties in deconstructing biomedical discourse on childbirth in the US and making it unfamiliar. Her problem was 'to find a vantage point from which to see the water I had lived in all my life' (1987: 11). Casanova uses blindness as a metaphor for the same difficulty in comprehending and analysing the structure of the world republic of letters:

very few writers at the center of world literature have any idea of its actual structure. Though they are familiar with the constraints and norms of the center they have come to regard them as natural. They are blind almost by definition: their very point of view on the world hides it from them, for they believe that it coincides with the small part of it they know' (2004: 43).

6. We are alluding to campus novels here, which often draw on the author's own experiences in academia. Examples could be Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1953), Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975) and Lodge's *Changing Places* (1975), which are all fanciful descriptions of academia by male authors. Reading these novels against the grain offers some insights into the gendered world of mid-20th-century British universities. Byatt's *A Whistling Woman* (2002) is acerbic on gender relations and sexism in academia in the 1960s.
7. Thus while men were doing the 'real thing', women were left to cope with the 'blood, sweat, and tears aspect of fieldwork – feelings and sentiments included' (Dumont, 1978: 8)
8. All informants have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

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