Contextualizing Academic Lives

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This article establishes a historical context for understanding academic lives. The focus is on the issues individuals face as they adopt and enact the role of academic, including their experiences as newcomers, interactions with saga-keepers, and the limits of their voice and role in new institutional environments.

The decision to pursue an academic career, to seek and accept a faculty position in a university, to learn and internalize the norms and mores of the academy, is unquestionably a life-changing decision for an academic newcomer. The attractions of such a career are many, including the freedom to choose a field of study and a personal research focus, the freedom to teach students the body of valued knowledge acquired through doctoral study and professional experience, the freedom to organize one's life around the demands of academic employment, the discretion to come and go as one pleases between the competing demands of the role, the enjoyment of conducting research, the satisfaction of reporting results at conferences and in published papers or reports, the opportunity to work with talented graduate students, the security of tenure and socially ascribed status— all these and more—are real benefits that come with a successful academic career.

In many respects the university in contemporary life has become the modern equivalent of the patron of the Renaissance and provides a haven for idiosyncratic minds, unconventional thought, and cutting-edge research. Consequently, an academic career is unquestionably a privileged occupation in today's society; few occupations offer the degrees of freedom, individual choice, and personal autonomy extended to academic appointees in daily life, let alone over an entire career.

Yet, that career is not without hazards and hurdles. The university as a social institution has specific purposes, or in contemporary language, a "mission." Such purposes derive in large part from the special role ascribed to the university in the culture as the one institution charged to educate the upcoming generation, seek for truth and understanding, generate new knowledge, and apply such knowledge to social priorities. At the same time, the

university must respond to the pressures placed upon it by the society in which it sits and functions and by the expectations that follow the public funding that many universities receive. Such funding brings with it pressures for accountability and responsiveness to changing social needs, labour market demands, and economic imperatives. These pressures are immediate and far ranging and are more or less recognizable and intelligible. They also carry with them expectations for institutional compliance and conformity in return for public funding. What is not so obvious but is nevertheless true is that the modern university has its roots deep in history reaching back to the medieval era with consequent established traditions. Some of the residual and most obvious legacies of that era are evident at the ceremonies for the awarding of degrees where professors don their academic gowns, many relying on designs dating back centuries and based on monastic habits and clerical garb, and where students may still receive their degree certificates inscribed in Latin.

The long-established and seemingly permanently entrenched practices of universities have, over the generations, invited criticism and suggestions for change. Newman (1852/1960) and Robinson (2004) note that the universities in Britain granted admissions predominantly to those who were independently wealthy Anglicans (only Anglicans being granted admission) and these institutions could operate in relative isolation from the rest of the world. Watson (2005) charts the development of universities and reports that changes to universities were brought about by attacks mounted on the universities of Oxford and Cambridge by three Scotsmen (Francis Jeffrey, Henry

Brougham, and Sydney Smith). Jeffrey and Brougham, the founders of the *Edinburgh Review*, charged that the curriculum was too grounded in the classics, and as a result, largely useless. They wrote:

> The bias given to men's minds is so strong that it is no uncommon thing to meet with Englishmen, whom, but for their grey hair and wrinkles, we might easily mistake for schoolboys. Their talk is of Latin verses; and, it is quite clear, if men's ages are to be dated from the state of their mental progress, that such men are eighteen years of age and not a day older. (Watson, 2005, p. 948)

Sydney Smith went on to criticize "Oxbridge men for having no knowledge of the sciences, of economics, or politics. . . . The classics cultivated the imagination but not the intellect" (Watson, 2005, p. 948).

These attacks on university curricula brought about changes. Watson (2005) reports that, in part as a response to these kinds of attacks, University College and King's College in London were created and "nonconformists" were allowed admission. The curricula were modelled after Scottish universities, which were centrally concerned with practical matters owing to the influence of the Scottish common-sense movement. It is these deeply penetrating changes in the mission of universities that prompted Newman (1852/1960) to compile his classical polemic piece on universities. It now represents an ideal upon which universities were based, for the mission of universities had changed. In this, Newman could be regarded as a saga-keeper of medieval universities, lobbying for no change, while because

of their efforts, Jeffrey, Brougham, and Smith could be regarded as change seekers.

Hum (2001) describes two sources of political influence on university operations and academics' work: external and internal. The external forces include restrictions imposed by government, grant funding agencies, politicians, social norms and conventions, among others. As an example of internal influence, Mojab (1995) reports that "forces [within the academy] argue that the pursuit of diversity in curriculum, hiring, teaching, research, and student admissions violates academic freedom" (p. 18).

Another legacy of the earlier development of the university is that university governance remains centralized and authoritarian often in a bicameral structure. Administrative authority rests with the Board of Trustees or Governors to whom the senior administrative officers report; academic authority is expressed through a duly elected Senate, a body often legislatively charged with setting and approving academic directions and changes to existing protocols and degree requirements. Senior administrative roles in the university are often still filled by men, thereby perpetuating the masculinist tradition of medieval universities and later incarnations in the intervening centuries, until today when women's studies and feminist scholarship have only recently gained legitimacy in the academy. Even with changes in attitudes towards women in the academy and while some senior administrators are female, they make up a small percentage of the senior administrative cadre. As Luke (1999) observed:

The hierarchical structure of masculinist models of doing business in the academy—whether in research, administration, teaching, funding and grant regimes, or publishing—remain virtually unchanged despite some 25 years of feminist attempts at intervention. For example, the continuing under-representation of women at executive levels of academic management is endemic to universities worldwide. (pp. 4–5)

The point, however, is broader than the relative absence of women in senior academic positions. It is fundamentally an issue of epistemological preference evident in the elevation of traditional masculinist orthodoxy, which significantly disadvantages the work of women academicians. The institutional context of the university, that of the university as text, is the central feature of Schick's (1994) analysis. She portrays passionately the difficulties that women and other marginalized people have in negotiating their entrance to the academy and being continually subjected to the ruling relations articulated so eloquently by Smith (2005). Moreover, as Luke (1999) points out, "feminist intellectual work is marginalized because it is not the mainstream" (p. 5). Female academics are thus more vulnerable to the sanctions of the academy and have a more difficult road to travel to acquire a sense of belonging than their male counterparts. This masculinist orthodoxy, originating as it does in a formal Eurocentric worldview, also presents barriers to academics who come from different backgrounds, social class, ethnic origins, and epistemological traditions; newcomers of these backgrounds, in addition to confronting

the traditional orthodoxy of the academy, have to negotiate their own entry with the distinctive backgrounds that they bring.

The Price of Belonging
Regardless of background, the beginning academician seeks a sense of belonging upon entering the academy. The desire for belonging is grounded in a fundamental need to be recognized as having something of value to contribute to the organization. In addition to an academic background hard won through many years of undergraduate and graduate study, culminating in this new appointment to the academy, the beginning academic expects to be valued as a person who has a real contribution to make, to join a group of other academics in their mutual pursuit of truth and scholarly advancement.

While belonging to the academy is often a coveted position, the cost to "belong" in or to the academy can be substantial. How do academic newcomers, or any academic for that matter, become fully integrated into the normative structure of the institution to the extent that they develop a sense of belonging? How do individuals maintain this sense of connection despite disappointments or conflicts within the institution? The development of a strong connection to an institution may serve the institution's purposes through the engendering of commitment and loyalty. Paradoxically, however, there are many stories of individuals who enthusiastically embark on an academic career only to find, at some stage of their experience, that their "sense of belonging" to the institution is subverted by the institution's actions towards them. Individuals may be overlooked for a new position, denied tenure or promotion, censured due to a political stance, unsupported in a legal battle, or subjected to a myriad of other large or small actions that demonstrate a lack of institutional commitment. Such actions push many individuals to a new recognition that they are living on the margins and that any earlier sense of belonging was optimistically delusional. Individuals in these circumstances typically experience a sense of betrayal by peers or by decision-making structures within their institutions, which may act as a blow to their sense of self-esteem or as an incentive to withdraw emotionally or physically from the academy. The price of belonging may be high—higher than expected—and it may be exacted at unexpected turns in the academic journey as illustrated by the case of Herbert Richardson at the University of Toronto (see Westhues, 2004). Richardson's case exemplifies well the ways initial success in a particular political environment can turn negative when the prevailing ideology, among other things, suddenly changes, resulting in dismissal from the academy. This case demonstrates multiple dimensions of interest.

Professor Richardson, a Calvinist theologian from the United States, joined the faculty of St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto in 1968. His decision to join St. Michael's, a Catholic theological college, was motivated by the ecumenical movement in Christianity provoked by Vatican II. Professor Richardson's career flourished at St. Michael's until institutional realignment within the University of Toronto, the changing social role of religion, the re-emergence of conservative theological forces in the Catholic Church in the early to mid 1980s altered the relationship of St. Michael's to the

University of Toronto and threatened the position of Professor Richardson as a Calvinist in a Catholic college.

Encouraged to leave St. Michael's in 1987, Professor Richardson declined the option and, following a sabbatical year, returned to St. Michael's. At this point, the decision to force his exit gathered momentum. St. Michael's decided to require all faculty to sign a Memorandum of Agreement affirming their responsibility to teach authentically and accurately the faith tradition and theology of Roman Catholicism. Professor Richardson refused to sign on grounds of conscience. He could not, as a committed Calvinist and as a tenured professor entitled to academic freedom, agree to teach Catholic theology.

From this point on, the wheel of exclusion moved with increasing speed and institutional resolve as the university administrators began to express concern about Professor Richardson's teaching and grading criteria, as well as his outside employment as the founder and chief executive officer of the Edwin Mellen Press. The penultimate stage before instituting a charge of dismissal was a proposal to transfer Professor Richardson from St. Michael's College to the Department of Religious Studies. These events culminated in June 1993 with the formal notice from the University of Toronto that the University was initiating steps to dismiss him on grounds of an alleged abuse of a medical leave, his alleged failure to report on his outside activities with the Mellen Press, alleged gross misconduct in teaching, and alleged scholarly misconduct in his published research. Ultimately the Tribunal created to hear these charges upheld the first two and rejected the last

two charges. As a result, Professor Richardson was dismissed.

Westhues' (2004) study of the trial, degradation, and dismissal of Herbert Richardson from the University of Toronto is much more detailed and heart-rending than this treatment allows. The story wounds the soul of the reader, particularly the academic reader, and especially those who (perhaps naïvely) have attributed integrity and fundamental fairness to those who hold authority in universities. Westhues' analysis definitely leaves the impression that the charges against Professor Richardson were trumped up and specious, used expediently to remove a now unwanted colleague. The danger of adopting the mindset of administrative righteousness to exclude an academic whose performance has been stellar but who has become a burr under the institutional saddle is revealed in all its vengeful poignancy.

Other cases of disputes between academics and their college or university employers have also attracted high visibility when they reach the courts and require judicial review and decision. A working paper developed as part of this research investigated reported judicial cases involving alleged discrimination by the employing institution towards an academic on the basis of personal characteristics, political behaviour, or epistemological stance (see Manley-Casimir & Manley-Casimir, 2005). Reliance on published court decisions, however, revealed little of the emotional trauma that such incidents raised and did not permit definitive conclusions.

Even so, each of the cases reflected the experiences of individuals on the edge of academic acceptance and exemplified experiences of identity, belonging, and participation or lack

thereof within the academy. Each marginalized academic reached a point where his or her sense of belonging within the respective institution had come into question due to the institution's actions or perceived actions toward him or her. Despite the academic in each case claiming discrimination on a particular ground, in the cases in this study, no court or tribunal found that such discrimination existed. Further, there was a tendency on the part of the court or tribunal to follow the established tendency to defer to the authority of the university or college. This tendency of non-interference in university affairs is well supported in the case law.

Despite the failure of the academics' claims of discrimination in the cases examined, it is apparent from the text of the judgments that the academic's self-perception in each case is that of marginalization in and from the academy. The institutional barriers that these academic newcomers perceived in the academy contributed to the feeling that they were prevented from gaining and maintaining status based on their experiences as professors in good standing.

The cases that reach the courts are, however, only the few high visibility cases that are driven there by profoundly aggrieved academics. All academics in all disciplines walk the tightrope of identity formation, epistemological acceptance, and sense of belonging within academe, so it is to these "garden-variety" experiences of academics that we turn.

Saga-Keepers and Newcomers
Joining a university Faculty and department and adapting to the role of academic with a newly minted doctorate

or ABD (i.e., with all but dissertation complete), one is by definition, a newcomer, with much to learn. Such a situation presents challenges to the academic newcomer and negotiating such challenges may well be the key to success or failure in securing a career future. These challenges include navigating the uncertainty and strangeness of the Faculty and department and the sometimes unreasonable expectations created for new academics (McCall, 1999), learning about the social construction of the department and the individuals who are to be new colleagues, and coming to terms with the histories of the people and events that have shaped the tradition as remembered by the longer-established members (the insiders). These "histories" are traditionally "his" "stories" because in many—or perhaps even in most—cases, these stories are remembered and recalled by the senior male members of the department. These stories comprise the array of beliefs and events deemed to be significant in the life of the academic unit and quintessentially constitute a form of saga that establishes the character of the remembered tradition. Sagas contain many organizational stories (Clark, 1972) that "summarize years of events" (Martin, 2002. p. 72) and shape the historical context that in turn establishes the character of the remembered tradition. The guardians of this tradition are the self-appointed "saga-keepers," the gerontocracy of memory, who are the sources of authoritative interpretation of the department or Faculty's development or evolution.

Saga-keepers are cultural custodians and, we submit, are instantly recognizable across the continent because they are present in every

department and Faculty. They are often the long-established colleagues who have invested many years of their academic and professional lives in education and who recall and interpret institutional stories when confronted with questions about academic practice or proposals for change. They are the colleagues who voluntarily assume the responsibility of socializing newcomers to the ways of the department and Faculty. Frequently well-intentioned and compassionate mentors, the saga-keepers can all too often become the blocks of institutional resistance to change and can have a crippling effect on innovation and the atmosphere of free inquiry so frequently affirmed as the hallmark of academic life. Regrettably, the saga-keepers invoke the key events of the story repeatedly in meetings, corridors, and other conversations, thereby establishing the limits of legitimacy on opinions, participation, and credibility for the newcomer.

Drawing upon the traditions of narrative and self-study approaches to research (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), we present a conceptualization of saga-keepers illustrated with key examples from our focus group conversations as a team of academics. The following examples illustrate some of the facets of the role of the saga-keeper:

A newly appointed Dean of a Faculty of Education was informed shortly after arriving at the Faculty, that the Faculty had a practice of ejecting unfortunate Deans. Said in part in jest, this message was conveyed as part of the saga of an earlier Dean who had been forced to resign by the Faculty decades earlier. Interestingly

enough, however, the message was relayed by one who had become a saga-keeper but who had not been in the Faculty at the time of the original events! Clearly the saga lives on as new saga-keepers take up the role of preserving and promulgating the stories comprising the saga.

Another example amplifies the status difference between the saga-keeper and lower-level newcomer:

In welcoming newcomers, one saga-keeper describes his own appointment as the last decision made by the early Dean who was forced to resign. Due to the forced resignation, the Dean's decisions were questioned and the department members he had recently hired (including the saga-keeper) were laid off. The department then decided to rehire these individuals. Although never stated outright, newly hired department members who hear the story might question whether it is a warning that they too could be laid off and should not consider their position secure.

A saga-keeper may vary the content of a story and its meaning depending on the context in which the story is told (Martin, 2002). The meaning of a first official department event as told by one participant illuminates what the story did not say:

At the beginning of an all-day department retreat, one of the senior department members (a saga-keeper) takes responsibility for introductions because this is the first official department event for a newly hired department member. Approximately two hours are spent reminiscing about

the early history of the department's physical location, the circumstances surrounding individual department member's arrivals on campus, and areas of teaching or research interests for these department members. The story ends by listing the names of the department members who have arrived in the last three years, but provides no details about these individuals. The message is clear: new department members are not considered part of the sagas. Due to the length of the introductions, it is time for a lunch break prior to any real discussion of the retreat topic.

This example confirms the observations made by McCall (1999) in her discussion of entering the academy where she describes her experience under the rubric "We will let you in, but do not say anything" (p. 88). She reported that an unstated expectation at her new institution was that she would remain relatively silent:

> New, untenured faculty, who were all women, were expected to listen significantly more than speak. During departmental discussions, a few men and one woman, all senior faculty, dominated most of the discussions, were listened to, and significantly influenced decisions. These senior faculty, primarily men, possessed most of the power to control public talk and decisions within the department. (p. 88)

McCall described in detail the experience of entering the academy and the various pressures placed upon her before she became an accepted colleague: heavy teaching, supervision, and advisement loads; high expectations for academic publishing; the absence of emotional support; and other conditions that undermined her potential for meaningful contributions and success.

The power of established department members is well illustrated by the following anecdote where a decision that had been taken by the department in question, including a number of academic newcomers, was thwarted by a long-established department member upon his return from sabbatical.

> Members of a department come together for an all-day retreat at an off-campus location to discuss curricular changes. Discussion starts slowly in the morning, but major progress occurs in the afternoon. The department makes a unanimous decision to add a new required course for all students. When the report from the retreat is discussed at the next meeting, the department reaffirms this decision. Over the course of the summer, some administrative errors prevent students from enrolling in this new course. In the fall, a senior department member returns from sabbatical leave and expresses surprise at the addition of this new course without his input. He opposes the course and argues the need for a trial period with the new course prior to its full implementation. Three years later, despite initial unanimous support, only a small number of students have taken the course and its future is uncertain.

Through an exploration of our own institutional experiences and those of other academic colleagues, we see the roles of saga-keepers and the influence these individuals can have on the life of

an academic department, especially for newcomers. While not exclusively the case, our analysis focuses on differing interpretations of meanings according to one's status within the academic department, with particular attention paid to the interests and opinions of lower-status newcomers, thereby contributing to the critical perspectives of cultural studies (Alvesson, 2002; Martin, 2002).

Negotiating the Context
The foregoing analysis documents the necessity and the inevitability for beginning academics to negotiate the context and history of the particular department of their affiliation; such entry requires that they come to terms with its embedded norms and values, however difficult and problematic this may be. This is the challenge of beginning an academic career and is the focus of what follows in the ensuing articles in this collection.

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