

Danger and Grieving in the University

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to draw on understandings of danger and grieving as ways to make sense of academics' experience of change in the university. Following the anthropological work of Mary Douglas (1966), we theorise risk as 'danger' rather than 'odds'. We argue that the management of 'risk-as-danger' that is, the danger of waste, of failure, of lowering standards requires that all academics plug in to new systems of communication designed to minimise risk to the university as a large and complex organisation. This involves engaging with and valuing knowledge which is outside disciplinary know-how policy, marketing, ICT development, conflict resolution, and so on. Where academics experience a widening gap between their disciplinary 'know-how' and their 'professional expertise' (disciplinary know-how plus organisational know-how), it is possible that they will grieve the loss of their former claim to expertise. This grieving can appear to university managers to be a symptom of the refusal to change, rather than a part of the process of change. We argue that such grieving needs to be understood as other than simple resistance.

Danger and Grieving in the University

Of all the stories currently circulating about the state of Australian higher education, perhaps the most pervasive and instantly recognisable is that of the burnt-out and browned-off university teacher. According to Jill Roe (2001), writing in a recent volume of *Australian Universities' Review*, "enrolments have soared and stress is everywhere" (p.3). This claim is supported by the National Tertiary Education Union, who point to unprecedented levels of stress among academics brought on by "increased workload, and decreased job satisfaction" (Myton, 2002: 6). While governments may be less than sympathetic, there is no doubting the ubiquity of claims that academics are in a state of dis/ease.

The problem of academic stress and burnout is commonly depicted as having a two-fold cause: the inadequate funding of universities in a 'more-for-less' government policy environment (Rodan, 2001); and, the unwillingness or inability of university managers to protect shrinking departments from the chill winds (economic, technological, administrative) that are playing havoc with academics' work and identity (Roe, 2001). We have a somewhat different starting point for understanding how, and with what effects, academic work is being changed. While funding and managerial competence continue to be topics worthy of scrutiny, we argue that insufficient attention has been paid to changes in the organisational culture of universities. Thus our starting point is not economic rationalism, nor university managers (although both macro-economics and individual managerial competence are implicated in our analysis), but the organisational technologies that currently produce policies and procedures for efficiently and effectively governing institutional (and thus individual) performance.

Put simply, we argue that new organisational technologies are requiring academics to engage with and value different knowledges and different relationships in their daily work. We want to ask how the knowledge and relationships that have been most personally important and familiar to academics (and were once most rewarded in symbolic, monetary, and psychic terms), have been de-valued in the university, and then to consider the consequences of this de-valuing in terms of grief and loss.

To interrogate these two issues more fully, we first examine the nature of universities as 'risk' organisations. We then move to consider what this means for the communication systems that operate within universities, and the nature of the work they generate. Next we move inside university systems to inspect the ways in which this new organisational culture requires academics to do work that is different from traditional pedagogical work. Finally, we move to consider how this shift may be experienced as loss and grieving, and what the implications of this might be for the university.

Universities as 'risk organisations'

All contemporary organisations, including universities, are risk organisations. This is because all organisations must, of necessity, focus on guarding themselves against the risk of failure. In her anthropological studies of social and cultural life, Mary Douglas argues that risk is no longer about the probability of losses and gains - risk simply means *danger*. She states:

The modern risk concept, parsed now as danger, is invoked to protect individuals against encroachments of others. It is part of the system of thought that upholds the type of individualist culture which sustains an expanding industrial system. (Douglas, 1990: p.7)

Following Douglas, 'risk-as-danger' is generally understood by cultural theorists to serve the "forensic needs" (Douglas, 1990) of a new and expanding global culture in "politicizing and moralizing the links between dangers and approved behaviours" (Pidgeon et al, 1992: 113). Thus, to avoid failure, organizations in a "risk society" (Beck, 1992) must be alert to potential danger - ie, the danger of not performing in ways that are morally and politically acceptable, as well as economically viable. As Beck (1992) argues it, risk society is characterized by negative logic, a shift away from the management and distribution of material/industrial "goods" to the management and distribution of "bads", ie, the control of knowledge about danger, about what might go wrong and about the systems needed to guard against such a possibility. For a university, this means guarding against the danger of waste (of resources), of failure (of students), of declining standards (intellectual, ethical and moral).

Concerns about the capacities of Australian universities to self-manage around risk minimization have been a theme of successive governments in recent times. They are made explicit in Michael Gallagher's (2000) summation of outcomes of discussions between the Australian Federal Government's Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA, now DEST) and senior university executives. He states that these discussions pointed to "a number of failures" (p.38) that he links to the "trial and error dimension" of university management practice to date. According to Gallagher, it is the lack of uniformity of practice within universities that is the key culprit in producing failure. "The next phase of development", Gallagher concludes, "...can be expected to be more formalized and professionally risk managed" (p.38).

Risk management as an organizational culture

The professional management of risk demands knowledge of risk, and knowledge of risk produces new risks for the organization and its personnel. As Ericson and Haggerty (1997) point out, the risk society is a knowledge society "because scientific knowledge and technologies are sources of major risks and the primary basis of security efforts aimed at controlling such risks" (p.88). In Beck's (1992) terms, "the sources of danger are no longer ignorance but knowledge....Modernity has become the threat and the promise of emancipation of the threat that creates itself" (p.183). So knowledge about risk is no escape from danger. Indeed such knowledge *is itself dangerous*. It threatens all professionals because it gives them processes for deciding what action to take and at the same time provides the means by which they can be found to have done the wrong thing (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997: 89). Thus it is not simply that large populations of non-traditional 'clients' have 'caused' a heightened vigilance in the university sector, just as it is not simply that the decline of the welfare state has 'caused' universities to become more accountable for the shrinking funding that they receive from governments. As necessary professional expertise, risk knowledge itself has within it the seeds of its own proliferation because it is both a means to manage danger and a danger to professionals everywhere.

Central to the 'negative' logic of risk management, as indicated above, is the idea that there must be more self-scrutiny, regularity and control within and across an organizational sector. This is manifested in the rise of an "audit culture" in universities (Strathern, 1997), a culture that militates against systemic arbitrariness by ensuring organizational precision for coping with (appropriate) social imprecision. Put simply, the logic is that systems of management need to be uniform because individuals are not, nor are they likely to be. This logic of procedural equity flies in the face of a more perverse reading of audit cultures as intentionally depersonalizing. This is not to argue that such cultures do not have depersonalizing effects. Rather, the point is that the logic of the intensive bureaucratic monitoring that is a feature of audit cultures is not simply 'one-size-fits-all' in terms of the individuals who are its 'products'. What is 'standard', however, is the model for measuring organizational performance.

The introduction of audit mechanisms, whether as measurements of 'teaching effectiveness', or 'research quality', or 'accountability', has been for some time now a feature of a wide range of public and private universities (Shore and Wright, 1999). Whether or not the appearance of these mechanisms heralds "a new form of coercive and authoritarian governmentality" (Shore and Wright, 1999: 1), the fact remains that

managing the large and diverse student populations who are now engaging in university studies worldwide requires knowledge that is outside the "unique, informal culture" (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997: 57) of academics' traditional work. Thus the craft knowledge of academics is being reshaped by administrative interventions that work to achieve fair and efficient institutional practice. It is not that academic knowledge is being displaced altogether. Rather it is being made over as 'professional expertise' through a process that Ericson and Haggerty (1997) describe thus:

[P]rofessionals obviously have 'know-how', [but] their 'know-how' does not become expertise until it is plugged into an institutional communication system. It is through such systems that expert knowledge becomes standardized and robust enough to use in routine diagnosis, classification, and treatment decisions by professionals. (p.104)

The idea that academic work is being made the subject of "routine diagnosis, classification, and treatment decisions" is often viewed as a sinister, Orwellian development in higher education. (This is certainly the case for the academics who featured in the recent ABC film documentary 'Facing the Music'.) However, the rush to resist this new regime often fails to acknowledge how teaching, as a sub-set of the organizational activities of universities, cannot be outside risk management as "a system of regulatory measures intended to shape who can take what risks and how" (Hood et al, 1992: 136). For better *and* worse, academics are being required to 'plug in' to audit technologies, those "supremely reflexive" practices through which the university can make sense of itself as an organization, can "perform being an organization through the act of self-description" (Strathern, 1997: 318).

Effects on academics

For organizations to become more visible to themselves (and thus more capable of self-regulating audit), it is necessary that expert knowledge become standardised and routinised so that it can be used to diagnose, classify and treat potential dangers within the organization (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997). This has the effect of changing the focus of professional service from the client to *information about* the client. Castel elaborates:

The essential component of intervention no longer takes the form of the direct face-to-face relationship between the...professional and the client. It comes instead to reside in the establishing of *flows of population* based on the collation of a range of abstract factors deemed liable to produce risk in general....These items of information are then stockpiled processed and distributed along channels completely disconnected from those of professional practice, using in particular the medium of computerized data handling. (Castel, 1991: 281, 293, emphasis in original)

In universities, this means that academics are called upon to pay closer attention to the information flow about themselves and their students through which the organization can develop and measure performance. Moreover, they are to do so in ways that are approved as technologically innovative. A key issue here is the extent to which this shifts the institutional priority (and thus academic attention) from "unique, informal" relationships with

students and peers to formal relationships with the 'expert' information systems through which such the performance records of students and peers are compiled.

There is little doubt that academics have for some time now been sensing the creep - or indeed the gallop - of the audit culture into their offices and classrooms. This "pervasive emphasis on external audit and quality assessment, mirrored by systems of internal quality assurance and control" has been an unwelcome development in the working lives of academic teachers and researchers (Davis, 1999; Kenway & Bullen, 2000; Shore & Wright, 1999). In broad terms, the tenor of such arguments seems to be that the instruments of accountability used to define and improve quality in higher education impose models of organization that are incompatible with traditional academic work, particularly in the creative arts. Such arguments stress the "unbusiness-like nature" of academic endeavour, insisting that regulations for business practice are both "formulaic" and "shallow" as mechanisms for verifying academic labour (Davis, 1999: 7).

While there is much that can be justified in such critiques of the 'quality' agenda as it is being experienced in universities, there is also a sense of forgotten history here. As Strathern (1997) points out, the assumption that the practices of audit culture originate with "the commercial world with its protocols of bookkeeping and calculations of resources" (p.308) refuses acknowledgement of the fact that commerce 'imported' these practices from education at an earlier time. She describes the 're-importation' of these practices by education as "a beautiful example of cultural replication" in that "values cross from one domain of cultural life to another and then, in altered form, back again" (p.308). So arguments about the "unbusiness-like nature" of academics' work may well in be danger of overlooking the education-like nature of accountability in their rush to blame an alien outside force for the university's 'ruined' state (Readings, 1996). Moreover, arguments such as these run the risk of becoming tired reiterations of a David-and-Goliath theme: the higher education sector-versus-the State: the good academic-versus-the University; the artist-versus-the bureaucrat; and so on.

We suggest it might be more useful to focus on charming absurdities that can result when audit meets academe. Strathern (1997) provides an example by noting the concerns expressed by a 1992 Academic Audit Report on the performance on Cambridge University. The Report upbraided the University for "not stating its 'aims and objectives'; for its 'informal and uncoded understanding about academic quality' and for the fact that 'the course and examination system does not lend itself to a tidy and straightforward procedure for programme design'" (p.311-312). As Strathern notes, contradiction, conflict and maverick conduct seem to be as important to intellectual life as they are anathema to the audit exercise. In the singular consensus logic of audit, any discontinuity or disruption of this type prevents the organisation from being visible to itself and others - in Strathern's words, "the auditors could not see how Cambridge University worked" (p.312).

Because audit cannot tolerate arbitrariness of any kind, whether useful to intellectual work or not, the audit culture has significant negative implications for those academics who seek a working life "of lonely splendour" in which "one ...[is] able to come and go at one's will" (Tierney, 2001: 13). One of the most difficult issues for academics to address is that it is not possible to sit outside the performance culture and still be a valued player in a particular area of university activity. The option of 'just teaching' has been overtaken by the demands that all performance be accountable in terms of quality and that particular systems of communication and forms of documentation be engaged with for the distribution of 'performance-related knowledge'. Likewise, the option of 'just researching' is sustainable only if the research is understood to be 'quantum-generating', with all of the processes of documentation and self-scrutiny that this involves. Whatever about its uses and limitations, this 'quantification of quality' has left a legacy of resentment among many academics who

claim to have joined the academy for 'purer' purposes than record-keeping and/or 'bean-counting'.

Change and grieving

While record-keeping and bean-counting may well constitute a distorted view of the emerging academic work culture, the fact remains that academics are being required to engage in unfamiliar patterns of work and are under unprecedented pressure to be accountable for their activities. Severance from familiar patterns of work can lead to anxiety, as individual academics struggle to defend or recover the knowledge and relationships that have been most personally important to them. Peter Marris (1974: 1) notes a characteristic ambivalence which marks these reactions, an ambivalence which "seem always to inhibit any straightforward adjustment" to the new situation. He uses the concept of *grieving* to describe this less straightforward process of adjustment. We 'import' this concept into this discussion to draw attention to the loss that is associated with change-that "change is always *from* something, not just *to* something" (Taylor, 2000: 525, emphasis added). Thus, grief is "twinned with change", and its use acknowledges that an individual is "engaged in 'work', which is geared to making sense of the loss" (Katz, 2001: 5).

The sense of loss that accompanies the process of change from a unique, informal culture to a formal 'professionalised' culture can involve more than a loss of the familiar. It can also involve a loss of expectation: "it is obvious that we do have unspoken and even unacknowledged expectations for the future, and the loss of these expectations demands from us minor or major adjustments" (Bright 1986: 9). These reactions bear the same features as those associated with death and separation-shock, anger, grief, and (usually) recovery. However, while death (of the former culture) has to be acknowledged, deliberate change-deliberate disruption of the status quo and the expectations attached to it-is not accompanied by the same sense of finality. It can be resisted, and the status quo can be defended.

While uncertainty is associated with external factors, ambivalence is a concept that refers to internal ambiguity. Smelser (1998) suggests that ambivalence provides an essential addition to thinking about individual behaviour and social institutions beyond that provided by explanations that focus on the rational. His argument is that in any situation of emotional attachment, ambivalence invariably arises, and 'moving on' necessitates dealing with that ambivalence. Thus, disruption of the contexts where there has been a measure of emotional commitment, including expectations of rewards for particular behaviours and forms of expertise, can provoke highly emotional (anxiety-driven) responses.

As scholars of grieving indicate, the process of grieving cannot be treated as though it were a simply rational one - a stage or phase which will soon pass. Injunctions to 'get on with it' (ie, to conform), or to 'have faith' in the change process (ie, suspend doubt), are unhelpful, especially when directed to academics. Injunctions such as these ignore, and may interfere with, the need to acknowledge ambivalence and to re-connect with what has been lost. They also ignore one of the characteristics of grief, namely the loss of faith in any future reward, understood here in terms of recognition for the achievement of their personal academic aspirations that were themselves strongly associated with what has been lost. An effect of all this is that academic life can seem increasingly meaningless, with individuals simply 'going through the motions' with little purpose and even less sense of accomplishment.

Rather than externally-focused 'activity', grief and grieving call for 'time out' for introspection and reflection. This is so because:

[grief and grieving] involve taking something inside, but not in order to be 'full up', to achieve emotional satisfaction. Rather they involve loss in the outside world and for a while at least they emphasise internal loss, internal inadequacy: *our confusions and conflicts are emphasised*. (Craib 1994: 158, our emphasis)

But if confusion and conflict are necessary 'work' in grieving, they are certainly not welcome in the self-auditing organisation, as our earlier discussion makes clear. Given the importance for audit cultures of de-emphasising (and finally overwhelming) the non-rational, conflict and ambivalence stand as 'symptoms' of organisational ill-health and thus represent a danger to the risk-conscious organisation. As with obstinacy, inflexibility, cynicism, they mark the organisation as 'risking failure'. A 'sensitive and deeply pragmatic' response is to see conflict, anger and pessimism as a 'risky stage' in the process of change, a stage which must be made amenable to be managed and quickly resolved through a particular model of conflict resolution.

What is problematic about this strategy is that the conflict that accompanies grieving is not all of a piece. Nor is all conflict a hallmark of grieving. Therapeutic 'quick fixes' will be either inappropriate (in the case of 'useful' academic disagreement), or too short-term for many long and complex grieving experiences. Moreover, such quick-fixes are unlikely to work for all grieving, given that they are based on stage and time-based assumptions about grieving that are increasingly questioned (Small, 2001; Walter 1999). As Marris (1974, 155) argues, "[e]very attempt to pre-empt conflict, argument, protest by rational planning can only be abortive: however reasonable the proposed changes, the process of implementation must still allow the impulse of rejection to play itself out". Thus the move to solve the problem of this sort of 'conflict' by running a workshop for managers or offering (short-term) counselling for disaffected workers, while understandable in the logic of audit, may miss the mark in terms of an individual's complicated responses to loss.

A more fundamental problem is, however, that conflict remains so necessary to the grieving process and so problematic for a self-auditing culture of performance. By forcing the speed of change, and the positive mindset that fast change demands, organisational policies can 'refreeze' change processes long before they have achieved their potential. In doing so, they disallow the very conflict that can be so productive for the grieving (and, indeed, the thinking) process. A prevailing view of scholars of grieving (eg, Bright, 1986; Craib, 1994; Walter 1999) is that anger, for many, works as a necessary part of the process of grieving. Thus anger and hostility can signify recognition of, and engagement with change, rather than simple denial or refusal. Anger with others precedes re-formulations of the self. Conflict allows for issues of disappointment to be raised and shared, thus affirming the fact of loss while not disallowing the possibility of a new sense of self to emerge.

The introduction of the concepts of grief and grieving into a discussion of changes to academic work is intended to invite reflection "on the nexus of the individual, society and the prevailing form of disciplinary power" (Small, 2001: 39). As with any other knowledge, theories of grief and grieving are dangerous—they too can be used to 'decide what action to take' and can 'provide a means by which individuals can be found to have done the wrong thing'. However, they do draw attention to some silences, especially in relation to loss and the non-rational responses of individuals to that loss, in the disciplinary power associated with current fixations on risk management, audit culture and change management.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that the university is forever changed by rationalities of risk that given rise to an "audit explosion" (Strathern, 1997) in the higher education, as in other human

services. Fundamental to this culture is the importance of eliminating arbitrariness in the form of any informal culture that might include conflict, contradiction or contrariness in personal conduct. Moves to eliminate these features of academic work and life can and do misrecognise their value in the work of teaching and researching - and of grieving. When processes are put in place for the successful elimination of all discontinuity, the effect may be experienced as a powerful sense of loss on the part of individual academics whose working past and imagined future are both rendered suspect in the new formal culture of the professionally risk-managed university. While academic accountability is both necessary and laudable, and while new ICT-based processes can be helpful in maintaining procedural equity, rationalities of risk can be unhelpful in other respects. In the form of an 'audit explosion', they are likely to misrecognise conflict and ambivalence as illnesses to be expunged, and also to misrecognise the emotional labour of grieving as amenable to 'solution'. In doing so, they create new dangers for both the university *and* the burnt-out academic.

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