

Scholar Outsiders in the Neoliberal University: Transgressive Academic Labour in the Whitestream

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Abstract Over the past 15 years of tertiary sector reform, the nature of academic governance in New Zealand universities has radically changed. Globalization, neoliberal experimentation and managerialist practices have come to characterize a higher education system where the locus of authority is at an ever-widening distance from the majority of academics. This paper uses sociological analyses of organizational structure to explore how macro and micro-level interactions within the managerialist university shape ethnicized, classed and gendered institutional status systems. Drawing on interviews with 43 Māori and Pacific senior scholars in nine universities and Wānanga, we consider the role of scholar ‘outsiders’ from the point of view of minoritized/ethnicized academics and argue that while academic labour within the institutional margins can be profoundly alienating these sites are less readily accessed by institutional elites and therefore open up possibilities for organized scholarly resistance to the neoliberal status quo.

Keywords Higher education · Institutional organization · Institutional racism · Māori academics · Neoliberalism · Whitestream universities

Introduction

The nature of academic labour in New Zealand has changed dramatically over the past 15 years of tertiary sector reform. During that time the roles of academics and the work they do have been reconfigured to fit the discourses of a new ‘public

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managerialism’ that places the production of knowledge at the centre of a neoliberal regimen of measurement, audit and performativity (Amsler and Shore 2015; Olssen and Peters 2005). Shore (2010) contends that this form of governance constitutes a paradigm shift from the notion of universities as a public good towards a view of higher education as an economic investment for an educated citizenry. Inside these managerialist regimes, universities and the groups within them battle for status, resources and influence. At the same time, debates have intensified about the aims, purpose and values of university education and the means by which these will be carried out (Larner and Heron 2005).

As universities become progressively more oriented towards external demands from policy makers, corporate sponsors, industry partners and funding agencies, everyday academic decision-making has largely shifted from small faculty-based units with a relative degree of intellectual and disciplinary autonomy towards more corporate and distanced forms of governance. The effect of these widening academic spaces can be described spatially as a form of “distance decay” (Eldridge and Jones 1991) where the level of day-to-day interaction between institutional elites and less powerful or influential academics declines and deteriorates as the physical and cultural distances between them increase.

In this paper we examine the impact of organizational distance on academic labour and institutional status from the point of view of minoritized/ethnicized academics in the managerialist academy. We present findings from a two-year ethnographic study with 43 Māori and Pacific senior academics in nine universities and Wānanga across New Zealand. These findings informed two discrete case studies; one explored Māori academic socialization and the other examined Pacific academic socialization. In this paper we focus primarily on findings from the Māori case study with supplementary evidence from the Pacific cohort.

Drawing on sociological theories of work, careers and organizational structure we examine how macro and micro-level interactions within the neoliberal university create institutional status systems framed by ethnicized notions of academic insiders and outsiders; a practice known as “whitestreaming” which refers to the structures of academia that protect and maintain Anglo-European/Pākehā privilege (Ritchie 2014). In line with previous studies in this area we contend that these academic status systems are also highly classed and gendered (Ahmed 2012; Chatterjee and Maira 2014) but argue that despite the level of isolation experienced by these scholar outsiders their worksites are less readily accessed and monitored by institutional elites and as such possibilities exist for creative scholarly resistance to the managerialist status quo. As a note on terminology, the phrase ‘institutional elites’ refers here to broad networks of actors within organizations united by shared interests, priorities and social capital (Zald and Loundsbury 2010) who are integral to the “regulative architecture” (Morris et al. 2016, p. 2280) of institutions. They may be involved with the ‘hard’ power mechanisms of an organization (for example, the enforcement of institutional rules and regulations) or the exercise of ‘soft’ power (for example, shaping the prevailing culture and norms of an organization) or both.

The ‘Hidden Transcripts’ of Academic Institutions

The sociologist, Erving Goffman, famously wrote “[o]ur status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks.” (Goffman 1961, p. 320). He was referring to institutional identities forged in the interstices and small corners of complex organizations such as asylums, prisons, schools and universities. These ‘cracks’ form in parts of an institution that are generally below the radar for managers and administrators who have little input into the localized cultures of these environments and rarely appear in them in person. As such, they are interstitial spaces that provide inmates with opportunities to resist the “pull” of institutional life (Goffman 1961).

The public ‘front rooms’ of organizations like universities, however, are characterized by distinctive governance structures, values and practices that organize and link the everyday interactions and identities of those within them. The closer an individual is to the institutional core or upper echelons of power, the greater the degree of symbolic or cultural authority they are generally accorded and it is in these proximities that displays of institutional unity are rewarded (Abrutyn 2016; Lawler et al. 2016). In line with this, and common in managerialist environments, a cadre of skilled, calculative and strategic operators, known in the organizational literature as ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ (Abrutyn and Van Ness 2015), gathers closely around the centre of authority. As Abrutyn (2016) notes, “[e]ntrepreneurs who carve out cores gain privilege and power and, like any interest group, work hard to protect and, in many cases, expand their influence over the institutional environment and across institutional boundaries.” (p. 222). Meso-level institutional entrepreneurs are often highly adept at garnering material and symbolic resources in order to advance their status and acquire privilege within the institution (Thornton et al. 2012; Levy and Scully 2007).

In universities, these groups tend to be comprised of academics who have come to terms with the performative and managerialist ethos of higher education and are willing to uphold neoliberal practices and strategies on behalf of their university’s senior leadership (Cribb et al. 2016; Leathwood and Read 2013). In New Zealand universities and elsewhere, these institutional in-groups are dominated by Anglo-European academics who are protective of their status and privilege (Pilkington 2013; National Tertiary Education Union 2011).

Conversely, groups positioned at the periphery of large organizations often have less robust affinities with the official narratives and strategic aims of an organization. The more extensive the physical, cultural and symbolic reach of an institution, the greater the distance between the core and those at the outer limits. Accordingly, it is often more difficult for institutional elites to mobilize support for key initiatives from those at a symbolic, cultural or physical distance from the upper levels of university administration (Lawler et al. 2016). Indeed, institutions tend to be weakest at the margins and this is one of the reasons that “kings and empires collapse” (Abrutyn 2016, p. 223). It is within these distal groups that local cultures emerge offering alternative forms of institutional identity and commitment (Anderson 2008; Collins 1986; Henderson et al. 2010; Moss and Snow 2016).

Allegiances forged in the academic margins serve multiple purposes for scholar outsiders. Anderson (2008) argues that interactions within and between these groups act as “hidden transcripts” (p. 255) of institutional engagement that have the potential to expand notions of resistance to the incursion of neoliberal managerialism into everyday academic life and work. As such these hidden transcripts, which often diverge considerably from official organizational narratives, can mount a significant challenge to the institutional status quo.

Methodology

As part of a two-year study of Māori and Pacific academic socialization, in-depth, semi-structured one-to-one ethnographic interviews and field observations (Skinner 2012) were conducted with 43 Māori (N = 29) and Pacific (N = 14) senior academics in nine PhD-awarding institutions of higher education in New Zealand. During the pilot stage of the project, participants in two universities in the Pacific region were also interviewed in order to provide a level of contrast and comparison with the experiences of indigenous and diasporic senior academics in New Zealand universities. Two discrete case studies were developed, one comprised of narratives from Māori academics and the other focused on Pacific academics. In this paper we look primarily at the findings from the case study of Māori scholars.

The participants were Associate Professors, Professors and experienced Senior Lecturers at the upper levels of the salary scale. We also included people with other job titles that reflected their status as established senior researchers and scholars. The participants were affiliated with a wide range of disciplines in the humanities, sciences, social sciences, and professional and applied fields. Very few Māori senior faculty are employed outside of Māori Studies departments, however, and this makes them relatively easy to identify. For this reason we have not named participants’ departments, faculties and universities.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed except in a small number of cases where participants preferred not to be taped. In these instances we took extensive field notes which we showed to interviewees at the conclusion of the interview. Most interviews were conducted in person although on a few occasions follow-up discussions were conducted by telephone or email. Data were also collected from observations and field journals (Kidman et al. 2015).

Academic Labour in the Whitestream University

The way that Māori senior scholars articulate their sense of belonging or distance from academic decision-making in their departments, faculties and institutions sheds light on how academic labour is organized in different parts of the university. This, in turn, provides insight into how institutional knowledge circulates through a range of networks within and across universities. When academics are deeply embedded in these networks and flows they are more likely to establish identities that reflect and uphold the values and beliefs of the institution (Abrutyn 2016). On

the other hand, when they do not have a strong sense of affinity or when the practices and policies of whitestream institutions limit or exclude their participation in decision-making protocols are they are more likely to turn towards other scholar outsiders at the margins for validation and solidarity (Anderson 2008). In this section, we draw on sociological analyses of work and organizational structure to frame our analysis. In particular, we refer to the work of Abrutyn (2016) who argues that institutions operate in ‘four dimensional space’, namely, temporal, social, physical and symbolic. We have used these four institutional dimensions to scaffold our findings below.

Academic Time: The Temporal Dimension of Whitestream Universities

Time plays a key role in the organization of academic institutions. It shapes faculty decisions, academic workloads and institutional and departmental goals, strategies and responsibilities. Walker (2009) argues that neoliberal academic time is increasingly commercialized and linked to market demands, globalization and global capitalism. As such, time has become a contested site within the managerial university and many scholars assert their resistance to compressed temporal regimes through collective action, such as the emerging ‘slow scholarship’ movement (Mountz et al. 2015) and other forms of tacit non-compliance. The Māori academics who were part of this study were acutely aware of these pressures.

Yeah, the neoliberal agenda. We’re going to get squashed. Forget about academic freedom. Research and teaching as an activity that’s government-funded will take on the American model of nine months teaching; three months research. At the end of the day we’ll just work bloody hard twelve months of the year. I think that the luxury that was enjoyed by me and my colleagues up to this point in time will be something that sits in the past. Then you’ll get into a “publish or perish” mentality far more than what we’ve experienced today. (Māori academic).

These concerns have been raised by others in New Zealand and elsewhere (see for example, Vostal 2016; Clarke 2015; Raaper and Olssen 2016; Stahl 2015) but as is discussed below Māori scholars also contend with a further set of temporal realities centred on significant disparities in their academic career trajectories.

Māori Academic Careers and Compressed Temporal Regimes

Māori faculty make up a very small proportion of the nation’s academic workforce (6%) and the proportion of Pacific academic staff is even smaller (2%) (Sutherland et al. 2013). Most of these scholars are clustered in the early to mid-career stages with very few operating at senior and late career levels (Nana et al. 2010). Part of the reason for this is that Māori scholars generally begin their academic careers later than Pākehā academics. The average age for a Māori doctoral student in New Zealand is 49 years (Nana et al. 2010) and only 5.8% of all postgraduate graduates are Māori so only a very small number of these graduates enter academic careers

(Theodore et al. 2015). Consequently, Māori academic careers have a different trajectory from most Pākehā careers (Middleton and McKinley 2010).

Since many begin their careers closer to the age of retirement, Māori academics tend to be engaged in early career activities at a later age than most Pākehā. The shorter duration of Māori academic careers is problematic because scholarly reputations generally take many years to build. Accordingly, this “swinging door” situation means that it is difficult to establish a stable, sustainable Māori research workforce in the higher education domain (Kidman et al. 2015). There is also a growing body of evidence that suggests that under the current Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) audit regime universities are increasingly reluctant to recruit early career academics who are significantly older (Kidman et al. 2015). The unwillingness of many academic managers and Deans to address these temporal realities reinforces hiring practices that favour the employment of younger Pākehā academics (Potter and Cooper 2016). In this regard, the recruitment and retention of Māori scholars in a highly competitive academic job market contributes directly to the whitestreaming of the academy. Combined with other factors, such as the ways that institutional status is acquired and enacted, as is discussed below, these practices reinforce and maintain existing disparities within the academy.

Academic In-Groups and Out-Groups: The Social Dimension of Universities

The social territories of universities tend to be partisan, fractionalized and clannish (Campbell 2009; Becher and Trowler 2001). But the academy also looks outwards towards wider social norms and values relating to ethnicity, gender and social class which are incorporated into inter-group and intra-group relations.

...the university doesn't stand apart from the society it's in. It's an institution that's embedded in the wider social institutions that surround it. So it's a nice idea to hope that the university is going to be [...] different or a bit less racist than anywhere else but in the end the university is a creature of the society that made it. (Māori academic).

Ethnicized status distinctions in the social sphere of universities are often enacted in subtle ways. For example, a Māori participant based in a small department commented on the active social networks of her Pākehā colleagues, as follows:

...they are nice enough people and it's not like they're deliberately leaving me out when they go to the pub after work or if they're taking visiting scholars out for lunch. Sometimes on Monday mornings I hear them talking about how they've been to dinner parties at each other's houses. I've never been invited to those little shin-digs. Probably, they think I wouldn't want to come. Well, it's true actually, I probably wouldn't really but it would be nice to be invited sometimes even if just to find out what's going on in [the Department]. But I don't lose sleep over it and they're not terrible, evil people. (Māori academic).

The acquisition of institutional status in universities rests on a familiarity with the unspoken rules and expectations of academia and an understanding of the ways that in-group interactions are structured; as Gerholm (1990) notes, “[c]ompetence in the cultural life of the discipline and the department functions as an informal sorting device, often without the sorters and the sorted being aware of the fact” (p. 263). Academics who do not have access to this tacit knowledge are often positioned as outsiders and this was an experience that was shared by most of the Māori and Pacific participants.

Academic community... to me, that doesn't include me really. It's that powerful group of academics that sits over there. I've never really had a sense of belonging to that kind of academic group. [...] I never saw myself as part of that kind of community. Even at [name of university removed] we were academics, but as a Māori team we saw ourselves as being more part of the community. Part of the Māori community. (Māori academic).

The circulation of tacit knowledge and information through university networks and cliques is shaped by subtle messages about ethnicity, gender and social class and this has a corresponding influence on the way that many academics at the institutional periphery carry out their work. Accordingly, much of the academic labour of Māori scholars is highly visible within cultural and tribal networks outside the university but often entirely invisible within their departments, faculties and disciplines. Distinctions in social status are further reinforced by the spatial organization of universities, as discussed below.

Academic ‘Space’: The Physical Dimension of Whitestream Universities

Physical places, their scale, size and differentiation of space, are a critical factor in the social organization of institutions. In large or complex organizations, spatial realities contribute to particular patterns of behaviour especially in the demarcation of institutional boundaries and statuses. For example, the nature of the encounters that commonly take place in a campus bar differ from interactions in a lecture theatre, a university Library, a university Marae or the office of the Vice-Chancellor.

Smith (1997) argues, the “educational battleground for Māori is spatial. It is about theoretical spaces, pedagogical spaces, structural spaces” (p. 203). Our focus here is on the organization of physical spaces and way they intersect with structural spaces. This aspect of university life was experienced variously by the participants. Academic staff in Māori/Indigenous Studies and Pacific Studies departments and in academic units where there were clusters of Māori or Pacific staff, for example, had access to regular daily contact with other Māori or Pacific colleagues. These participants reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction with their workplaces. In departments with few Māori or Pacific academic staff, having a Māori or Pacific colleague nearby had a positive effect on participants’ sense of institutional belonging. In general, and with only two exceptions, Māori faculty were more likely to experience intellectual, social and professional isolation in departments where

there were few or no other Māori staff. In these departments and faculties, the level of regular, positive engagement that departmental heads and Deans have with Māori academic and professional staff became very important and had a considerable impact on their professional well-being (Kidman et al. 2015). These findings provide an interesting comparison with the level of workplace well-being reported by academic staff in Wānanga who are more likely to report that their level of satisfaction had improved over time since starting work in the sector than those in universities or polytechnics.” (Bentley et al. 2014, p. 29).

The highest levels of workplace satisfaction, however, were reported by Māori academics who had experienced and institutionally astute Māori academic managers at the helm. One of the participants in this study, a Māori senior scholar who leads a high-functioning academic unit, spoke of making a conscious decision to run the department in ways that complement the cultural and family responsibilities and priorities of staff. The physical environment was organized so that children and older family and tribal members were welcome and comfortable spaces were set aside for them.

It’s a place where people aren’t just stuck in their office. We move around and talk to each other in that space. Physically, wairua is in that space. I’m not interested in whether people are there nine to five. It’s about the work that people are doing, the projects that they’ve got, making sure that whatever work they’ve got, it’s reasonable in terms of time, energy, support, expectation, et cetera et cetera.” (Head of academic unit/Māori academic).

In these environments, Māori academics are more likely to consider themselves part of an academic community that is attenuated to their intellectual, cultural and personal priorities. At the same time, the willingness of academic managers to welcome Māori community members into the academic space reduces the sense of distance between members of academic departments and university administrators. In this respect, spatial organization has a significant impact on the degree of affinity people have with institutional aims and goals.

The Treaty of Waitangi: The Symbolic Dimension of Universities

Alongside the spatial organization of universities, the cultural and symbolic aspects of academic institutions are evident in their distinctive rituals (e.g., graduation ceremonies), practices (e.g., the structuring of faculty meetings, large group lectures) and ‘official’ values and beliefs (e.g., institutional mission statements and strategic plans). In New Zealand government discourse, a great deal of attention is given to the relationship of government with Māori peoples and the Treaty of Waitangi is a central symbol that has come to represent values of cultural fairness, inclusion and equality (Crocket 2009). Accordingly, New Zealand universities reference the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi in their mission statements and equity and diversity policies, yet in most institutions, there has been little or no corresponding structural change to facilitate equitable relationships with Māori. As

a result, the participants expressed considerable cynicism about the translation of these symbolic relationships into institutional practice.

So there's an institutional narrative about Māori that talks about the Treaty and partnership. This university has a statute about the Treaty and there's a lot of "soft" talk about partnership. I think that some managers think that partnership just means being nice to Māori people and smiling at us when we go past them in the corridor. I don't think they have a sense that it means changing anything structural about the institution itself. I don't think they see it in terms of changing institutional priorities, changing behaviours, changing their employment practices. It's kind of like if they smile at one Māori a day, they've ticked the diversity box for the institution. (Māori academic).

Institutional policies that are not accompanied by structural change are perceived as being highly tokenistic (Pilkington 2013). Frustrations ensue amongst minoritized/ethnicized groups when universities develop elaborate narratives about diversity, equity and cultural responsiveness without creating the conditions for these values to be enacted. Several participants noted that they are frequently called upon to serve cultural roles at university pōwhiri or turn up when a Māori voice is needed by university managers. While this bolsters the institution's public identity as a fair and equitable employer, the participants commented that, in the main, Māori staff continue to be excluded from macro and meso-level decision-making and this reinforces the marginalized and ethnicized positioning of many Māori scholars within the university.

Opportunities and Transgressions at the Academic Margins

Recent work on the micro-politics of resistance within institutions throws light on how marginalized institutional 'actors' exercise agency in their daily working lives. Moss and Snow (2016) argue that in these contexts collective action may take place directly, for example, through calls for structural change in institutional relationships with subordinated/subaltern groups; through challenges to the normative values and practices of institutional elites; or by appropriating and reconfiguring elements of an organization to better suit the needs of institutional out-groups within those structures (Moss and Snow 2016). At the same time, more covert micro-resistances may also be mounted through various kinds of tacit non-compliance (Snow 2004). Alternative forms of academic resistance frequently involve the deployment of disciplinary knowledge and expertise to challenge the status quo both within the institution and beyond. In her work on scholar-activism, Mendez (2008) describes situations where "the researcher uses her position within the academy to contribute to social justice struggles, while at the same time working to place at the centre alternative voices and ways of knowing" (Mendez 2008, p. 138). This approach was taken by many of the participants in this study.

The positioning of minoritized/ethnicized groups of scholars at the periphery of the social organization of universities was a cause of considerable frustration and resentment for the majority of participants who spoke at length about the impact of

institutional racism on their own careers and those of their colleagues. However, they were also well aware of the creative possibilities of operating in the academic margins. As Smith (2015) suggests,

There are also researchers, scholars, and academics who actively choose the margins, who choose to study people marginalized by society, who themselves have come from the margins, or who see their intellectual purpose as being scholars who will work for, with, and alongside communities who occupy the margins of society. If one is interested in society, then it is often in the margins that aspects of a society are revealed as microcosms of the larger picture as examples of a society's underbelly." (Smith 2015, p. 358).

In this study, the participants were deeply committed to mobilizing their academic expertise to create genuine and lasting change in Māori and Pacific communities. To that end, they established sophisticated strategies for meeting the formal requirements of academic life in managerial universities, such as publishing their research, carrying out teaching responsibilities, sitting on university committees, and participating in PBRF, while maintaining strong primary commitments to marginalized communities and groups outside the university with whom they had shared affinities, connections and concerns.

So I could publish in a journal that a handful of white scholars will read and forget about by the end of the day or I could go to [name of tribal area removed] and talk to the whānau there who are at their absolute wit's end and look at ways of sorting out the problems they're dealing with. Or, I could choose between getting into a polite debate with some earnest, tweedy, corduroy-ed don over a glass of sherry and a vol-au-vent or I could duke it out with the bloody stropky kuias in the back blocks of [name of region removed] and maybe... possibly... hopefully make some sort of constructive change to the lives of real people... Who am I going to choose? Well, what do you reckon? Seriously? I hate sherry! (Māori academic).

Institutional identities that reside in the "cracks" and clefts of academic life pose particular challenges for managers and administrative elites who work hard to create unified and unifying organizational narratives. Operating within the margins can also be a profoundly alienating experience for academics who, as a result institutional racism and/or sexism, are positioned at a distance from the institutional core but once in these spaces, academics can be remarkably creative in developing transgressive identities that serve them and their communities well. As Ewick and Silbey (1993) note, "[r]esistance, to the extent that it constitutes forms of consciousness, ways of operating and making do, may prefigure more formidable and strategic challenges to power. Through everyday practical engagements with power, individuals identify the cracks and vulnerabilities of institutions" (p. 749).

Universities have become progressively more complex in neoliberal times and as such the distance decay effect between institutional elites and scholars at the margins is more readily observable. At the same time, relationships between distal groups of academics and the organizational core are increasingly mediated by meso-level 'entrepreneurs' willing to endorse and uphold whitestream neoliberal practices

and institutional policies on behalf of senior leadership. Many Māori scholars, as well as other marginalized groups, have responded to these pressures by asserting scholarly identities and affiliations that are not easily accessed, managed and monitored by institutional elites and we contend that it is here that opportunities and possibilities for creating genuine social change as well as mounting resistance to the neoliberal ‘creep’ of managerialism into academic life is frequently asserted.

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