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Representations of Academic Life: Institutional and Personal Values

Representaciones de la vida académica: valores institucionales y personales

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Abstract

The way academics construct professional identities and operate in a complex profession that is under pressure depends on how they position themselves in relation to institutional cultures. In order to investigate faculty representations of academic life, a survey case study (questionnaire and interviews) focusing on potential dissonance between institutional and personal values was conducted at the University of Minho (Braga-Portugal), a research-teaching university. Dissonance was found related to teaching, research, working climate, relationships and leadership, suggesting a person-organization misfit. Dissatisfaction arising from values incongruence co-exists with efforts for self-

fulfilment as academics struggle to preserve their identity while realizing that institutional priorities may run counter to their ideals. Acknowledging dissonance as a vital element within a culture of respect for diversity would foster the negotiation of understandings about what the academic community is and might be. Institution-specific inquiry into academic experience should not only be expanded but also become part of the strategic (re)definition of institutional development policies.

Keywords: Representations, academic life, values, dissonance.

Resumen

La manera de actuar y construir la identidad profesional de los académicos en una profesión compleja y sujeta a presiones, depende de la postura asumida en su cultura institucional. Se sondearon, mediante un cuestionario y entrevistas, las representaciones de la vida académica en la Universidad de Minho (Braga-Portugal), una universidad de enseñanza-investigación, según la potencial disonancia entre valores institucionales y personales. Se identificaron disonancias concernientes a enseñanza, investigación, clima laboral, relaciones y liderazgo, reflejo del desajuste persona/organización. La insatisfacción resultante coexiste con esfuerzos de autorrealización. Los académicos luchan por preservar su identidad, sabiendo que las prioridades institucionales pueden contrariar sus ideales. Reconocer la disonancia como elemento vital en una cultura de respeto hacia la diversidad, permitiría negociar entendimientos entre la comunidad académica real o factible. La investigación de la experiencia académica debería expandirse e introducirse en la (re)definición estratégica de las políticas de desarrollo institucional.

Palabras clave: Representaciones, vida académica, valores, disonancia.

I. The need to inquire into academic life on campus

Extraordinarily, universities, while claiming to be in the business of knowledge, know very little about themselves (Barnett, 1997, p. 17).

What Barnett suggested long ago still holds true in many settings. And even though knowledge about the higher education landscape has increased immensely, we still know too little about our own institutions. Yet, how can the quality of academic life on campus be improved without inquiring into it? As Johnsrud (2002, p. 393) argues, “colleges and universities pay a price for ignoring the quality of worklife experienced by members of their faculty and administrative staff. (...) The vitality and quality of the entire academic enterprise depends on their performance”.

Inquiry into institution-specific academic experience is particularly urgent given the crisis in the hegemony and legitimacy of the 20th century university and the changing face of the profession, namely as regards the implications of globalization and managerialism upon the redefinition of higher education purposes, policies, and academic roles and identities (see Altbach *et al.*, 2009; Barnett, 1997; Coaldrake and Stedman, 1999; Courtney, 2013; Fredman and Doughney, 2012; Henkel, 2007; Morley, 2003; Meek *et al.*, 2009; Santos, 2008). Even though current conditions may stimulate professional growth and satisfaction (Locke and Bennion, 2010), experts' views at the UNESCO Forum for Higher Education, Research and Knowledge 2001-2009 indicate that “the notion of a ‘profession under pressure’ is more often presented than one of improving quality and relevance and than one of an increasingly satisfying professional situation” (Teichler and Yağcı, 2009, p. 107).

The way academics build professional identities and operate in a complex profession under pressure depends on how they position themselves in relation to institutional

cultures, here defined as dominant patterns of espoused values considered to be valid on the basis of shared experience and problem-solving (Schein, 2010). Organizational cohesion and growth are enhanced when culture has a holographic quality through the representation and enactment of shared systems of meanings (Morgan, 2006). However, higher education institutions are sites where competing rationalities create a struggle of opposites, reflecting the fact that “any system development always contains elements of counterdevelopment” (p. 282). Conflicting work ideologies provoke fractures in academic identity especially when personal autonomy is threatened by measures that reinforce internal quality control towards collective action and institutional autonomy (Henkel, 2007; Waitere *et al.*, 2011; Winter, 2009). Moreover, when managers create survival anxiety or guilt for resisting dominant discourses and practices, they may generate learning anxiety, denial, scapegoating, maneuvering and bargaining (Schein, 2010). Institutions may even become unsafe places where incivility, alienation and occupational stress seriously affect academics’ well-being and productivity (Ditton, 2009; Morley, 2003; Twale and De Luca, 2008).

Enhancing faculty engagement requires investing in the intellectual capital of institutions and cultivating a culture of respect for diversity (Gapa, Austin and Trice, 2007). Therefore, we need to know more about academics’ views of worklife and inquire into dissonance between perceived dominant values and personal values. This was the main purpose of the exploratory case study here reported. Even though it focuses on one institution and only touches the surface of a complex phenomenon, it may resonate in similar settings and contribute to an increase in debate on dissonance as a vital element of inclusive academic life, allowing us to get a grasp on “repressed forces lurking in the shadow of rationality” (Morgan, 2006, p. 237).

When dissonance is dismissed or silenced, issues that affect us deeply as professionals tend to become naturalized and culturally accepted. On the contrary, when it is voiced and acknowledged, a space is created for liberation, dialogue and transformation. From this perspective, research that seeks to disclose, interrogate and reframe understandings of institutions can be empowering. It entails “a return to the beginning: What sort of community is desired?” (Schostak and Schostak 2008, p. 250). To a certain extent, our study seeks provisional answers to this unsettling question.

II. Inquiring into views of academic life: A survey case study

2.1 Research context and objectives

The survey case study here reported was conducted in 2009/2010 at our university. The University of Minho (Braga-Portugal) is a teaching-research institution founded in 1973 that offers a wide range of undergraduate and graduate programs involving around 1,200 faculty and 18,000 students within eleven colleges. Like other institutions across the country, it has struggled to keep up with escalating quality demands deriving from transnational, managerial trends and policies in a context of national economic crisis. There appears to be a growing divide between “academic managers” and “managed academics” as regards academic values (Winter, 2009), reinforced by a mismatch between quality demands (related to expanded roles and professionalism, fund raising, internationalization, accountability, excellence, and

collective commitment to institutional development) and the deterioration of working conditions resulting from funding cuts, growing job insecurity, reduced autonomy and opportunities for promotion, increased workload and bureaucracy, and lack of support structures for change (see Santiago and Carvalho 2008, 2012).

In this scenario, our study proposed to: (1) compare perceived institutional values with personal/ideal values in diverse domains of academic life; (2) gain insight into the impact of values incongruence on the way academics perceive and (re)shape professional experience; (3) identify the conditions necessary for a culture of greater respect for diversity.

To our knowledge, no study of this kind had been conducted before in the country, where research on academic work is an emergent field and has focused primarily on management issues. We found ourselves entering a sensitive terrain that involved self-exposure and an inquiry stance towards the institutional culture, and this determined some of our decisions regarding methodological procedures.

2.2 Research procedures and participants

An anonymous survey questionnaire was designed and reviewed by three colleagues from other universities and a foreign expert (Ronald Barnett). The final version integrates 20 closed questions focusing on various facets of five domains of academic life: academic activities; assessment of teaching and research; career promotion; leadership; working climate and relationships (see sample questions in Appendix 1). Respondents were asked to express their opinion about a) what is valued (important or present) in the institution (perceived institutional values), and b) what should be valued (personal/ideal values). They also expressed average (dis)satisfaction regarding the five domains on a 9-point scale (-4=Completely Dissatisfied; 0=Neutral Position; +4=Completely Satisfied). This scale was later converted to a 1-9 scale in order to calculate mean and standard deviation values. Personal data collected was minimal in order to protect identity (college, academic position, length of experience in higher education, age range, and gender).

The questionnaire and a project summary were first posted to the Rectorship Office, the Quality Assurance Office, college directors, and heads of departments so as to inform the administrative staff about the study. Shortly thereafter, the questionnaire, a project summary and a return envelope were posted to all faculty (n=1153). For a period of about one month, regular e-mails were sent across campus to ask and thank for collaboration.

The response rate was 25.1% (n=290), which means that this study is exploratory and caution needs to be taken regarding the significance of results. The sample distribution across colleges/disciplinary fields and academic positions matches roughly the distribution on campus. It is also heterogeneous as regards type of appointment (equitative distribution of non tenure-track and tenure-track faculty), gender (equitative distribution of male and female respondents), and length of experience in higher education (from 1-5 to +20 years).

Although we might expect a higher response rate in a study on worklife experience, we need to consider the sensitive and marginal nature of the study and the fact that

the survey was not launched by the Quality Assurance Office. Asking it to sponsor the study would probably guarantee a higher response rate, and this possibility was considered, but it might also reduce our research autonomy and generate a need for compliance on the part of respondents.

A descriptive statistical analysis of the survey data was done and two open seminars were organized on campus to discuss results with participants and invite them to volunteer for a semi-structured interview aimed at collecting personal accounts. This procedure was based on the assumption that seminar attendants would be interested in the study and thus more willing to be interviewed. Around 30 colleagues attended the seminars and 9 colleagues from 4 different colleges later contacted the team coordinator to be interviewed. Given the short number of interviews, they were used to get some insights into and illustrate the way academics experience life on campus.

The interview protocol integrated 18 open-ended questions about three topics: management of academic activities, institutional climate, and the importance of academic life issues (see sample questions in Appendix 2). The protocol was sent to the interviewees in advance so that they could get acquainted with it and feel more comfortable about participating. The interviews were conducted and tape-recorded by the coordinator, and later transcribed by team members in order to ensure maximum confidentiality. The transcriptions were sent to the interviewees for content validation.

The fact that the study went against the grain seems to be confirmed by the rather low participation rate and also the absence of feedback on the final internal report, which was e-mailed to all faculty, the Rectorship Office, and the Quality Assurance Office. It is our assumption that in settings where academic life is seldom discussed, this kind of research tends to be undervalued and needs to be expanded so as to disclose what would otherwise remain concealed, helping institutions better appreciate and cater to diversity.

III. Results: Dissonance between perceived and ideal values

This section is organized into two themes: teaching and research; working climate, relationships, and leadership. We will focus on dissonance between perceived institutional values and personal/ideal values, which suggests a person-organization mismatch resulting from values incongruence (Winter, 2009). Interview accounts will be used to expand and illustrate some of the issues raised.

In the tables below, the percentages refer to the frequency of responses. Percentages related to perceived institutional values are always in decreasing order. For both institutional and personal values, we include higher ratings (Very Important + Important or Very Present + Present). Dissonance or incongruity for each item is represented by the subtraction between the percentage related to perceived culture and the percentage related to personal perspective. The minus symbol signals a negative dissonance, i.e., the percentage of respondents who value a given item is higher than the percentage of those who perceive it to be valued in the institution. Average satisfaction levels refer to mean values on a scale from 1 to 9 (from completely dissatisfied to completely satisfied). Standard deviation values (SD) are

also provided on the basis of the same scale.

3.1 Teaching and research: what is (not) valued

Respondents put a high value on teaching, research and service, even though dissonance with perceived institutional values can be found in the cases of teaching and service (Table I). Average satisfaction levels are higher for teaching and research, but standard deviation values (SD=7) show that there is a lot of variation in this regard. Average satisfaction with the conciliation of the four activities is not high (5.14/ SD=2.06).

Table I. Areas of academic work

	Institutional Culture (% VI+I)	Personal Perspective (% VI+I)	Dissonance (% IC – PP)	Satisfaction (1-9)
Research	87.2	99.6	-12.4	6.32 (SD=7)
Teaching	66.9	100	-33.1	7.14 (SD=7)
Management	66.7	63.4	3.3	4.91(SD=4.91)
Service	41.5	91.6	-50	5.43 (SD=5)

VI: Very Important I: Important IC: Institutional Culture PP: Personal Perspective

The most significant insight from the interviews as regards the management of academic work is that even though teaching and research are both highly valued, investment in teaching means time lost for research, and only research is perceived to give legitimacy to one's career as an academic (see Gottlieb and Keith, 1997; Maison and Schapper, 2012).

On the other hand, teaching itself presents problems. The interviewees stress the deprofessionalizing effects of excessive workloads, increased bureaucracy and accountability, and also of having to teach subjects outside their areas of expertise due to the growing diversity of teaching programs, which is seen as a hindrance not only to good teaching (see McInnis 2010) but also to research and its articulation with teaching. Attempts to innovate do exist and seem to depend more on faculty values and experience than on top-down demands. In fact, recent reforms emphasizing the need to increase learner-centeredness tend to be seen as rhetorical and largely ineffective, mainly due to the lack of support and reward systems.

Not surprisingly, the survey findings show that teaching is seen to occupy the lowest place as to what counts for promotion, whereas personal values signal the desire for a more balanced and holistic appreciation of academic work (Table II). Moreover, teaching (along with service) is perceived to be given less importance than non-academic factors like belonging to groups of influence and family/friendship ties, which indicates the existence of "political scripts" to deal with tensions between private and organizational interests, often resting in alliances operating informally and invisibly through "gamesmanship and other forms of wheeling and dealing" (Morgan, 2006, p. 204). Overall, satisfaction with career advancement is not high (5.4/ SD=2.54).

Table II. Career progression factors

	Working Context (% VI+I)	Personal Perspective (% VI+I)	Dissonance (% WC – PP)
Research	89.4	99.3	-9.9
Belonging to groups of influence	73.0	5.0	68.0
Management	63.7	60.6	3.1
Nr or years in a post/the institution	61.7	33.8	27.9
Family/friendship relationships	51.6	1.9	49.7
Service	45.7	81.4	-35.7
Teaching	37.4	98.3	-60.9

VI: Very Important I: Important WC: Working Context PP: Personal Perspective

Values incongruence within teaching and research become evident in the respondents' views about what is and should be assessed as regards quality (Tables III and IV).

In our institution teaching quality is assessed every semester on the basis of a student feedback questionnaire focused on instructional aspects. Our survey presented a list of quality criteria that included those aspects but also other criteria related to learner-centeredness and a 'scholarship of teaching and learning' (SoTL). As regards the criteria presented, negative dissonance between institutional and personal values ranges from -31.9% to -73.3% (Table III). Dissonance increases as we move from teacher-dependent instructional aspects (appropriateness of objectives, contents, methodologies and assessment) to aspects that are more learner/interaction-dependent (student involvement/participation, relevance of learning and teacher-student relationships), and to those that are related to SoTL – pedagogical training, innovation and inquiry, dissemination of practice, and peer collaboration.

Table III. Teaching quality assessment

	Institutional Assessment (% VI+I)	Personal Perspective (% VI+I)	Dissonance (% IA – PP)
Relevance of course contents	61.7	98.6	-36.9
Adequacy of student assessment	60.7	92.6	-31.9
Relevance of course objectives	60.6	96.5	-35.9
Adequacy of teaching methodologies	57.4	96.1	-38.7
Teacher updating in subjects taught	53.0	98.2	-45.2
Student involvement/participation	52.5	97.2	-44.7
Teacher-student relationship	52.2	95.1	-42.9
Relevance of student learning	48.8	96.5	-47.7
Teacher pedagogical updating/training	39.4	93.3	-53.9
Innovation/pedagogical inquiry	33.1	91.2	-58.1
Dissemination of pedagogical experiments	24.8	80.2	-55.4
Teacher collaboration	16.5	89.8	-73.3

VI: Very Important I: Important IA: Institutional Assessment PP: Personal Perspective

Even though SoTL fosters the transformation of teaching cultures by enhancing responsive professional collegiality, continuing professional development and bottom-up quality improvement strategies (Boyer, 1990; Shulman, 2004), it has

played a marginal role in institutional agendas (see Vieira, 2009) and institutions do not have established academic development systems. This might explain why most respondents consider the impact of teaching assessments on campus-wide change to be low.

The respondents' average satisfaction with teaching assessment results is moderate (6.97/ SD=1.55) and those results are perceived to have some impact on their personal practices. Given the existence of values incongruence as regards criteria for assessing teaching quality (Table III above), we might ask: Do their practices conform to or move beyond the perceived assessment criteria?

As for the assessment of research quality in working contexts, which is done every year, dissonance is globally lower than in the case of teaching (Table IV).

Table IV. Research quality assessment

	Working Context (% VI+I)	Personal Perspective (% VI+I)	Dissonance (% WC – PP)
Quantity of publications	90	74	16
External fund raising	84.1	93.6	-9.5
Dissemination in English	79.5	90.2	-10.7
Inter/national impact	77.6	93.8	-16.2
Scientific rigor	70.6	98.9	-28.3
Quantitative research	65.0	64.2	0.8
Discipline-based research	63.4	78.9	-15.5
Qualitative research	49.7	81.1	-31.4
Social relevance	39.7	89.7	-50
Multi/interdisciplinary research	42.6	89.2	-46.6
Local impact	27.4	73.7	-46.3
Dissemination in Portuguese	22.8	69.9	-47.1
Dissemination in other languages	11.5	38.8	-27.3

VI: Very Important I: Important IA: Institutional Assessment PP: Personal Perspective

Perceived and ideal values tend to converge in aspects that have been emphasized as indicators of excellence in external assessments and fund allocation policies—quantity of publications, fund raising, quantitative and discipline-based research, inter/national impact, and publishing in English. However, dissonance increases (ranging from -31.4% to -50%) as to the importance of qualitative and multi/interdisciplinary research, the local impact and social relevance of research, and dissemination in the native language. Many academics appear to wish that these aspects were more valued, and in fact there has been controversy about the way research policies have disregarded them. Yet, their average level of satisfaction with assessment results is not low (6.03/ SD=1.92) and most of them feel that those results have an impact on their research practices. Again, we might ask: Do their research practices conform to or move beyond the perceived dominant criteria?

The results presented so far indicate that although most respondents are moderately satisfied with their own teaching and research, their ideal perspectives on the quality of both and on the role of teaching in career advancement diverge significantly from perceived demands, and there seems to be a predisposition to embrace a more holistic understanding of academic work.

The tension between real and ideal emerged in the interviews. In coping with “the rules of the game”, attitudes vary from conformity to resistance, but the consequences of swimming with or against the tide are always assumed:

(...) I don't think I should measure what I deserve [in terms of career promotion] according to the [teaching] work I did, or my investment, or my dedication only, because if I do not have a product... The institutional culture is as it is, I knew it was like that and so I knew the rules of the game... (I9).

The pressure [from institutional demands] is enormous. The pressure is enormous. I have been very affected by that pressure. Now I realize that in order to survive the best thing is... I mean... to understand the rules of the game... but not let myself be totally conditioned by them, and so what I try to do is a bit like... walking between the rain drops, you see? (...) Sometimes I do not agree with demands and I have to take a stand and say I'm against them, but I never put myself in the position of not fulfilling minimum obligations and rules. (I2).

When the interviews were conducted, a new internal system for assessing faculty productivity in all areas of academic work was being devised, and while the interviewees felt that they would probably have to adjust to that system, they also feared its consequences on their personal value systems and the relevance of their work. The following account comes from a teacher trainer who had been integrating service and research by visiting schools and working with schoolteachers:

(...) [the new evaluation system] may oblige me to be more rational, stop doing what I see as a priority for the university and society, and think about what is a priority for keeping my job. That's life... (...) For example, it will no longer make sense to visit thirty schools as I did last year... It would rather make more sense to follow the six schools I am now working with in teacher education (...). Of course it makes sense to me (...) as a social response [to the needs of schools] but it doesn't make sense in terms of research benefits. (I5).

Although no one denied the value of research and publication, what is personally relevant may not count much according to dominant policies:

The publication of books is not valued. Well, I don't care. If studies are developed by me or with my collaboration, and they cannot be published as articles abroad, which is now the band-wagon, I don't worry a bit... I am about to publish a book. I know it counts for nothing but I don't care because it's a personal imperative to publish this book, which will reach a lot of people. It counts for nothing in my career, not even in our research unit or the research group I belong to, but that's no reason why I shouldn't publish it. (I1).

Actually, the social relevance of mainstream research is called into question:

I am not sure that the research we do here in our college contributes in some way to the collective good and to a better, more just society where people can understand one another... that is, a humanist society... (I4)

Values incongruence pervades academics' experience of teaching and research. This is also true, as we will see next, of working climate, relationships, and leadership.

3.2 Working climate, relationships, and leadership: what is (not) valued

Average satisfaction with the working climate and relationships in working contexts is not high (5.69/ SD=2.08) and negative dissonance was found especially as regards a democratic culture of respect, professional motivation and a sense of job security (Table V).

Table V. Climate and relationships

	Working Context (% VP+P)	Personal Perspective (% VI+I)	Dissonance (% WC – PP)
Autonomy in research	77.1	97.2	-20.1
Respect for faculty rights	58.4	96.8	-38.4
Autonomy in teaching	53.1	92.6	-39.5
Sense of job security	50.5	94.8	-44.3
Open communication and well-being	48.1	99.3	-51.2
Democratic practices	43.1	94.0	-50.9
Motivation/satisfaction at work	42.1	97.9	-55.8
Peer collaboration/support	38.4	99.7	-61.3
Interest in/respect for people's work	38.0	97.9	-59.9
Justice in career decisions	37.9	97.2	-59.3
Reliable appeal processes	27.5	91.1	-63.6

VP: Very Present I: Present VI: Very Important I: Important WC: Working Context PP: Personal Perspective

Interviewees also took a critical stance towards their working environments and discontent was often voiced. When reporting on positive and negative episodes from experience, they focused on issues of support, mutual respect, justice and integrity and their impact on self-esteem, morale and proactiveness. In some cases, the effects of negative experiences are devastating. One of the interviewees, after being accused of seeking attention because s/he organized an event for the department, felt that s/he had been disrespected both personally and professionally, and decided to assume “the attitude of being like a shadow at work”:

(...) the situation was discussed in my department when I was not there, and I never had a word from the person who caused this mess, and I did not know what had happened... I never had a say in the matter, before, during or afterwards. (...) At the time, it made me... I was going mad. After that I realized that any personal initiative for my students, the department or myself, even with the best of intentions, can be misinterpreted in unimaginable ways. So from then on I assumed the attitude of being like a shadow at work. (18)

Not feeling valued by peers may lead to isolation and disengagement, which hinders the achievement of collective institutional goals (Gappa *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, workplace environments characterized by poor communication and low participation in decision-making may foster a climate of mistrust and unspoken fear, leading to conformity, discontent and disempowerment:

(...) there are many situations in which I keep silent and many people keep silent because they know that if they don't keep silent they will have problems. If they use their freedom of thought they will probably have some problems. (14)

In the department meetings I feel that most people take an acquiescent position, thinking: “What does the head of the department think? I will vote in accord with

that"... instead of assuming a clear position, and trusting the head of department, and thinking that if they assume a position that is contrary to his, they will not suffer any retaliation for it. I think people live in that fear. (I7)

In my college (...) everything is done behind scenes. (...) there is a very small group of people who are really in charge and make decisions for others, and there is nothing you can do about it. (...) Obviously, when those decisions have to do with you, it makes you feel down. But you cannot talk about it because if you talk it will get to the director. So, in a way there is a climate of... I do not want to use the term fear, but there is not a climate of openness, dialogue, clarification of doubts... Decisions are often made without taking into consideration the people in question... and this causes some discomfort and discontent. (I6)

The above accounts draw our attention to leadership, since it influences the working atmosphere. Actually, the survey results indicate that satisfaction with leadership is quite low (4.88/ SD=2,13) and a significant negative mismatch is observed between what academics experience and value, particularly as regards collegiality and equity (Table VI). These aspects have been threatened by a growing managerial type of governance that entails the centralization of political and strategic power (see Santiago and Carvalho 2012), even though the stated mission of the university advocates freedom of thought, plurality of ideas, humanism, creativity, innovation, sustainable development, well-being, and solidarity. When asked about whether that mission is reflected in practice, most interviewees showed signs of scepticism and disbelief. A schism between rhetoric and reality, as well as between "academic managers" (they) and "managed academics" (we), surfaced in their discourse (cf. Winter, 2009).

Table VI. Leadership qualities

	Working Context (% VP+P)	Personal Perspective (% VI+I)	Dissonance (% WC – PP)
Knowledge of the institution	83.3	95.3	-12
Respect for institutional tradition	78.3	59.9	18.4
Ability to negotiate interests	55.4	88.1	-32.7
Ability to manage resources	52.7	95.6	-42.9
Ability to make decisions	48.4	98.2	-32.8
Moral and intellectual integrity	48.4	97.8	-49.4
Strategic vision of the future	45.5	98.9	-43.4
Critical mind	43.9	97.2	-53.3
Conflict management	39.5	96.7	-57.2
Sense of justice	39.2	99	-59.8
Defending collective interests	39	97.5	-56.5
Democratic spirit	37	95.3	-58.3
Promoting collective engagement	29.8	94.6	-64.8

VP: Very Present I: Present VI: Very Important I: Important WC: Working Context PP: Personal Perspective

Personal commitment to collective welfare was also pointed out as crucial. By taking a critical stance towards negative facets of the institutional culture, academics can become cultural drivers and leaders of institutional change, which means that "the interface between leadership and ownership is a critical one" (Gordon, 2010, p. 101):

People need to have some sense of agency, to realize that they have some

responsibility for changing the working climate, and I think people often tend to say “poor me”, “I’m the victim”, “I’m a just a poor guy in the middle of all this”, and they do not assume the responsibility they have, right? (...) I believe that constraints should raise our awareness and our ability to design our own paths, to know where we can go, and if we have a rock in the way we should pull it aside or go around it. I think there are conditions in which to enact the mission. (I3)

Dealing with conflicting rationalities may, however, induce a sense of disempowerment and create the need to be told what (not) to do, which will reinforce the culture that is criticized for being alien to one’s aspirations and efforts. The interviewee who claimed that publishing a book that counts for nothing was a personal imperative also stated the following:

We have always been very autonomous. There was never anyone telling us what to do and perhaps that’s one of the problems. (...) In this college there was never a policy, a policy of growth or criteria towards this or that area, either in teaching or research. (I1)

Overall, this second set of findings suggests that there is a person-organization misfit as regards representations of working climate, relationships and leadership. Working contexts appear to suppress rather than encourage dissent, open communication and the negotiation of perspectives, which reinforces the need for further research into life experience on campus as a way to open up the road for reflection and debate towards a culture of respect for diversity. What seems to constrain the development of institutional self-inquiry also justifies its potential relevance.

IV. Conclusions and implications

Rather than presenting a holographic view of the institutional culture, academics’ representations of life on campus reveal that personal values differ significantly from perceived institutional values as regards teaching, research, working climate, relationships, and leadership. This is evident in the survey data and in interview accounts where interviewees present “narratives of constraint” but also “narratives of growth” as they struggle for what makes their work meaningful (O’Meara et al., 2008). Discontent seems to co-exist with efforts to pursue one’s cherished values while realizing that institutional priorities may run counter to ideals. This duality seems important to understand how academics operate in complex settings under pressure, and attention must be paid to whether and how dissent can be integrated into a dialogical framework that accomodates and promotes diversity (Gordon, 2010). Values incongruence may create “identity schisms” (Winter, 2009) as well as “a latent tendency [of institutions] to move in diverse directions and sometimes fall apart” (Morgan, 2006, p. 203). Because rationality is always interest based and political, competing rationalities cannot be ignored if we are to understand how institutions develop.

Rather than suppressing diversity and favoring dogma, institutions probably need to acknowledge and explore dissonance as a potential source of energy requiring pluralist, learning-oriented management, enacted by leaders who have “a keen ability to be aware of conflict-prone areas, to read the latent tendencies and pressures beneath the surface actions of organizational life, and to initiate appropriate responses” (Morgan, 2006, p. 198-199). Protecting the integrity of

academic work by enhancing more inclusive management practices (Kenny, 2009), as well as acknowledging different forms of scholarship and recognizing the need for differentiated career paths, would promote “a multi-vocal institutional identity” (Winter, 2009, p. 128) and allow faculty to work “more on a dialogical frame than on a confrontational frame” (Bergquist and Pawlak 2008, p. 238). This implies some resistance to managerial modes of governance where collegiality and professional autonomy are neutralized and where institutional goals and strategies are defined within a narrow view of productivity and quality.

Billot (2010) argues that nowadays there is a fine line between academic and institutional identity, meaning that staff need to be flexible and adapt to new demands by “grappling with a fluid identity” (p. 718) rather than hanging on to “imagined identities” based on past values that are not aligned with real circumstances, like collegiality, collaborative management and academic freedom (p. 712). In fact, research seems to indicate that “while there are increasing social demands being placed on higher education there remains a strong commitment to autonomy, independence and academic freedom, which quality assurance procedures sometimes rub up against” (Harvey and Williams, 2010, p. 107). Should we then abandon “old” values? In exchange for what?

Whatever our answer is, self-renewing academics are value-driven and future-oriented. Ideal perspectives, like those we found in our study, far from being exclusively based on the past (which was not idyllic anyway!), might portray an imagined future and fuel transformation. This seems particularly important if we want to reframe higher education purposes with reference to its social usefulness for serving the common good in the best interests of humanity (Barnett and Maxwell 2008; Henkel, 2007). Can higher education be socially useful if academics’ aspirations are overlooked and life on campus becomes socially degraded?

Going back to the question posed by Schostak and Schostak (2008, p. 250)—What sort of community is desired?—our study reveals conflicting views and perhaps irresolvable tensions as regards life in academe. Acknowledging the importance of dissonance may be the first step towards empowering faculty to negotiate understandings of what their community is and might be. This means that institution-specific inquiry into academic experience should not only be expanded but also become part of the strategic (re)definition of institutional growth policies.

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