

Information behaviour during transitions and liminal periods: Experiences of inclusion and exclusion

Introduction

Transitions are inherently times of upheaval. Whether positive or negative, anticipated or unanticipated, or simply a matter of getting older, a transition is a process of moving from a point of stability to a time of disruption back to a stable point. Between these stable points, change and adaption takes place. An inherent aspect of transition is the shift from inclusion to exclusion to inclusion in a different state. An added challenge is to undergo a transition in a precarious context. Modern universities employ neoliberal principles that regard universities as corporations, which is a concern to many academics (e.g., Chomsky, 2015; Côté and Allahar, 2011; Giroux, 2007; Kimber and Ehrich, 2015). Neoliberalism in higher education entails decreased government funding, increased pressure for finding external income sources, increased managerialism, increased workloads, and increased casualisation. As academia moves toward “economic rationalism, commercialisation, managerialism, corporate governance” (Hil, 2012, p. 7), permanent employment becomes more rare, short-term contracts become the norm, and the task of breaking into academia becomes more challenging. This paper will explore the information behaviour of early career academics as they transition from doctoral students to their first full-time, continuing position and examine how this privileged, yet marginalised, group undergoes inclusion and exclusion from the academy.

Literature Review

Transitions

Transition, as a commonly used term, often remains undefined in research. A well-developed definition is that it is “a process of convoluted passage during which people redefine their sense of self and redevelop self-agency in response to disruptive life events” (Kralik, Visentin, & van Loon, 2006, p. 321). Transitions can be the result of personal changes (life cycle), situational changes (circumstances in personal or professional life), or environmental changes (circumstances in the social or organisational context) (Schumacher & Meleis, 1994). Diverse and often experienced in personal ways, the transitional process is not prescriptive. However, there are two universal properties of transitions: process and change (Schumacher & Meleis, 1994). Change is a part of all transitions, but not all change is transitional (Meleis et al., 2000). This change includes a loss of security and familiar reference points, as environmental resources are no longer available or adequate to meet new needs (Schumacher & Meleis, 1994).

Liminality

Related to transition is the concept of liminality. Coming from the Latin for “threshold,” liminality was eloquently, and famously, described by Turner (1967/1987) as a state of being “betwixt and between.” Turner used Van Gennep’s phases of transition found in rites of passage: separation (disconnection from a fixed point or state), margin (state of ambiguity with few features of the preceding or upcoming states), and aggregation (completion of the passage and restoration of a state of stability). To Turner, stable states are structural with rights and obligations. Therefore, the liminal state is ‘interstructural’ and individuals within this state are ‘antistructural,’ bonded to those who share an interstructural space and marginalised by those in a structured state (Davis, 2008). The liminal period is also one in which “the reality of living in a new society becomes manifest as an individual begins to deal with the tedious activities of daily living” (Baird, 2012, p. 258). Liminality highlights that a transition does not end once an event has taken place. It is by focusing on liminal spaces, “places and moments of change and transformation that one can see most clearly the processes of domination and resistance, of inclusion and exclusion, and of marginalization and socialization” (Davis, 2008, p. 486).

Information behaviour during transitions

While transitions are infrequently the focus on information behaviour research, studies examining individuals and groups undergoing transitions have been undertaken. This includes research such as McKenzie’s (2003) examination of the information practices of women pregnant with twins, providing a model for information practices; Westbrook’s (2009) work on the information needs of survivors of intimate partner violence, finding that these needs shift in during their transition; and much of the research into the information behaviour and practices of migrants and refugees (e.g., Caidi & Allard, 2005; Caidi, Allard, & Quirke, 2010; Kennan, Lloyd, Qauuym, & Thompson, 2011; Lloyd, Lipu, & Kennan, 2010; Lloyd Kennan, Thompson, & Qayyum, 2013). Caidi and Allard (2005) found newcomers’ lack of access to information prohibited their participation in important and everyday activities, preventing their integration into society. Lloyd and colleagues (2010) link issues of information literacy, information poverty, and social exclusion for migrants and refugees. Lloyd’s (2017) recent work examining refugee and migrants’ information landscapes conceptualises them as “fractured,” highlighting ideas such as liminality and integration as important to understanding experiences. While information behaviour research on transitions is still developing, this focus is fruitful to gain richer understandings of the individuals’ information experiences.

Research Objectives and Questions

This reports on part of doctoral research into the information behaviour of early career academics (ECAs) as they transition from doctoral studies into full-time continuing

academic positions. The aim of this research was to examine the informational experiences of ECAs. To guide this research, the following questions were asked:

- What is the information behaviour of ECAs as they transition to become a part of new social contexts?
- How does the social environment of academe affect ECAs' information behaviour?

Methodology and Methods

Participants for this qualitative study were 20 ECAs, 10 from Canada and 10 from Australia, in disciplines within the humanities, arts, or social sciences. This research employed constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) methodology to examine the information behaviour of ECAs as they transitioned into their first full-time, continuing academic position. Constructivist grounded theory provides both a framework for systematic data collection and analysis, as well as being the result of the data analysis – that is, the theory developed. Data collection took place over 5-7 months, beginning and ending with two in-depth interviews and “check-ins” in between. Check-ins are modified journal entries or interviews used to maintain regular contact and rapport, as well as to collect salient experiences as they occur. Data analysis took place through inductive coding. Data were coded twice using initial line-by-line coding, followed by focused coding. Constant comparison was used to determine the major themes and grounded theory.

Findings

Exclusion in precarity

And even though I was being really successful and those sorts of things, I think there was just a lot of uncertainty and the notion of where am I going to get a job? Am I going to get a job? Should I go academic or take an applied job? Those were all really difficult things. And it's only after a year and a half of being done that I'm coming out of that fog, ...

-“Jesse,” (Canada, social sciences)

Using the concept of liminality can aid in understanding transitions by focusing on issues of both belonging and not belonging (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009). This is demonstrated by Jesse’s quote. Despite being successful as a doctoral student, he experienced uncertainty about his future and where he belonged; this experience lasted well into his first academic position. Membership in the academy largely depends on the position one occupies. Obtaining one’s doctorate but not obtaining employment means being excluded from academia; obtaining a casual or short-term position only allows temporary access. Many participants discussed the precarity within academia, having previously worked casually. Lack of employment or short-term employment left some participants marginalised, “structurally invisible” (Turner, 1967/1987, p. 6), and excluded from aspects of academic life. As outsiders they were not privy to the same information as insiders (i.e., tenured

academics), excluded from situations where information is shared, such as orientation sessions and departmental meetings. Even in their current permanent positions, participants discussed the precarity of their situations, having not yet obtained tenure. So while precarity increases ECAs' information needs (ECAs require a lot of information when both looking for and then starting a new position), they do not have the same access to information. Information is a form of power, as well as a signal of status within a group. While a lack of information may not be intentional, it nonetheless excludes marginalised individuals.

Inclusion through insider information

And [colleagues] can give me, you know, "Oh don't bother with that, just do this," they sort of get to the meat of it. And I would say that my colleagues actually went beyond just informational, they actually made space, and I think that was probably the best the way to sort of visualise, they made space for me in their classrooms and I think that's something that you can't get from a website or from theory or literature.

-“Evelyn,” (Canada, social sciences)

ECAs overwhelmingly preferred getting information from colleagues over documents, a finding in agreement with previous research (Cross & Sproull, 2004; Miller, 2015). The reasons for ECAs' preference included timeliness, ease of access, convenience, and completeness of answers. Several participants stated that colleagues could provide information that documents could not. This included practical day-to-day information, as well as the “full story” behind the documents and how things are “actually” done in the department. The recognition of the difference between policy and practice was a key reason for choosing to consult colleagues. ECAs developed collegial relationships with more senior members of their departments, gaining insider information as a result of the information sharing that took place. To obtain workplace information, individuals form and cultivate “information relationships” (Cross & Sproull, 2004), which create the feeling of safety and facilitate information sharing. But as Evelyn's above quote demonstrates, what can start out as sharing insider information can extend into other forms of social interaction and inclusion. The social aspect to ECAs' information behaviour was key, as establishing collegial relationships fosters information exchange and allows for the sharing of insider information.

Understanding inclusion through comparison

I think I was surprised by the confidence I felt in response to people's, the other staff, my colleagues' greater openness and recognition of [me] getting the position and joining the staff. So that took me by surprise. In hindsight, it made a lot of sense, and in hindsight actually it makes me feel like the position of the casual academic is actually even harder than they realise.

-“Adam,” (Australia, humanities)

ECAs compared their experiences as doctoral students and casual academics to their current experiences. Comparing situations before and after a transition is one way to situate oneself and make sense of experiences (Messias, 2002). This comparison connotes moving back and forth between the known and the unknown. To make sense of their experiences, individuals relive and integrate the past, present, and future (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009). In his quote above, Adam compares his colleagues’ actions and his own reactions to better understand his experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Several participants described the sense of belonging they felt in their new role as ECAs, facilitated in part through a new title, new responsibilities, and a change in treatment from other academics. Their sense of belonging was developed by using the information they had about their situation to compare and contrast it to their previous situation. Transitions involve separation from the previous context, liminality, and integration into a new context (Baird, 2012). Comparison was an important way for ECAs’ to determine their sense of belonging within their departments and the academy.

Conclusions

While academics are rarely thought of as marginalised, ECAs transitioning into academia frequently face issues of inclusion and exclusion. They experience exclusion through the precarity of their positions and, as a result, a lack of workplace information. However, these academics seek to overcome these issues through the creation of collegial relationships, which allows them to gather insider information. They develop a sense of belonging within academia by using information to compare and contrast their experiences. The use of the concepts of transitions and liminality leads to a richer understanding of the information behaviour of ECAs undergoing life changes.

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