The Health of Academic Psychology

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**Introduction**

For those starting out in academia, it is an arduous climb, often with uncertain perspective; a career ladder moving in the wind, with few rungs, dangling from a helicopter being piloted by non-academic managers. And from this precarious position, it is expected you offer students the best learning environment.

Self-care is an important ethical duty, and a central argument of this article is that we may be neglecting it in academia. For psychologists, it is a specific ethical responsibility as outlined by the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI), (4.1.1. PSI Code of Ethics, 2011). In addition, and linked to promoting 'integrity in the science, teaching and practice of psychology,' we should 'seek emotional support and/or supervision from colleagues when feeling stressed or vulnerable' (4.1.2. PSI Code of Ethics, 2011, p. 13).

Importantly, as psychologists we have a responsibility to 'speak out if the policies, practices or regulations of the organisation within which we work seriously ignore or oppose any of the principles of this Code of Professional Ethics' (3.1.9, PSI Code of Ethics, 2011). Well? Will you speak out? Because as I propose below, the third-level sector is falling foul of these principles. So this is a plea; a plea for some tangible emotional support from colleagues; a plea for researchers to investigate academics' mental health in Ireland; and for support from our governing body to protect the integrity of the psychology courses they accredit and the mental health of the lecturers who deliver these courses.

**Work demands and mental health**

The pressured and precarious nature of academic life is growing ever more stressful and anxiety-producing (Berg, Huijbers & Larsen, n.d.). The short, fixed-term lecturing contract has become the new norm in the tertiary sector (Academia now appears incompatible with family life, 2016; Kaplan, 2010) and Ireland is no exception (McGuire, 2015; 2017). The Teachers' Union of Ireland labelled this casualisation a crisis (TU, 2015) and last year 4,000 lecturers from the Institutes of Technology engaged in a one-day strike to protest underfunding, understaffing and precarious employment (Wall, 2016, para. 8). In her excellent article on precarity in the academic profession, Ivancheva (2015) roundly criticises the profession's silence on this casualisation crisis, noting that universities 'have rather sought ways to justify new levels of exploitation by the acknowledgement that that is how 'the system works' (p. 43).

This is only part of a broader mental health crisis. In the dearth of research on the issue, organisational psychologist Gail Kinman is a consistent shining light (Kinman, 1998, 2008, 2010, 2014). Figure 1, reproduced with permission from Kinman (2014), shows the caseness rates (clinical level of mental disorder as measured by the General Health Questionnaire) found for UK and Australian academics (presented in Kinman, Jones & Kinman, 2006) compared with those obtained from other occupational groups and community samples. As a further comparison, general working population averages have been found at 22% in the UK (British Household Panel Survey, as cited by Kinman, 2014), and 23% in the USA (Bollmann, Kant, Kasl, Beurskens, van den Brandt, 2002

In 2014, a post on the Guardian Higher Education Network blog warned of a "culture of acceptance around mental health issues in academia" (Anonymous Academic, 2014). Citing a survey of 14,000 university employees by Kinman and Wray (2013), the author noted that there is a particular problem of stress in academia due to ‘heavy workloads, a long hours culture and conflicting management demands.’ Despite numerous indications of a mental health crisis in academia (e.g., by Kinman) and some focus in the media, for example, Mental Health: The University in Crisis (The Guardian, n.d.), the issue has failed to gain traction with psychologists (Woods, 2010; Wilcox, 2014). Notable exceptions in Ireland are studies by Hogan, Hogan and Hodgins (2016) on workaholism in Irish academia and Hogan, Hodgins, Kinman and Bunting (2015) on working hours and psychological strain in academics. Their 2015 paper on working hours and psychological strain in academics provides evidence of a long-hours culture in Irish academia with 84% of the academics surveyed working over 40 hours per week (18% reporting 60+ hours). Furthermore, the authors present a structural model of potential antecedents of that culture. The model attempts to separate out gender, organisational and individual factors related to work hours and while some of the factors are not supported in the paper, the authors do note sampling and measurement limitations. Importantly, they acknowledge:

"The challenge for universities moving forward is to design work systems and processes that maintain the agility and resilience of both individual workers and the university as a whole in the face of both internal and external pressures." (p. 15)

This is not just a challenge for universities. The organisational factors that influence working hours should be of concern to the governing bodies in psychology, as according to Hogan et al. (2014) working hours influence work-life conflict, which in turn influences psychological strain. Recently, the President of the British Psychological Society (BPS) acknowledged the mental health implications of precarity and inequality in the workplace and recognised the role for psychologists. ‘For us as psychologists, the evident consequences of social injustice justify a call for action.’ (Kinderman, 2017, para. 9). But what action? Despite this recognition, and the many indications of a decline in working conditions and mental health in academia, the governing bodies that oversee standards in the teaching of psychology in Ireland (PSI) and the UK (BPS) have not intervened to improve working
conditions in this area. Traditionally where psychologists do intervene, it tends to be at the level of the person rather than at the level of the system (Lating, Barnett & Horowitz, as cited by Cohen, Lee & McIvor, 2012, p. 154), with for example, the deployment of coping strategies or stress management.

The march of neoliberalism

An intervention would be most welcome in tackling one of the main contributors to this atmosphere of stress and anxiety – i.e. the increasing managerialism in, and neoliberal approach to, education (McGuire, 2017). The growing precariousness in the sector has been highlighted by Third-level Workplace Watch (https://www.facebook.com/ThirdLevelWorkplaceWatch). Low paid adjunct and assistant lecturing positions could be seen as breaching the requirement to ‘compensate others justly for the use of their time, energy, and intelligence’ (4.2.8 PSI Code of Ethics, 2011, p. 14). While the PSI does not, cannot and should not set the pay for lecturers, they do accredit the courses in these institutions; therefore, it is suggested that how these institutions treat their staff (including remuneration) should matter. And while pay might be considered the vulgar end of the struggle against neoliberalism, working conditions and institutional support are obvious factors that have an impact on the student (Clarke, Kenny & Luxley, 2015; June, 2012). Appealing for staff and student support, Third-level Workplace Watch emphasise ‘our working conditions are your learning conditions’. The quality and integrity of our psychology courses is of paramount importance to PSI and resource provision including staff requirements are outlined in the guidelines on the accreditation of courses leading to a first qualification in psychology (PSI, 2004, Section 2.6). But how has neoliberalism impacted on the working conditions of lecturers? Ölsen and Peters (2005) describe a change from ‘the traditional professional culture of open intellectual enquiry and debate’ to ‘an institutional stress on performativity… strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance measures and academic audits’ (p. 313). The various roles demanded of lecturers, from educators, to researchers, to administrators, to student counsellors, to marketers, to entrepreneurs have led Shore (2010) to label the performativity university as ‘schizophrenic’, in the layperson’s sense/misuse of the word. Psychology lecturers, like all lecturers, increasingly need to compromise academic freedom and integrity for the commercialisation and commoditisation of education (do Mar Pereira, 2015; Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015). In her article ‘Breaking the silence’, Gill (2010) lists the feelings of the modern academic: ‘exhaustion, stress, overload, insomnia, anxiety, shame, aggression, hurt, guilt and feelings of out-of-placeness, fraudulence and fear of exposure’ (p. 228). Gill goes on to note that, “…these affective embodied experiences, occupy a strange position in relation to questions of secrecy and silence. They are at once ordinary and everyday, yet at the same time remain largely secret and silenced in the public spaces of the academy. They are spoken in a different, less privileged register: they are the stuff of the chat in the corridor, coffee break conversations and intimate exchanges between friends, but not, it would seem, the keynote speech or the journal publication or even the departmental meeting. For all the interest in reflexivity in recent decades, the experiences of academics have somehow largely escaped critical attention.” (p. 228)

We have reached a level of seriously dark humour when we find ourselves smiling at the recognition of our own misfortune! ‘Grin and bear it’ seems a fitting mantra for modern academic stoicism. Could this be a type of psychologist’s fallacy of taking these feelings as reality that prevents us from attempting to protest our working conditions?

Psychologists should be leading the debate on university reform, on academic freedom, on the provision of courses that provide socially and not just economically useful citizens. With growing regulatory systems and metrics (Ball, 2003; Burrows, 2012; Strathern, 2000), we have allowed the philosophy of managerialism and performance management enter the university (Kallio, Kallio, Tenari & Hyvönen, 2015). We should be providing evidence and expertise in the debate on the performative university rather than allowing an ideology to shape the future of the teaching profession. As Burrows (2012) states, ‘we know this; yet somehow we feel unable to reassess ourselves’ (p. 355).

As psychologists we should be best placed to puncture this collective learned helplessness. The ‘McDonaldization’ of higher education (Parker & Jary, 1995) has been progressing unabated for two decades so why should we expect change if we do not insist on it? As a discipline, we have in the PSI a governing body that can insist on it.

In his highly critical and sardonic article ‘The slow death of the university’, Prof Terry Eagleton (2015) advises academics to leave academia to best benefit the university, arguing they should join a circus, hence saving their financial masters a much grudged salary and allowing the bureaucrats to spread out their work among an already overburdened professoriate’ (para. 14). As university management reduce the salaries and increase the workload of already overloaded departments, could the PSI intervene in this race to the bottom? By expanding the criteria for course accreditation to support staff development; protect permanency, progression and salaries, and heavily discourage precarious contracts the PSI might better encourage the requirement of ‘just compensation’ (4.2.8). They could also intervene by petitioning the government to move on strengthening employment law to protect workers and move towards ending casualisation practices.

The need for advocacy

In 2015, there was dismay and disillusionment among psychology graduates after assistant psychologist posts were advertised through JobBridge (see Korpos, 2015), leaving ‘aspiring graduates feeling undervalued’ (para. 20).

Last year, Jack Horgan-Jones (Sunday Business Post), listed all companies who have used JobBridge (Horgan-Jones, 2016) and using this list, Prof Brian Lucey assessed the use of the scheme in higher education (Lucey, 2016). A search of Lucey’s list of 628 posts for academic psychology positions returns 30 examples (from research psychologist, research officer in psychology, and psychologist). This number does not include departmental and lab support staff. Unions across employment sectors have argued that this scheme displaces jobs and ‘high-risk concerns’ were raised in a recent internal audit of the scheme, which noted that ‘It is not possible to verify whether or not the internship is displacing a potential job vacancy’ (RTE News, 2016). Even if this type of internship provided a quid pro quo by way of experience, it has been suggested internships advantage students
who can afford to work for low or no pay, therefore making professions elitist (UK Social Mobility Commission as reported by Boffey, 2016).

So it was disappointing that in the June 2016 issue of The Irish Psychologist, guidelines (not intervention nor advocacy) were offered to current and aspiring assistant psychologists. While the Guidelines for the Employment of Assistant Psychologists in Ireland (2014) represent progress in regulating the position of assistant psychologist within the HSE they fall short of what would be needed to protect graduates in that sector, and would be similarly inadequate in the teaching field unless linked to accreditation. Nevertheless, if the possibility for similar guidelines in the university sector exists, it should be pursued, as a first step. But the PSI can and should take a strong position on the proper recognition of psychology in Ireland, beyond guidelines. We need advocacy for psychology and psychologists (Cohen, Lee & Mcilwraith, 2012; DeLeon, Loftis, Ball & Sullivan, 2006). Evidence-based advocacy (see Friedlaender & Winston, 2004), like the stance taken during the Marriage Equality Debate (Psychological Society of Ireland President warns..., 2015) is needed to inform the public and move an issue onto the agenda of policy makers. With regards to that debate, Dr Paul D’Alton, then President of the PSI rightly cautioned against (misusing) psychological research to 'justify the unjust: treatment of minorities'. This is a general warning. A related corollary would be failing to use psychological research to condemn unjust treatment. So the failure of psychology to take an advocacy position condemning the treatment of workers and the undervaluing of graduates seems to be an example of omission bias. The PSI needs to take a strong, principled, evidence-based stance.

Protectionism is such a maligned word but in what has been called the 'Disappearing Phase' of Higher Education (Oireachtas Library and Research Service, 2014) and after a national newspaper report about 'exploitative employment practices at Irish third-level colleges, and the impact on learning' (McGuire, 2015), it is unfortunate that individual academics are left to fight for themselves and that a body like the PSI does not advocate on their behalf. In an environment of increased student numbers and lower state funding (McGuire, 2013), academics need protection, the teaching profession needs protection, and the university needs protection. But not as an end in itself but as a means to an end, as a critical third-level sector will fight for standards and protections across society and benefit social and economic development in many other ways (UNESCO, 1998; O’Carroll, Harmon & Farrell, 2006; Virgo, 2017).

The importance of a healthy third-level sector

Anyone who teaches students and/or cares about education knows that this is more than just protectionism for self-interest or personal enrichment, Richard Rorty (1999) eloquently explained 'why tenure and academic freedom are more than just trade union demands'.

'The temptation to suggest [that faculties can be ordered to a purpose] comes over administrators occasionally, as does the feeling that higher education is too important to be left to the professors. From an administrative point of view, the professors often seem self-indulgent and self-obsessed. They look like loose cannons, people whose habits of setting their own agendas needs to be curbed. But administrators sometimes forget that college students badly need to find themselves in a place in which people are not ordered to a purpose, in which loose cannons are free to roll about. The only point in having real live professors around instead of just computer terminals, videotapes and mimed lecture notes is that students need to have freedom enacted before their eyes by actual human beings. That is why tenure and academic freedom are more than just trade union demands. Teachers setting their own agendas — putting their individual, lovingly prepared specialties on display in the curricular cafeteria, without regard to any larger end, much less any institutional plan — is what non-vocational higher education is all about." (p. 125)

You could at this point argue that it is just academics and intellectuals that see the university in crisis and it is all fabrication and exaggeration. I would urge you to read the arguments of those scholars, before a Govean dismissal of their expert opinion. The university loses any moral authority as 'critic and conscience of society if we conspicuously allow precarity, mental illness and managerialism to rise unchecked within our own sector.

"If the university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as a guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some other regime or régime of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, and without us." (Morrison, as cited by Giroux, 2013)

Tom Morrison made that plea 16 years ago. This plea for help is not a new one, but it is becoming more urgent. Avoiding the negative connotations of protectionism, Defend the Irish University (http://defendtheuniversity.ie/) is an aptly named campaign making the same plea. I strongly encourage a visit to their website to read their educational charter and the debates. There is a crisis recognised by the academy. In maybe the most important point of their charter for action, Defend the Irish University (n.d.) states:

'In the current crisis of the Irish university system, we need to stress the importance of academic freedom over a fear-driven consensus, creativity over blind compliance and collegiality over managerialism.'

Conclusion

We need to act as a community of colleagues. And in accordance with our own code, practice self-care in delivering a quality service with integrity. And we cannot shy away from advocacy. Those of us in permanent positions need to show collegiality and not expect new entrants on precarious contracts to soak up hours of teaching and research for lesser pay and conditions. And as a community of psychologists, we should advocate for education, and not allow the university to be seen as a factory (Albhai-Brown, 2013; Foley, 2016; Giroux, 2002), caring only for the market-value of graduates, and fulfilling only the needs of employers. Students must not be seen as problems, products, or customers but valued as crucial partners in learning' (Mahatmya, Brown & Johnson, 2014, p. 33).

Last year was the centenary of Democracy and Education and we should take time to reflect on John Dewey's (1916) views on the profession. Are we graduating active citizens who can meet the needs of a changing society? And are we being adequately supported in such a task? Can we resist justifying the exploitation of our graduates by insisting the system does not have to work this way? Better working conditions, and learning conditions, will not just be handed to us. So,
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does modern academic psychology in Ireland have any philosophy of education it is willing to fight for?

References


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