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Becoming legitimate academic subjects: Doing meaningful work in research administration

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ABSTRACT

Professional staff in research administration work closely and collaboratively with academic staff. Examining research administrators' work provides a point of entry for investigating research culture in the Canadian Academy. We focus on interviews with 19 research administrators from 5 universities within a larger project on the social production of research. We draw on Davies' theorisation of subjectification to analyse the interviews as sites wherein a research administration subject is produced. We argue this subject is positioned as a legitimate subject through arrival stories characterised as incidental and/or as a strategic move away from precarity, through descriptions of their work as meaningful due to a proximity to research, and through care for academic staff. The research administrator subject strives to gain legitimacy through her proximity to research and through her strategic positioning as ally to academic staff.

KEYWORDS

Research administration; professional staff; higher education; Canada; subjectivity

Introduction

The expansion of professional staff positions to support increasingly complex systems of Canadian higher education (and increased expectations of research productivity) is often the subject of discussions in popular/trade publications. Some professional staff positions, also referred to as alt-ac positions in Canada, have overlap with, but are not, academic positions (e.g., academic development, research administration). These positions are framed as a possible solution to both the lack of permanent academic positions for junior scholars and increased workloads for established academic staff. However, scholarship focused on the lived experiences of professional staff in Canada is limited (Acker et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2021; Vander Kloet & Aspenlieder, 2013; Vered, 2019). The kinds of work professional staff do is only partially understood, and their increasing number is occasionally perceived as evidence of the neoliberal erosion of academic institutions and the autonomy of academic staff (Jones, 2013). The growth of professional staff in Canadian higher education brings with it negotiations of academic hierarchies. Both Vered (2019) and Smith et al. (2021) discuss how acutely aware Canadian

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professional staff are of established university staff hierarchies and how they navigate their interactions with academic staff who may perceive them as encroaching on their fields of expertise and control. Professional staff, landing between academic staff and other staff groups (e.g., clerical, facilities and maintenance, students) in institutional hierarchies, may position themselves with those higher in the hierarchy (to gain access to institutional power) or with other 'non-academic' staff in contestation of this hierarchy stemming from a desire flatten power differentials (Vered, 2019).

Scholarship from other national contexts highlights how professional staff work closely and collaboratively with academic staff and often identify with their academic colleagues and disciplinary cultures (Allen-Collinson, 2007; Allen-Collinson, 2009; Rytberg & Geschwind, 2017; Szekeres, 2004, 2006, 2011; Whitchurch, 2006, 2008a, 2008b). Similar to Vered (2019), scholars note how professional staff may seek to distance themselves from other staff by highlighting their education, credentials and work responsibilities (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Rytberg & Geschwind, 2017). Professional staff, in areas such as research administration or academic development often have doctorates, have overlapping duties with academic staff and feel a sense of belonging in the academy (Green & Little, 2016; Knight & Lightowler, 2010; Land, 2004). Professional staff appear to occupy a place described by Whitchurch (2008b) as a 'thirdspace': a space between academic and non-academic positions suggesting a porosity in the boundary between academic/non-academic work (see also Little & Green, 2012). Canadian scholarship on professional staff, as a relatively new field, references and situates itself within international scholarship, but there is a desire to bring the focus to shifting local institutional arrangements. Smith et al. (2021) point specifically to how the presence of third space professionals necessitates a rethinking of the organisation of work and power relations in the Canadian Academy.

Our research draws on interviews with professional staff working in research administration in Canadian higher education. Their experiences provide a lens through which to examine professional and academic staff relationships, and to explore the positioning of professional staff in the academy. We engage with two questions:

- (1) How, and in what ways, are professional staff in research administration positioned in the academy through their narration of past and present work?
- (2) How do professional staff in research administration reference and define themselves through their working relationships with academic staff?

This article is part of a larger project on the social production of social science research in Canada that includes interviews with academic staff (who focus on social justice in their research) and professional staff in research administration (herein, research administrators).

Methods

Our analysis draws on interviews with 19 research administrators at five Canadian universities. Participants were identified through institutional websites, networks, and referrals. Approval was secured from research ethics boards at all participants' and researchers' universities and participants provided written informed consent. Semi-

structured interviews lasting 75–90 minutes were then carried out by academic staff on our research team. Interview questions covered academic and career histories, job responsibilities, research culture within academic institutions, working with academic staff, and the research policy landscape. Participants in the study can be understood as a combination of ‘third-space or blended professionals’ and ‘superadministrators’ (Poli, 2018, p. 8), that is, some work directly with academic staff ($n = 11$) and others serve as managers of research offices or centres ($n = 8$) in their universities. Participants were disproportionately women ($n = 14$); all of the men in the study worked in central units in management positions. Approximately half of participants have completed PhDs, with most others having Masters degrees. Eight participants work in local units (e.g., faculties or institutes) and eleven participants work in central units or offices. To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms are used and details about specifics of participants’ workplaces (e.g., type of institutions) or titles/roles (e.g., director, manager, consultant) are not included. Most participants worked in small teams (2–3 colleagues) ($n = 9$) or alone ($n = 4$), while a few worked in medium (4–7 colleagues) ($n = 2$) or large teams (7+ colleagues) ($n = 3$). Many participants had substantial experience in their roles. 10 participants had worked between 10–15 years in research administration and two participants for more than 15 years. A smaller number had worked 5–10 years ($n = 4$) or fewer than five years ($n = 3$). 11 of participants found their way to their roles through some aspect of institutional reorganisations or applied for existing roles, while eight applied for or transitioned into new roles and were thus the first to hold their position. Participants came from a variety of work backgrounds (both within and outside the university) – these can be clustered into five thematic areas (research ethics, technology, postdoctoral or graduate research, contract research work (university or organisation) and other alt-ac employment in universities).

To examine the interviews, we draw on Davies (2000) theorisation of subjectification. She describes the process of subjectification as ‘a tension between simultaneously becoming a speaking, agentic subject and the corequisite for this, being subjected to the meanings inherent in the discourses through which one becomes a subject’ (Davies, 2000, p. 27). Davies, drawing on Butler, uses subjectification to consider how subjects in education are made knowable through submission and mastery. Davies’ work on subjectification supposes that the subject ‘might resist and agonise over those very powers that dominate and subject it, and at the same time, it also depends on them for its existence’ (Davies, 2006, p. 426). We look at the interviews to consider how a research administrator subject must simultaneously submit to existing power structures in the university (which organise professional staff and academic staff in a hierarchy), and demonstrate mastery of the kinds of acts that mark one as an intelligible academic subject.

The production of subjects in the academy has been considered through analyses of: becoming recognisable as an academic through supervision work (Petersen, 2007), the formation of doctoral candidate subjectivity for ‘non-traditional’ students (Petersen, 2014), and the demands of audit culture and the neoliberal university for academic subjects (Bansel et al., 2008; Davies & Bansel, 2010). In this scholarship, we observe that the focus is the discursive positioning, modes of conduct, or technologies of the self

(Foucault, 2003, p. 146) that are needed to be knowable as a particular kind of subject. Petersen describes this process, saying:

If you want to be recognised, by yourself or others, as an ‘academic’, and want to stay recognisable as a member of that particular discourse community, you cannot perform contextually unintelligible or inappropriate academicity. You would simply not be recognised as a legitimate subject. (Petersen, 2007, p. 478)

She goes on to explain that, within this process, we may both succeed or fail at getting it right. Our intelligibility as legitimate subjects in the academy is always in progress (Petersen, 2014). While scholars such as Petersen and Davies have focused on academic staff, we consider the production of a professional staff subject - the research administrator subject. Professional staff, or third space professionals, are presumed to straddle a boundary between staff roles (academic, administrative) and can prove disruptive to hierarchies within the academy. Part of this ‘in betweenness’ suggests the need to demonstrate some connection to academic work. We use the production of a professional staff subject to explore how this may be achieved – to consider what discourses are invoked to make claims to academicity for staff who are not in conventional academic positions.

Through the interviews, we can trace how research administrators are positioned as particular kinds of academic subjects. Positioning, or ‘the way in which people are constituted through and in terms of existing discourses’ (Davies, 2000, p. 70), occurs through multiple sites, including across the interviews as a collective. It is a ‘discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines’ (Davies, 2000, p. 91). We focus on the collective contribution that the interview narratives make to the production of a research administrator subject. The process of subject making will be incomplete; it is through the ongoing work of becoming knowable and recognisable that this subject seeks to secure a place of legitimacy in the academy.

In analysing the interviews, we consider what Petersen explains about narrating oneself, she writes ‘the stories that people can tell about their experiences are not entirely optional; in different contexts and settings there are stories and plot structures which pre-exist us and that people in a certain sense are compelled to engage with, even if it is to resist them’ (Petersen, 2014, p. 826). Participants in this study have a rich understanding of research methodologies, suggesting they understand rapport building in interviews, researcher-researched relations established through methods like interviews and, as a result, may be strategic in how they discuss their work as professional staff in the context of a scholarly research project (led by academic staff). We approach the interviews assuming that participants are always already positioned within existing discourses on work, identity and meaning in higher education – some of which they may trouble through their narratives.

In analysing the interviews as a site wherein discourse operates, it was necessary to return and reflect on different ways in which the research team has previously read and coded the transcripts. This return to the texts, prompted us to re-focus on the interviews as a place wherein some stories could be told (and others could not) and consider how particular discourses are framed as real or true in understanding research administration. Knowing the hierarchies that shape professional staff work in Canadian higher

education, we attended to how the interviews cannot take place outside of power relations (between professional staff and academic staff (who organise and shape this research project, for example)). We consider how multiple discourses work together to produce research administrator as an intelligible subject – often calling upon discourses from scholarship and popular/professional dialogues in the academy. We describe these discourses as ‘arrival’ (stories about coming to work in research administration), ‘meaningful work’ (stories pointing toward work that matters) and ‘working with academic staff’ (stories about who to do meaningful work with). Each discourse contributes to producing a particular subjecthood as a knowable, possibly even desirable position which some professional staff may be able to intermittently take up.

Results and discussion

Arrival

We begin to see the production of the research administrator subject through the participants’ description of their employment histories, including their arrival into the field of research administration. Participants shared some details about their education and past work and discussed how they entered research administration. Their descriptions of fields of study and previous research work focused on moves to new institutions, programs, cities or countries. At times, these narratives were interspersed with comments about precarity which participants experienced or continue to experience. For some, applying for, taking on and staying in research administration is to redress the precarity they experienced as graduate students, postdoctoral researchers or in previous contract work on research projects. Transitioning into permanent professional staff roles in universities, rather than working on individual projects, was a way of redressing precarity in their working lives. As one participant, Deborah, bluntly states: ‘I had no money. If someone looked at my bank account, they would have recognised that I was in no position, if I was offered a job, I would have to take it’. Many participants found their way into research administration either because of frustration with the precarity of their current work, a disinterest in pursuing academic staff positions, or economic necessity. For example, Jason describes leaving his second postdoctoral position saying, ‘I became disillusioned, a bit, I guess with the research environment . . . it’s a bit cutthroat, which is why I got turned off by it’. For participants like Deborah and Jason, they knew they needed work and that the precarity and competitiveness of academic roles deterred them from continuing to pursue this work. Erin, who moved into research administration after two temporary academic staff appointments, describes the field as ‘a great area for people to go into if they come to the end of their Master’s or PhD and maybe they don’t want to be a prof or maybe there’s just no jobs’. While many participants also explore aspects of their work that they enjoyed and excelled at, their arrival stories can be characterised as incidental and/or as a strategic move away undesirable or precarious work, rather than a specific pursuit of research administration.

Our participants’ experiences of starting in research administration may be illustrative of the uneasy relationship that many within the academy have with alt-ac careers or pursuing work outside the academy. In both popular and scholarly writing, the presumed lack of prestige and value attributed to alt-ac work is occasionally challenged and other

benefits, compared with academic staff positions, are highlighted (e.g., greater work/life balance, ability to have children/provide family care, creative and varied work) (Posner, 2013; Schuman, 2014). The unintentional or ‘out of necessity’ aspect of participants’ arrival in their positions suggests that their choices may be constrained. Knowing that alt-ac work is often interpreted as failure (to secure an academic staff position), the focus on arrival as incidental suggests that this is something that happens to someone. This unintended arrival is widely echoed in trade writing and accompanied by discussion of why leaving the academy is (wrongly) equated with failure (Bartram, 2018; Kruger, 2018; Åkerlind, 2005). Narratives produced by academic staff (e.g., Jones, 2013; Macfarlane, 2011) often frame alt-ac staff work as examples of how academic staff work has been atrophied or eroded (by shifting of responsibilities to professional staff in roles which may be less autonomous). At the same time, proponents of alt-ac work emphasise the meaning and value of the work (Basalla & Debelius, 2008; Bowness, 2015).

By invoking this narrative, participants produce a counter discourse of how research administration could be understood. Describing their arrival into research administration as unintentional or ‘out of necessity’ maintains a connection with previous academic fields, roles or communities. By sharing stories of necessity or unintentionality, there is no need to interrogate deeply if or how one’s desires have changed; this new field of work is simply stumbled into. We can see this as what Butler would conceive of as a form of ‘radically conditioned agency’ (Davies, 2006, p. 426); research administrators can consider and frame what was possible for them in terms of work and subjecthood in the academy and articulate their arrival stories as something that happens to them (even while they make choices about what occurs). This arrival into research administration work marks the research administrator subject as unintentionally arriving in an academic landscape rather than a dangerous infringement on the terrain of academic work. This story functions well because it is a palatable – it allows academic staff positions to still be perceived as valuable and desirable and doesn’t signal a need for change in how work is organised in the academy. It doesn’t invoke stories of shame, failure and injury that the academy is unprepared and unwilling to tackle (Gill, 2010; Hey, 2001).

Contrastingly, our participants, many of whom are women, also referenced how a desire to have children or the presence of other caregiving responsibilities impacted their arrival in research administration. Family was given as a reason for stepping away from either pursuing a PhD or staying in academia post-PhD to pursue postdoc or academic staff roles. Stephanie explains her choice to leave the academic track:

I realised I didn’t see myself working from postdoc to postdoc. I needed something that was more secure that I could go home at the end of the day and tend to my family, and so that’s why I decided not to continue with research.

Others were clear that the work expectations for academic staff were undesirable. Amanda discusses her experience with choosing alt-ac work:

my decision about trying to step off the tenure track path and to see if that was interesting to me. . . that you can actually not work sometimes. I still do a lot of overtime just because of the nature of deadlines and everything, but yeah, there is that side too that is satisfying about alternative academic position(s).

It is hardly surprising that several women in our study invoke reluctance when discussing no longer pursuing academic staff roles, perceiving them as incongruent with having time for family or for oneself. Much research suggests that keeping up demands for productivity and performativity within academic work is often very difficult for women, particularly mothers (Baker, 2016; Devos, 2004; Harris et al., 2019). Importantly, the larger study (from which these interviews are drawn) includes interviews with academic staff from the social sciences who focus on social justice in their research – this makes professional staff's reference to the challenging demands of care work and a desire for work/life balance more strategic. Participants can expect that their interviewers are familiar with discussions of gender equity, care work and about the privileging of carelessness (Lynch, 2010) in the academy – invoking it allows their arrival stories to be recognisable, even understandable to their interviewers and to the project as a whole. The differing ways participants describe their arrival as both incidental and intentional reveals the messiness of positioning the research administrator subject as holding a legitimate place in the academy.

The research administrator becomes an agentic subject who arrives in research administration from elsewhere in the academy, with a history and knowledge of the university and sense of belonging to it as her home. While her arrival might be unplanned, the academy is a site the research administrator subject understands. The simultaneity of unexpected arrival into research administrative work and decision to stop pursuing academic staff positions illustrates the interconnectivity of submission and mastery in Davies' work on subjectification. In order to look further into the subjectification of the research administrator, we must consider 'the mutual acts of recognition through which subjects accord each other the status of viable subject-hood' (Davies, 2006, p. 427) – that is what must subjects do, repeatedly, to become knowable. We can begin to see these acts of recognition in how participants describe what brings meaning to their work and how they approach working with academic staff.

Meaningful work

Descriptions of everyday work provide insight into how participants frame what they enjoy or value in this field. Our participants have diverse responsibilities including pre-award (finding and promoting funding opportunities, navigating internal approval processes, drafting and submitting applications, etc.), post-award (finances and budgeting, contracts and reporting, knowledge mobilisation, etc.), research ethics, and managing other staff. The participants proximity to research, which often but not always means a proximity to academic staff, is described as integral to what they consider to be meaningful work.

Many participants suggest their research administration work becomes meaningful because of connections with their previous research work. Andrea sees her current position as a continuation of her past roles:

I was a research coordinator or assistant, whatever title it was, for over a decade, and so I've seen the life cycle of studies and grant applications and even though I never would have called myself a research administrator prior to taking this position, a lot of my work involved

an administrative function, whether it was applying for grants, liaising with legal financial administration, training of [research assistants], training and supervision of postdocs, onboarding of staff, collection of data, designing the protocols, Research Ethics Boards presentations, the whole gamut.

Research administration is presented as a place to channel this accumulated knowledge of research grants into practice outside of an academic staff position. Significantly, participants who assist with research proposals emphasise that their capacity to engage on both logistical *and* intellectual levels is what makes their contribution valuable. This combination or dual role involves being ‘an intelligent non-specialist’ (Erin) with a core understanding of funding bodies’ and institutions’ application processes. They consider this combination of scholarly training and administrative knowledge as necessary to ‘translate’ (Candace) for academic staff who have an idea for a research project but often do not have the insider knowledge of what is needed to turn it into a successful grant proposal.

Research administration also is conceived as comfortable or familiar to those who have previously completed graduate degrees and who wish to remain in the academy. Importantly, past experiences in the academy likely ensures that participants understand how their work may be perceived and situated within institutional hierarchies. Rebecca characterises her relationship with working in the academy as familiar when she states: ‘None of us are really working on our old research stuff. It just happens to be once you have a PhD you kind of like being in a university’. A small number of participants likewise signalled a sense of affinity or belonging to the academy. For example, Deborah, when asked about if there is a link between a part of her academic past and her current role, notes, ‘I don’t think, except that my dad is a prof and I think there’s an element of empathy towards the professoriate that I probably wouldn’t have and a sort of, yeah, an affinity for that cohort of people’. Even while there may not be clear connections between prior work or study, participants are able to invoke a sense of belonging to the academy and its milieu. Through reference to enjoyment and familiarity with the academy, it becomes possible to assert a claim of belonging. Although a position in research administration does not secure academicity, other ties can be pulled together to allow for a loose claim on academic subjecthood.

Participants also worked to ensure, that in an interview with an academic staff member, that the kinds of skills they have developed through previous experiences of work and study, were associated with both research work and research administration. Stephanie speaks to this connection saying: ‘The best thing I ever got out of my Ph.D. is learning how to learn ... you learn how to take information from whatever, you learn how to do research writ large, figure out how to process and analyse’. This connection work echoes discourses about alt-ac work in Canada which emphasise the idea of transferrable skills wherein doctoral education is not exclusively disciplinary training. With research histories of their own, it is unsurprising that research administrators are interested in and motivated by activity that is intellectually engaging. But, given existing hierarchies amongst academic staff in the Canadian academy, a desire for this work is not enough to claim a legitimate place from which to do it. Thus, other means to claim this work must be established – familiarity and connection to the culture of academicity, relevant work and education, parallel skills – for this to be possible. We consider participants’ descriptions of how their work matters and their sense of belonging in the academy as a way to see how reflexive considerations of the

self can function as a way of shaping particular subjects and making them recognisable in context (Davies et al., 2006, p. 103). Davies and colleagues, in their consideration of how researchers engage in reflexive acts, point to how we must be capable of 'knowing well and using competently the discourses through which we constitute ourselves and constituted as selves' (Davies et al., 2006, p. 112). By narrating their past and present work in particular ways, participants deploy discourses of belonging and acuity in learning for research, to make a research administrator subject recognisable. The reflexive work of describing oneself as belonging to and engaged in research, as a formative aspect of self through a research interview (where one is presumed to be the one studied, rather than the researcher), reveals the mastery of research and reflexivity that the research administrator subject employs to ensure she is understood as a legitimate and deserving academic subject.

Further to describing a sense of belonging, many participants discussed overlaps between research administration work and research work done by academic staff. For example, staff in local units were sometimes asked to be listed on grant proposals as collaborators. Megan explains that as components of grant applications change, academic staff may ask questions such as 'what's a knowledge mobilisation?'. She uses her knowledge mobilisation expertise to work on drafting this part of an academic staff's proposal. A frequent refrain from participants regarding what makes their work meaningful was working directly with academic staff on proposals, especially the early stages where ideas are developing. Amanda refers to this stage as 'imagination work' and expresses that what she loves about her work is 'daydreaming with faculty', invoking creativity rather than logistics or organisation. This desire (to work supportively with academic staff) is also very safe in the academy – it reflects the centrality of research and academic staff in the institution and frames this work as positive and significant. Research is exciting and creative – it is not mundane, underdeveloped or irrelevant. The participants' desire thus, uncomplicatedly, replicates what is presumed to be true of research (and those who do it).

Our participants repeatedly indicate that this proximity to research lends meaning to their everyday work. This idea can help us to see how the research administrator subject is positioned as a legitimate subject. The alignment of research administration work with analysis and creativity is a way to position the research administrator subject as akin to but not decentring the primacy of academic staff as researchers. Not unlike Allen-Collinson's findings (Allen-Collinson, 2007; Allen-Collinson, 2009), our research administrator subject, through her interest and proximity to the creative aspects of research, is positioned as a scholarly subject who needs to be sustained intellectually. The research administrator subject desires to be an 'intellectual companion or friend' to academic staff (Allen-Collinson, 2007, pp. 303–4), and perhaps as a result, might enable access to working conditions that typify academic work (e.g., autonomy, creativity, independence). What makes the research administrator subject recognisable as a scholarly subject is continual alignment and reconnection to academic staff, as well as sustained interest in and connection to research.

Working with academic staff

Research administrators frequently describe how meaningful aspects of their work exist in the overlap between their work and that of academic staff. They often flip between

describing what they do in research administration and how they are tasked with motivating, challenging and guiding academic staff. Through these unthreatening descriptions, we can hear how participants understand and define their relationships with academic staff.

Our participants perceive and frame academic staff to be in need of care and empathy. They routinely described the extent and kinds of support they provide. Candace explains how she connects with new academic staff and that she tries 'to let people know that if they want to talk about their trajectory or plot things out that [she is] available'. Likewise, Karen states: 'I always have time. That is a priority for me ... because you know it's the relationships that mean everything, for me'. Participants note that academic staff need help with the specifics of grant processes but they shift focus towards the support they provide for conceptual thinking. Amanda shares how she sees herself professionally, saying 'it's about being imaginative with researchers and supporting them beyond the specifications'. Descriptions of their work that are grounded in care and a desire to 'make a positive difference' for both individual academic staff and institutional research cultures denote aspects of praxis in research administration work (Acker et al., 2019, p. 76). Further, the types of work they engage can be used to render the research administrator subject recognisable as a kind of scholarly subject through demonstrations of care for academic staff and creative contributions to research work.

Academic staff are described as busy and occasionally anxious, frustrated or confused about grant applications which thus produces a need for support and a way to mitigate their worries. Kelly, one of the more experienced RAs, describes the anxieties often expressed by recently hired academic staff navigating competing priorities. She explains what she might say to a new academic staff member:

I think it's a better use of your time in the summer to spend the time getting the book done, because in fact, that's going to improve your CV and make you more competitive two years down the road ... it's almost a sense of relief on their part that I've given them permission ... you have to read people and figure out their sensibility ... the age difference between us and the new hires also comes into play ... whereas when I was hired, I wasn't much older than a new hire. Now I am older and I find that subtly comes into the mix, as well. So, I've become a bit more of an 'auntie'.

Kelly is reflective of how her methods may have changed over time and how her approach might affect academic staff, both their research and their emotional wellbeing.

Participants signal that they provide flexible availability alongside their expertise. They describe engagement in one-on-one discussions, access by phone or email and close attention to the frustrations and challenges experienced by academic staff. Scholars have documented the extent to which the neoliberal academy heavily governs its workers through myriad managerial techniques leading to exhausted, demoralised employees (Davies & Bansel, 2010; Maistry, 2012), and that women shoulder more administrative and care work within (and outside) the academy (Ivancheva et al., 2019). We consider the productive work these descriptions do to shape the research administrator subject. Through acts of care, the research administrator subject can become knowable as kind, flexible and capable of offering expertise offered delicately and at the right moment. The research administrator is not simply a tool to be deployed to increase research productivity but a potential ally or friend to frustrated academic staff.

Research administrators' discussion of their past and present work experiences, their relationships with academic staff and explanations of what is meaningful in their work can help us to understand the research administrator subject – she demonstrates mastery by being familiar with and skilful at navigating the academy while simultaneously submitting to the primacy of academic staff and research. This careful positioning highlights the 'imaginative capacity' of the research administrator subject and the markers associated with academicity which evidence her becoming (Davies, 2006, p. 433). She seeks to become recognisable through her positioning as proximal to research (both past and present) and akin to academic staff (through shared interest in intellectual and creative work and capacity to care for the needs of academic staff). But her claims to academicity are not assured, she must continuously re-establish connections and make her work integral to scholarship. Part of this process includes showing that, for the research administrator subject to be content at work, she desires to be engaged in the research process even if it is from some distance.

Conclusion

In our examination of the lives of research administrators and the production of the research administrator subject, we hope to contribute to critical discussion about how research work is organised in the Canadian academy. Relations between professional and academic staff could be characterised as in tension with one another – with academic staff seeing professional staff positions as indicative of their declining influence (Jones, 2013) and professional staff frustrated with persistent misunderstanding of their work by university leaders and academic staff (Smith et al., 2021). This exploration of the production of a research administrator subject is a way to think further about professional staff-academic staff relations. Specifically, it opens consideration of what discourses are deployed to enable claims to academicity for professional or third space staff which may be central to understanding how they might pursue their work with academic staff.

For investigations of academic identity and work, the academy is often perceived as an inhospitable place to work and yet, it is a place where cherished parts of a working life (disciplinary homes, research, friendships) are found. Thus, there exists the challenge of trying to find a way to be in the academy while distancing oneself from parts of it. For third space professionals, this challenge also occurs while navigating relationships with multiple staff groups, including academic staff who may perceive their presence as undesirable. The research administrator subject is produced through myriad discourses which demand balancing and navigating these tensions in order to remain an intelligible and desirable position. The research administrator subject is positioned as agentic, caring and creative; she navigates the academy from a place of familiarity and understanding. She struggles to gain legitimacy through her proximity to research, yet she seeks to show other ways to be in the academy – that show kindness, that value friendship and connection, that make time for care work and which include time away from work in the evening or on weekends. The research administrator subject resists being defined as a part of the machinery of the university; she wants to preserve space, possibly for herself, possibly for others, where resistance is possible. Through the subjectification of the research administrator subject, it becomes possible to shape research administration as

connected and integral to academic research without threatening the centrality of academic staff in research and knowledge production.

This perspective demands that we consider further, as scholars and as members of academic communities, how particular academic subjects are produced, sustained or resisted. The production of the research administrator subject is inherently relational: the research administrator subject can only become knowable through her positioning in relation to other academic subjects. She is produced through proximity to academic staff and their research work as a knowable and legitimate academic subject. We can, of course, see that the research administrator subject bears similarity to some of the descriptors used by researchers on professional staff such as occupying a 'thirdspace' (Whitchurch), working in roles that are hybrid or ambiguous (Knight & Lightowler, 2010) or experiencing what can feel like unhomeliness in the academy (Manathunga, 2007). We suggest that research administration positions might be less fraught and better situated in an academy understood through Manathunga and Brew (2012)'s Oceans of Knowledge metaphor which seeks to better encompass and frame interdisciplinarity in the academy and the kinds of practices which enable us to work with the complex and fluid forms of knowledge that characterise the future of research. We are curious about this metaphor and believe it can be promising for how we think about where the work of research happens in the academy. Perhaps rather than seeing research as connected to the roles and identities of academic staff alone, through the subjectification of the research administrator subject, we can observe research work flowing into and across other roles in the academy. If we can conceive of research knowledge and research work as large, flowing and connected, we may find many lakes, rivers, creeks and waterfalls which flow into and feed one another. One's pools of knowledge need not dry up if one moves to another role. While the research administrator subject works intently to become recognisable as a legitimate academic subject (particularly in a university research community marked by clear divisions in roles, privileges and work expectations), there exists the possibility that she would be better situated in a university organised differently.

Research on staff is typically, and unsurprisingly, undertaken by academic staff, limiting the opportunity staff have to shape the knowledge produced about them (for exceptions see: Aspenlieder & Vander Kloet, 2014; Green & Little, 2016; Knight & Lightowler, 2010; Little & Green, 2012; Pearson, 2008; Smith et al., 2021; Vander Kloet & Aspenlieder, 2013). We must therefore acknowledge a challenge and limitation in our own research. Our research team is composed of staff, PhD researchers and academic staff and all interviews with professional staff were conducted by academic staff. While the authors of this article have not worked directly in research administration, we have worked in alt-ac or professional staff positions for several years. Certainly, the interviews cannot occur outside of the power relations between academic staff and professional staff and thus what participants shared within them is necessarily shaped by these existing relations. The alt-ac world is not easily accessed by academic staff researchers and we observe how, in this research, only particular kinds of stories can be told. As two researchers who have also worked as professional staff, we noted that participants were unlikely to share stories that we ourselves heard regularly within our workplaces: stories of frustration and disappointment with work and career, stories that reveal cynicism about the primacy of academic staff, or stories that

suggest a personal disconnect with the academy. But, the interviews for this project are not a failure for not extracting confessionals and frustrations from professional staff. The interviews are themselves a site through which discourses are produced and subjects shaped. It is possible that, in order for different stories to be told, we must look to other sites wherein discourse is produced. We are curious about how professional staff, as researchers also, might approach creating space for competing discourses to take shape. We invite academic staff to join us in this curiosity in planning research about, or better still, with professional staff.

The space that the research administrator subject carves out for herself – caring and kind while still knowable and legitimate – does not necessarily shift the context in which academic subjectivities are produced and sustained. She may exist in a ‘thirdspace’ (Whitchurch, 2008b), neither completely academic nor non-academic, but the academic staff subject remains at the centre. Academic staff figure centrally in the life of the Canadian academy and the proximity of staff to them matters. Elsewhere, scholars have shown how demonstrating proximity to academic staff is a strategic move away from other staff, an alignment that secures greater power and privilege in the academy. To complicate what we claim about research cultures and work in the academy, we need to hear from different groups of staff to provide divergent perspectives, discussion and critiques from where they are situated. Most importantly, we want to trouble the presumptions that academic staff and professional staff are on opposing sides of the academy and consider the complex, interconnected subjectivities they produce, take up and resist in and through their work.

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