

## **The Changing Meanings of Authenticity:**

### **An Interpretive Biography of Professors' Work Experiences**

*This paper contributes to the symbolic interactionist literature on authenticity and the self by drawing from ethnographic research conducted with forty-six faculty members at an American public research university. I offer an analysis of the changing meanings of professors' sense of self across careers, ranks, and hiring cohorts and I suggest the following: (a) professors' experiences of authenticity and inauthenticity remain similarly frequent throughout their careers; (b) professors' concept of true self changes considerably from the time they are hired to the time they retire; (c) younger professors need to face different demands and challenges than older professors, as they need to adapt to a different academic social world marked by new practices and conventions surrounding tenure, research, teaching, and service.*

Academic work is undergoing dramatic change. Massive enrollment shifts, controversial public funding allocation policies, higher scrutiny from both the government and public opinion, deeper and more troublesome connections to the private business sector, professors' salary deflation, downward hiring trends, and increased administrative control have caused a considerable erosion of faculty power and resulted in lowering job satisfaction for some professors (see Altbach 1997; Bowen and Schuster 1986; Clark 1987, 1997; Gould 2003; Levine 1997; Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Smith 2000; White and Hauck 2000). With decreases in autonomy from both external agencies and from internal organs, continuous attacks on the tenure system, erosion of collegial spirit, and growing resentment toward careerism and blind specialization present conditions and future prospects for the professoriate appear problematic. Notwithstanding all this, many professors still feel that theirs "is still the best damn job in the world"—as one senior faculty member interviewed for this study put it.

The question of *why* professors find satisfaction in performing their work in the face of mounting difficulties is the object of this paper. The basic argument I advance is that even though there exist various sources of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation connected to varying degrees of work satisfaction, the emotional experience of authenticity<sup>1</sup> works as an important source of motivation for professors. While my focus here remains on professors, the arguments I develop can also be easily extended to other professions and identities, as well as related areas of interest for symbolic interactionist theory and research. My specific goal in this paper then is to contribute to the existing symbolic interactionist literature on authenticity, and in particular to provide analysis of original empirical data on the changing experience of authenticity over the career life course of university professors.

The concepts of authenticity and inauthenticity have long suffered from lack of clarity. Over the past two decades, however, a number of important works informed by the philosophy of American pragmatism have shed light on the concept of the true self and the emotional nature of authenticity. Namely, Holstein and Gubrium (2000) have posited that authenticity is the result of discursive practices of the narrative self, while Gecas (1986, 1991) and Erickson (1995) have respectively grounded authenticity in the realm of motivation and emotion. Despite such conceptual advances, however, no empirical studies that have made use of these existing theories have yet appeared.

In an attempt to provide empirical corroboration of existing symbolic interactionist theory on authenticity, the present study draws from ethnographic research conducted at the university I fictitiously named Mountain State University (MU from here on).<sup>2</sup> I conducted this ethnographic research for my doctoral dissertation and given the breadth of my research I need to limit my focus here to the analysis of how professors' sense of self changes through time, with a focus on change across individual careers and on differences across ranks and hiring cohorts.

## THE CONCEPT OF AUTHENTICITY IN SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

The concept of authenticity has a cumbersome baggage in the humanities and social sciences. Indeed, an important and widely recurrent criticism of the concept of authenticity is that it is difficult to define and that it suffers from inextricable ties to various ideologies and philosophies. Two recent books have surveyed the history of philosophical, psychological, and socio-political theory on authenticity (see Ferrara 1998; Golomb 1998). It is well outside the scope of this article to review this literature. It would be just as distracting to review the history of authenticity in sociology. In sociology authenticity has meant many different things to different scholars (for a review see Holstein and Gubrium 2000), but what has been constant about it has been the scarcity of empirical attention dedicated to it—in large part because of the difficulty inherent in its operationalization.

Within symbolic interactionism authenticity can be understood as *the emotional experience of being true to one's self* (see Denzin 1984; Erickson 1995; Gecas 1986, 1991, 2000; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Turner 1976; Turner and Schutte 1981). Authenticity is neither synonymous with sincerity—as sincerity entails being true to others—nor with the metaphysical and ethical notion of *being a "True Self."* Rather, for symbolic interactionists authenticity is the feeling that one's conduct is congruent with the meanings and values important to one's self. In contrast, inauthenticity is the emotional experience of being untrue to one's self. When we understand authenticity in such pragmatist fashion we can empirically study it as a phenomenological experience by gaining access to people's experience through introspective methods, such as phenomenological (Turner and Schutte 1981) and/or narrative in-depth interviewing (Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

My primary interest here is to analyze authenticity "at work," that is, in the social context of work—a context which lends itself well to the study of authenticity (e.g. Hochschild 1983). How does authenticity "work" then? Professors, just like many other workers, need to deal with

questions of authenticity just about every day of their lives. For example, faculty may have to decide whether to pass or fail a student, whether to accept or reject a manuscript for publication, whether or not to edit a paper in a certain way in order to please an editor, or whether or not to consent to the department chair's latest request. All such decisions require professors to reflect on and negotiate among competing values, goals, ideals, and identities. I refer to the complex of such values, goals, ideals, and identities as *self-meanings or self-values*.

Self-meanings are generated and continuously re-shaped throughout the socialization process. It is throughout our continuous socialization that we select from potentially infinite numbers of disconnected experiences a few personally significant ones and incorporate them into somewhat coherent and meaningful accounts. These accounts often take the form of self-stories—stories rich with meanings, values, ideals, goals and identities that individuals use to construct a sense of self, a “self that we live by” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Self-meanings give individuals a sense of continuity through time and a sense of identity. Thus, even though individuals undergo change throughout their lives, and even though they adopt multiple identities, it is through their evolving, storied self-meanings that they are able to live with a sense of identity and continuity—however fluid and multi-faceted (Denzin 1989; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Maines 1993; Maines and Ulmer 1993). Through stories we construct valued meanings for our experiences, create order among experiences and their meanings, and organize self-meanings into identities (Denzin 1989; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Through narrative, we also strive to cohesively organize systems of values, space and time, identities of others, and relatedness of actions across contexts by creating themes, plots, and drama (Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

Emotions are embodied feelings “that arise from emotional and cognitive social acts that people direct to self or have directed toward them by others” (Denzin 1984: 49). Along these lines, Erickson (1995) and Gecas (1986, 1991, 2000) describe authenticity as the emotional response to

individuals' reflective assessment of the meaning of their own conduct and being. In other words, *authenticity is a feeling in relation to the meanings and values attached to the self*. Gecas (1986, 1991) has convincingly argued that authenticity plays an important motivating function for the self (Gecas 1986, 1991). For Gecas, whenever the self acts in congruence with its values, the positive experience of authenticity takes place. Authenticity is not the only source of motivation for the self, however. For Gecas (1986, 1991) the self-concept works as a motivator through the interplay of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and authenticity. Feelings of low self-esteem and low self-efficacy are unpleasant experiences, and so is the experience of inauthenticity. Individuals will then tend to be positively motivated by feelings of authenticity and negatively motivated by feelings of inauthenticity. The question of how authenticity will motivate an individual over time is left, however, relatively unexplored in Gecas' (1986, 1991, 2000) work. The combination of Gecas' theory of authenticity with Holstein and Gubrium's (2000) conceptualization of authenticity as narrative practice seems therefore quite apropos.

Questions may arise regarding the compatibility between the kind of symbolic interactionism practiced by Gecas and by Holstein and Gubrium, with the former being commonly associated with structural symbolic interactionism, and the latter being commonly associated with a biographical/narrative and ethnomethodological/discursive conceptualization of the self and social interaction. I believe, however, that Gecas and Holstein and Gubrium share a common view of the *phenomenological* nature of authenticity. Holstein and Gubrium (2000: 70) for example argue that the self is "a particular set of sited language games whose rules discursively construct the semblance of a more or less unified subjectivity centered in *experience*" (emphasis added). Gecas (personal communication, 11/10/2002) is also adamant that authenticity can best be understood by accessing individual experience from a phenomenological perspective.

A similar conclusion is also reached by Erickson (1995), who bases her conceptualization of authenticity upon two premises. The first premise deals with the intensity of the experience of authenticity: authenticity is not a mono-dimensional concept and therefore not a universalistic condition. For Erickson one can experience authenticity or inauthenticity to varying degrees because authenticity is a local, changing practice, and a lived, embodied emotional experience. Her second premise deals instead with the existence of a true self for each individual: authenticity presupposes a self that remains somewhat consistent and stable across situations, without implying reduction to oversimplified, unchanging structures. Erickson (1995) also bases her understanding of authenticity in the work of that avatar of postmodern theory on identity and the self that is Erving Goffman. Erickson remarks that Goffman believed that feeling “unruled, unreal, and anomic” (Goffman 1963: 135) occurred when actors violated long-standing commitments to particularly meaningful self images, and “felt-identities” (Goffman 1963). Erickson’s point here is that emotions are central to the development of the self and her attention to emotionality plays a crucial role in the development of a symbolic interactionist theory of authenticity.

In sum, authenticity may be a feeling associated with being true to one’s self, but we must not rely on assumptions which render such self static and the act of “being true to it” stifling, and that is why studying authenticity over biographical time, as I attempt to do here, is extremely important. Take for example the work life of faculty members. Professors change identities, as well as institutional, disciplinary, and sub-disciplinary affiliations; they play differing roles from the classroom to the lab, from the faculty meeting room to the office; and often they even become radically different from what they used to value as they receive tenure, age, and retire. In a sense professors, like all human beings, derive their uniqueness and complexity precisely from this tension of becoming.

## METHOD

The main research question of this paper is: *How do professors experience authenticity and inauthenticity across their careers?* Furthermore, I ask: *are there differences among professors' experiences of inauthenticity and authenticity across rank and hiring cohorts?* Data for this study come from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with forty-six faculty members employed at MU during the academic year 2002-2003. MU is a mid-size public university currently classified by the latest Carnegie classification system as a Doctoral/Research University-Extensive.

I obtained lists of faculty members employed in three departments in each of three academic fields: psychology, political science, and anthropology in the social sciences, physics, chemistry, and biology in the natural sciences, and English, music, and philosophy in the humanities. I then selected randomly two names from each of the following three categories: assistant professor, associate professor, and full professor. Whenever a department employed limited term, part-time, or adjunct faculty I also made a list of all such employees and drew randomly one name from the list and proceeded to contact him/her via email. In total I made contact with sixty-two faculty members, sixteen of whom declined my request, because of lack of time or because they were on leave and out of town. The final sample included forty tenured or tenure-track professors and six instructors. All interviews took place in professors' own offices or labs and lasted in length between one hour and one and one half hour. Approximately three fourths of professors interviewed were men, and all but one was White.

I taped and transcribed all interviews. The semi-structured interview protocol included questions meant to gather background information (about rank, age, length of employment, etc.), questions meant to solicit answers in narrative format (e.g. "could you tell me the story of how you chose to become a professor?"), questions meant to investigate the ruling relations of academic work,<sup>3</sup> and questions drawn from Turner and Schutte's (1981) measure of "true" and "false" selves.

Slightly modified in terminology from the original, I posed the latter question(s) as follows<sup>4</sup>: “I’m very interested in understanding what it means to you to be authentic (or inauthentic), or true to your self (or untrue), in the context of your work. Can you tell me some personal stories of times when you felt that you were being authentic (or inauthentic), true (or untrue) to your self, in the context of work? What was it about your experience on each of those occasions that made you feel you were true (or untrue) to your self?” I also asked a variety of questions and probes that allowed me to gather data pertinent to the research aims of this study (e.g. “what has changed in the way you value your work from the time you started to today?”; “are there episodes that significantly marked your career and that you believe have changed who you are, as a professor and as person;” etc.).

In order to analyze the data for this paper I utilized the research strategy of interpretive biography (Denzin 1989) and engaged in open coding first and subsequently in focused coding of transcribed interview data. Interpretive biography is informed by both phenomenology and narrative/constructionist ontology. As Denzin (1989) has remarked, while it is necessary to keep firmly in mind that any gaze into the subject’s inner life is mediated by various processes of signification, we must keep in mind that as interpretive biographers we need to “study real people who have real-life experiences in the social world” (Denzin 1989: 14). People have experiences that are mediated through language, but are nonetheless embodied. Experiences compose the realities of a life, the moments during which we meet, confront, interpret, and make sense of events. Of course, experiences vary in degree of intensity. Some experiences may be routine, habitual, and therefore they may demand little attention. But other experiences are particularly revealing and problematic as they signify a dramatic moment of revelation and/or insight. These experiences are called *epiphanies*, “interactional moments and experiences which leave a mark on people’s lives” (Denzin 1989: 70). Epiphanies are of particular interest to interpretive biographers (Denzin 1989) and throughout my coding of the data I focused closely on linguistic descriptions of epiphanies.

## DATA AND INTERPRETATION

I present my analysis in two separate parts. In the first part I analyze a variety of epiphanies and their connection with experiences of authenticity. In the second part I then address the issue of how experiences of authenticity vary across rank and department.

### Epiphanies

My interpretation of the meanings of epiphanies begins with the story of Frank. I met Frank in his office on a summer afternoon, late in the two-semester long interview process. After walking into more than forty academic offices no amount of visual chaos could surprise me anymore. Papers, boxes, books and anything that dust can call home seem to reach a utopian state of symbiotic harmony in professors' offices. Frank's office, instead, was the perfect antinomy of my expectations. His work space was vast, spotless, tastefully decorated with prints and posters from all over the world, and enriched by a majestic piano and a serene view over the rolling hills surrounding the campus. It took little time for Frank to find comfort with my presence in his room. Despite his age of forty-seven, as we began to speak I learned that his career as an academic had only recently begun:

*Interviewer:* How did you choose to become a professor?

*Frank:* With regard to other things that I wanted to do, I had already done them to my satisfaction. I taught high school for five years and I was very successful. The idea of singing for a living kept floating around in my head. But I left high school partly due to burnout, and partly because I wanted to explore singing for a living. That led to a period of finding out how difficult that was. I did however do that for a few years, and got a still clearer idea of how difficult the profession was. While that was going on I missed the education-part of me. So eventually I went back to school and got a Master's when I was in my mid thirties. But then I found out that a Master's degree is not going to get you

anywhere. So I looked for another high school job, and taught in different high schools for six years and once again very successfully. And by that I mean that I took a program and made it one of the best, if not the best in the state. Then our daughter was all grown up, ready to go on with her own life, and our financial condition was such that I could have pursued my singing career if I had wanted to. And by that time I was burned out on teaching. So I gave myself five more years, as a second try with professional singing. By the time the fourth year rolled around I had figured out that this was not what I wanted to do with my life. So at that point I thought that it would be better to work at the college level than at the high school level. I was tired, I guess, of living a very isolated and very alienating life that the singing career demands and I missed educating students, and conducting, and interacting with people. What drew me to college teaching was the thought that I could teach, but also that I could perform. And I was right, this job fits me, it's a great match (Assistant Professor, Humanities).

Frank's story—only reported in part here, obviously—was rich with twists and turns, with dead-ends and sweeping vistas of future possibilities. Such twists and turns corresponded to epiphanies; complex emotional and cognitive experiences that are marked by deeply introspective reflections on the relation between the self and its lifeworld (see Denzin 1989). In simpler terms an epiphany is a clear and often sudden manifestation of meaning, an intuitive grasp of reality through a revelatory and striking event, and an illuminating discovery. An epiphany is also an interruption of continuity, dissolution of habit, and the birth of something new. Epiphanies can be more or less abrupt, more or less emotionally intense, but all epiphanies lead people to problematize the self and its lifeworld, and whenever pragmatically possible they lead people to change. Epiphanies can therefore be understood as significant points in time along the trajectory of self-meanings.

Frank's epiphanies marked his existential re-adjustments between high school teaching, professional singing, graduate school, and academic work. Each epiphany in Frank's narrative marked a *turning point* (see Denzin 1989); a point when values, goals, and identities undergo re-evaluation. Turning points are essential for our understanding of authenticity across the lifetime. For example, for Frank the academic environment is ideal because it "fits" him as a perfect "match." Through this narrative Frank therefore managed to present himself as someone who feels authentic in his current work activities (see Gecas 2000). The entire narrative segment reported above is then to be interpreted in relation to the statement by Frank in the last line. The *valued endpoint* in Frank's story indeed is that he is seemingly happy where he is now, and all episodes leading up to this valued endpoint are assigned meaning in relation to the epilogue of the story. This is an important point to consider in relation to the narrative study of authenticity: a storyteller's experiences of authenticity and inauthenticity will mark his/her positioning in relation to other characters and events present in the story. I will continue to give attention to stories' valued endpoints in relation to authenticity later, but for now it is important to continue to reflect on epiphanies and turning points.

Because meanings and values are attached to the self throughout the entire life course, by studying individuals' stories we should be able to learn about their changing sense of true self. For this reason I found it important to ask professors about how and why they chose their job, and how their feelings about their work and occupational identity had changed over time. Professors' responses indicate that they entered their careers in one of three ways: as a calling, as an accident, and by default. Analyzing these three paths in detail allows us to better understand the relation between epiphanies and authenticity.

### *Career as a Calling*

Professors who made the conscious and firm decision to study and teach in their field of interest and to become academics very early in their lives told stories marked by such qualifiers as

“fateful,” “destined,” and “determined.” These narratives resembled epic sagas in which a protagonist’s life is informed by a “mission” or “calling” to become the man or woman that one is truly meant to be. For example, as a professor in philosophy told me: “I didn’t choose it [this life and career], it chose me.”

In relation to authenticity, “career as calling” narratives are informed by a unique *positioning* of the author/protagonist. In all of these stories the endpoint is established first through statements like “This is who I am and who I’ve always been, and that is why I’ve lived my life that way.” Through such positioning these professors manage to discursively establish a true self that transcends the immediate circumstances of their occupation. This is a “vocational” true self then, whose biography is marked by a progressive and linear movement toward becoming what one was meant to be. The following excerpt, for example, shows that such a mission can begin at a very early age:

I’ve always been very interested in science and astronomy. I was four years old when I decided I was going to be an astronomer (laughs), seriously (Instructor, Natural Sciences).

Authenticity, as an experience, works as a revelatory force, as inspiration, and as an existential quest. Claiming knowledge of one’s true self, like this instructor did, is also a way of claiming authority over how a life story can be told and what its meanings are. In this sense authenticity can work both discursively as a frame for interpreting a narrative and phenomenologically as a source of motivation and as an emotional experience. Examples of this abound. For example, several would-be professors grew up in families of academics where they were weaned on science, politics, art, or literature. As young children they became interested in what they saw their parents practice and what they valued, and some of them like this political scientist (see excerpt below) later on in life even coauthored academic work with their parents:

My dad and my mom were both professors, my father was a political scientist like me. I grew up during the Vietnam War, and my family was very active in opposition to the war. Normally families would load up their kids in a car and go for a picnic, and instead we got loaded in a car and went to a demonstration. It was the normal thing for me to become a political scientist (Professor, Social Sciences).

The key statement here is to be found in the last sentence; the normal thing to be/become an academic is normal because through her interpretation of her life story and through her interpretation of her experiences this professor manages to *normalize* a childhood spent at political rallies instead of picnics or theme parks. Such claim is an agentic act of self-positioning and also a creative act by which a narrative endpoint is established.

Interestingly enough, there were no clear epiphanies in these narratives because there were never major significant turning points in these professors' biographies. In these stories authenticity was always seemingly taken for granted because self-meanings and values were never problematized. In these stability narratives, therefore, the experience of authenticity and the sense of a true self hardly underwent any change.

#### *Career as a Default*

By comparison epiphanies were quite a common occurrence in many other professors' stories, whether the trajectory toward academia was accidental or whether their decision was in part a default option. Professors who chose academia by default, after suddenly realizing that no other options were feasible for a career, experienced gradual epiphanies, or in other words slow revelations. The following excerpt is a good example of a gradual epiphany in a career by default narrative:

Between my junior and senior year in college I worked for a chemical company and I found out I didn't like industrial research the way it was structured, because it's bottom line driven.

If you get on a problem and you find that you're not making much progress and the costs go up, it is no longer economically feasible and they drop it almost immediately. So it's really frustrating because you can't complete what you started. I didn't want to spend my life improving a corporate coffin. I didn't want to have to do what someone else told me that I had to do. For example, I visited Proctor and Gamble, and throughout the visit I was taken to a secluded lab area where I would do some of my work. This area was protected and gated and you needed a pass to get in. So I asked "how do you do work here at night?" And I was told I couldn't; no one could come in after six. You know, I do my best work at midnight, or on Saturday mornings; why would they not take advantage of that? I was told it just was not the way things worked. I decided that I did not want economics to structure my life like that; I did not want economics to structure when I can have ideas. Here I can come in at any time I have an idea that I want to work on. And besides, here there is an element of intellectual freedom. You have the freedom to choose a problem and the freedom to find the way to solve that problem (Professor, Natural Sciences).

This professor's story had much in common with other natural science professors' work experiences in the corporate world. The endpoint of such stories always had to do with competing values: in the business world the ultimate value is monetary profit, whereas in the academic world the ultimate value is the accumulation of knowledge. Such stories about the corporate world allowed professors to position themselves *against* the values of greed, wealth, and the private property of knowledge while also allowing them to constitute a sense of self built upon the of values of freedom, independence, and creativity. Career by default narratives always weaved competing accounts of a protagonist (the authentic self) and an antagonist (the inauthentic self and the conditions limiting the expression of authenticity) struggling with each other until the authentic self finds emancipation through a gradual epiphany. If career by vocation narratives are stable and progressive, career by

default narratives are just as progressive but highly unstable, marked as they are by numerous turning points and various experiences of inauthenticity. The following narrative excerpt is a good example of the struggle for emancipation I just mentioned:

I was an attorney; I practiced law for three years. I hated practicing law. I always had an academic interest in law. I recall a couple of instances when I was doing research in the library for my firm. I'd be alone in the library and I'd get caught up in the research and all carried away. So I'd go on and read about issues that interested me but had nothing to do with my client. Of course you spend most of your life dealing with other attorneys, and as an attorney you're a hired gun doing other people's work. So, I had an interest in law but I didn't want to do other people's work, I wanted to pursue my own interests. Academia had always been in the back of my mind. I had always had the idea of influencing public debates and being a public intellectual, and I always liked teaching. So eventually it all happened (Assistant Professor, Social Sciences).

It would appear then that inauthenticity is a necessary biographical condition for future experiences of authenticity in such unstable narratives. Turning points, in such stories, mark experiences when inauthenticity becomes so unbearable that a person has to implement change. In other words, in narrative/biographical patterns marked by instability two things must occur for the experience of authenticity to be possible: either conduct has to change (as the previous two examples showed), or self-values have to change in order to re-align themselves with existing and continuing conduct. We can see examples of the latter in the following section.

#### *Career as an Accident*

MU faculty who chose academia by accident, found themselves “on the spot” at some point in their life and “fell into it” or got “suckered in.” These professors were usually engaged in something else when an opportunity to work in academia came along. Their narratives detail how

external forces put them in the conditions where they had to make a choice of either accepting a new identity or sticking to the old one. Accepting a new identity constitutes an “involuntary” epiphany, as the next two excerpts show:

I kind of fell into it. My parents really encouraged me to go to grad school but I just wanted to be a ski bum. I really was a ski bum for quite some time, actually. So, I thought I was going to do just my Master’s, I mean, I was completely clueless, and when I arrived in my department everybody assumed I was going to do my PhD. I really had no idea at the time what a PhD was, but I was told that as a PhD student I’d have a semester paid for in Paris and I thought, hey I’ll do a PhD! (Professor, Social Sciences).

An involuntary epiphany is an epiphany nevertheless. For example, by finding out that graduate studies would give her an opportunity to travel and have a good time this professor realized that she could pursue her lifestyle and enjoy her passions. But whereas a conventional epiphany is one in which the self agentically comes to the realization that a new course of action is necessary, an involuntary epiphany is one in which a new course of action has already taken place, and after being “suckered in” or having “fallen into it” all one has to do is sail along the new current and enjoy the ride. Take for example the next excerpt: here too a career is chosen by accident and here too the story’s protagonist simply needs to re-align her self-values with the new course of events:

I was a philosophy major as an undergrad. I did awful. I was a horrible student, I almost flunked out. I didn’t have the grades to get into grad school, so I went into the domestic peace core and they sent me to the Texas-Mexico border, where I met my husband. And I worked there doing economic development with impoverished people and it occurred to me that nobody really knew how to do anything. The program was very poorly planned and I thought that the only way you could know what work was to be done was to understand the culture, and that was anthropology. I wanted to do applied anthropology but I got suckered

into the academic life because my father was a professor, and my mother was a professor, and my husband was a professor. What I specifically want to do is make students aware of cultures that are different from theirs, and to make their approach to people that are not exactly like them more humane. That's my primary goal in doing what I do (Assistant Professor, Social Sciences).

In order to maintain a sense of coherence this professor found herself embracing certain aspects of the profession (teaching and service) while distancing herself from others (research). And this is obviously an important characteristic of academic work: while a professor may feel authentic about one aspect of work, it is possible that other aspects will be sources of discontent and inauthenticity. Life stories may become quite complex as a result. While a narrative account of an aspect of work such as teaching and the related identity as teacher may be marked by a Panglossian sense of progression, another thread in the narrative may be marked by a continued downward slide. In relation to authenticity this is possible because the sense of self is always contingent and situational and because emotional experiences are naturally complex and even contradictory. Different identities and different values do compete over the definition of the situation and whenever such competition exists the emotional experience of authenticity may be muted and ambivalent. Because the concept of the true self (advanced by Holstein and Gubrium 2000 and Erickson 1995) is contingent, situational, and based on local discursive practices it is still possible to make sense of experiences, such as the one discussed next, that are fragmented and potentially contradictory. Consider the following excerpt from my interview with Frank:

*Frank:* I used to think of myself as... ok, I'm a teacher, but when I'm conducting I'm a conductor, or when I'm singing I'm a singer. I think the older I got, the more those three areas have become integrated. They are aspects of the same job, of the same self. They are different, but they are aspects of the same. When I sing, I need to be very self-focused, very

self-oriented. But when I teach I need to be very other-oriented. You see when I teach the goal is to get them, the students, to communicate to the audience. When I sing, the goal is to communicate to the audience, there is no middle-man.

*Interviewer:* But, which one is your real self?

*Frank:* You see, that's a great question and one that I have wrestled with to a great extent. I don't think any one aspect is more authentic than the other. I think, however, that if I spend too much time doing one or the other, wearing just one hat and ignoring the others, then it is frustrating. I need to go back and forth. My personality is such that I need to go back and forth. I need to be alone, and absorb, and reflect, and then I need to get into a group situation. I think it depends on each person, I tend to be very pragmatic about this, I mean it's my nature and I've always made the choice to be myself.

Much like Frank other individuals can experience authenticity in diverse situations without being incoherent. Erickson's (1995) remarks on the trans-situational nature of authenticity, and especially her Goffmanian emphasis on the multi-faceted nature of the self and felt-identity are here clearly illustrative of how this can be possible. Authenticity is an embodied, complex emotional experience, and just like all emotional experiences it works by giving our sense of self and our self narratives a sense of continuity. In sum, authenticity as an emotional experience informs our life stories, and in turn our storied collection of experiences and their interpretations will inform our continuous emotional connection with our lifeworld.

#### *Authenticity as Motivation*

Let us turn back to our reflection on the valued endpoints of professors' stories. As I briefly discussed earlier, my data showed that values such as knowledge, freedom of intellectual expression, discovery, and creativity are undoubtedly important to most professors. Throughout their narratives in fact professors tended to select events relevant to the endpoint of their occupational choice;

endpoints which emphasized the importance of such values. For example in one of the excerpts reported earlier I discussed the story of a political scientist who found his previous work for a law firm increasingly intolerable and also found his decision to work in academia a logical consequence of his stance on the value of autonomy. But in other professors' narratives as well a state to be reached (freedom and autonomy) and one to be avoided (dependence and lack of control) were always present. And such states, or valued endpoints, were always connected to the goal of feeling authentic.

Professors' paths leading to academic work showed that what all professors come to embrace is the academic lifestyle. All of the professors I interviewed claimed to value freedom, and also argued that freedom is institutionalized in academic work (at least ideally) through regulations on academic freedom and in general through the very culture of the professoriate. Because professors find the value of freedom to be important for the definition of their true self, and because freedom is very important for the definition of academic work, circumstances that lead to the sacrifice of professors' freedom are also circumstances that lead professors to experience a friction between their self-values and their conduct. The value of freedom and related feelings of authenticity, therefore, function as structural conditions of work but also as a source of authenticity and motivation, as the following excerpt shows:

What has really brought me to the academic career is the autonomy and independence that it gives you. I hated being told when to be in the office, when to be in places. I'm just not that type of person; I don't think most academics are. Yeah, autonomy and flexibility are very important: I get to choose what I want to study, I get to choose when I want to do it, for the most part, and I like the idea of tenure. You have a lot of things within your control (Assistant Professor, Social Sciences).

Freedom has many different meanings that range from freedom of speech and thought, to freedom of creative expression, and even to freedom of going to the office or lab whenever one pleases. The value of freedom, in all its meanings, is important both for the definition and realization of professors' true selves and for the definition of academic culture at MU and presumably at other universities as well. Seemingly, the benefits of working in an environment where freedom is so highly valued even offsets the relatively low pay that most professors receive and the large amount of work they perform, as these excerpts show:

Academia fits my life really well. It's a heck of a lot of work, and it's a heck of a lot of stress, but it allows me to..., well, it fits my personality, the academic freedom that we have, and the freedom that we have to structure our time, and I've always been someone who works very well on my own, and structure myself. And I love to travel, and being free to take summers off or travel for conferences is really nice (Associate Professor, Social Sciences).

I found that I liked the lifestyle. I wanted to have a job that would allow me to continue learning for the rest of my life, and a job in which I would have freedom to pursue my interests without asking for someone's permission. The academic lifestyle is absolutely my ideal (Professor, Social Sciences).

Many of the professors I interviewed expressed similar feelings, the freedom "to be left alone" to pursue what they find meaningful and valuable. In other words, being free *from* close supervision and control allows professors to dedicate themselves to the pursuit of their interests and to feel authentic. In fact, professors are not simply interested in learning or in diffusing knowledge; many professors are very passionate about their work. Passion shapes their work as much as it shapes their identity; it drives them to work sixty or seventy hours a week for a relatively modest salary, and it drives them to read thousands of books and articles throughout their careers, or to fight with

colleagues over a seemingly inconsequential matter at a faculty meeting. Such passion is a very important component of professors' intrinsic motivation to perform their work.

In summary then the link between freedom, passion, authenticity, and motivation works as follows: data showed that professors find the values of freedom, independence, discovery, creativity, and intellectual expression highly important for the definition of their true self. Such self-meanings have led them to choose to work in academia. Because the academic lifestyle allows professors to be congruent with their values professors feel authentic while performing their work. And because authenticity is a positive emotion, professors feel content in the performance of their work even in spite of decreases in extrinsic motivation.

#### *Changes in Self-Meanings across Careers*

What kind of changes in relation to authenticity do professors experience through their careers? Interview data showed that experiences of authenticity are equally common throughout a career. In other words, there are no data to support the contention that authenticity would be more or less common as faculty age and retire. Narratives do show, however, that professors continuously negotiate and redefine what they value as well as the meanings they assign to their true self. Data also show the following: whenever self-meanings and self-values change, professors also change their conduct in order to feel authentic. And whenever professors cannot change their conduct—for example because of structural limitations—experiences of inauthenticity will occur. For example when I spoke to Jane—who, as a young instructor had a lowly and tenuous part-time appointment in the humanities and a part-time appointment in the social sciences—I learned that she had recently realized that the academic world had come to resemble more and more the corporate world that she had left in disgust. In the recent past Jane had turned to radical progressive politics for the definition of her political identity, and as her values changed so did her views of the meanings of academic research and teaching. In other words, as her self-values had changed, she

felt that she had to quit her academic job because it made her feel incongruent with her true self. Indeed Jane explained to me that she was getting ready to leave academia because she had never felt so inauthentic:

In a truly public education is where I wanted to be, in various kinds of teaching positions, from K-12 to the university; I wanted to be responsible. Like I said, I tend to be far more left than even some of my colleagues, I believe that the state has the responsibility to fund education for everyone and I believe that my central responsibility, through critical pedagogy, is to lead my students to question social inequalities. But given the direction that the university and higher education are taking, and given the position of the humanities, I feel that at some point I have to be a salesman for my discipline. Take all these grants that are made available to various professors in this school, the various Boeing grants, and Microsoft grants, it seems that corporations want us to train better workers for them, and where is the place of the humanities in all of this? You know, you feel like you have to justify your existence. And it bothers me, you know, I mean, I feel like I should be able to talk about what I do, but to sell it, or to justify your existence, you know, that bothers me. That's why I'm leaving. Screw marketability, I'm just going to do what I love.

Jane's clash with the changing structure of higher education is important because her decision to quit rather than feel inauthentic supports Gecas' (1986, 1991) conceptualization of authenticity as a positive motivation and inauthenticity as a negative motivation.

Self-meanings change irregularly throughout a professor's career, but a certain imposition of regularity comes from the practices that universities adopt that segment the occupation of professors. For traditional faculty a career has at least four important institutional turning points: hiring, tenure, the promotion to full professor, and retirement. With each turning point, self-meanings can potentially become incongruent with a professor's new institutional roles and

responsibilities and lead to experiences of inauthenticity. But are such institutional turning points significant? Consider the tenure process, for example. Interviews with MU faculty showed that for faculty currently employed as full professors tenure turned out to be relatively inconsequential, as the following excerpt illustrates:

I've changed in the sense that I've started to write more books. In the past I'd write more articles than books, because, you know, that was the requirement. But everything else is just the same. If I wanted to coast, I could. But why? I like what I do (Professor, Social Sciences).

Writing books instead of articles may seem like a significant change to external observers, but it was not so for this professor. As she explained, she found that not much had changed with her receiving tenure because the intrinsic motivation she derived from research and teaching had always been the same. For other senior professors tenure was also relatively insignificant as it led to no major change.<sup>5</sup> However, growing older—regardless of institutional qualification or formal career stage—seemed to lead many professors to adapt some new values. The volume of publications, for example, becomes less and less meaningful as time goes on. There is an insignificant difference, professors explained, between forty and forty-five publications, for example, so after a while many professors feel it is more rewarding and authenticating to pursue more meaningful goals, such as research that can actually make a difference. For others the change in self-meanings occurs within the realm of teaching, as this excerpt shows:

My goal at this point is to continue to make contributions to the field, and to do a good job at prepping graduate students to enter their careers. It's more gratifying for me to hear that a graduate student of mine has been accepted into the graduate school that he wanted to get into, than to get a letter in the mail that says your paper has been accepted. For example I had a female student last year who wanted to get into the graduate program at a very good

school and she thought that she had no chance whatsoever. It turns out that she called me on a Sunday, at home, and she said to me that she was just on the phone with that university, and she was incredulous that this had happened. That's a lot better than a publication; at this point in my career that's more gratifying (Associate Professor, Social Sciences).

For others, feelings of satisfaction and authenticity may come from contributing one's time and energy to the improvement of one's department or college. Some tenured professors in fact choose to become chairs or administrators in the years before retirement:

I became very interested into administration and I had always been interested in helping people more than in my own projects. Working as a chair, and being a very other-oriented person, I had a very difficult time getting many me-oriented professors to see that their egoism went against the interest of the department as a whole. For me it's less of what I'm interested in than a synthesis of what everybody is interested in. [...] So my inclination to be expressive and to allow for my individual expression, you know, that essential core value for my self is there in everything that I do. It's there when I play in an orchestra and it's there when I do administrative works. You know if you're simply *dealing* with a budget, if the budget is *just there*, it's meaningless, and you can't advocate for it, you can't even feel good when you get an addition to it (Professor, Humanities).

Finally, for others change in self-values will lead to feelings of inauthenticity mixed with apathy and alienation. Some faculty members grow "out of it" as they age because their passions wane and they feel that "writing yet another piece isn't going to make any difference"—as Mark, an associate professor in the humanities, put it. Mark's feelings of inauthenticity came not only from having to occasionally publish research in order to appease colleagues, but also from having to "baby-sit twenty year olds" in the classroom. A change in conduct (for example by moving on to another less undesirable job) seemed unreasonable to Mark, as he neared retirement.

No matter what the extent of the self-change is, my analysis leads me to suggest the following: (a) the true self undergoes constant negotiation and redefinition as the values and meanings associated with it change over the life course; (b) values and meanings associated with the true self are especially liable to change at institutional turning points, that is, when the social roles of a person change, or when the expectations and norms inherent in these roles change; (c) at such institutional turning points authenticity continues to work as a positive motivational force and inauthenticity as a negative motivational force. Therefore individuals will either accept or reject the new institutional definition of the situation to make it congruent with their true self, or will accept or reject the values inherent with their new role in relation to what makes them feel authentic; (d) the discursive construction of a true self—based on the trans-situational emotional experience of authenticity throughout the life course—will continue to inform how individuals (professors in this case) make sense of their past, present, and future; (e) however changing the self may be across biographical time, narrative events and characters will still be plotted coherently and re-interpreted in relation to changing self-values and meanings. In sum, by looking at professors' occupational narratives we have learned that their self-meanings do change, but the frequency and intensity of experiences of authenticity does not, because their conduct continues to adjust to their new self-meanings.

### **Occupational Structure and Authenticity**

At this point we need to address one important and final question. It would seem obvious that recent changes in the occupational structure of the professoriate and in both the culture and structure of higher education are affecting professors' experience of authenticity. In the following section I continue to examine my data in search of answer to the question: *are there differences among professors' experiences of authenticity across rank and hiring cohorts?* Are there differences, for example, between instructors and associate professors, or between tenured and untenured faculty? And are

there differences between professors in their sixties and professors in their thirties? In what follows I switch my attention away from both phenomenological description of experiences of authenticity and inauthenticity and from interpretation of individual biographies, and instead turn the focus on my analysis of the occupational contexts of authenticity in order to understand differences and similarities across individuals.

There exist important differences between professional expectations for younger and older professors and between untenured and tenured faculty. The following two excerpts, the first by a young instructor and the second by a senior professor, summarize some of the differences:

Academia is really weird in how it is administered. You have the old guard and the old culture with an old concept of tenure and then you have the new guard in the administration that came in during the 1980s, with this sort of yuppie mentality and these business rules, but then they don't fully go by the business model, you still have the tenure system and all these old rules (Instructor, Humanities).

For me it's been a good career on the whole. I think that the people that were here early had a bit better situation. I'm just worried about the people that are coming in. The squeeze is becoming tighter and tighter (Professor, Natural Sciences).

At MU those faculty members who received tenure in the 1970s or earlier had to deal with different expectations and fewer pressures than younger professors now do. Back in the 1970s budget crises had not "strangled" the university yet, as some senior professors remarked. With "the squeeze becoming tighter and tighter" from the years of the Reagan administration onward, universities have become more careful about giving out tenure, promotion, and even hiring tenure-track faculty. As a consequence, younger professors (most of those who are currently working as assistant professors) are aware of the higher expectations that are in place. Stronger institutional pressures sometimes

lead younger professors to conformity to institutional norms, and thus in some cases to conduct incongruent with self-values. For example, in order to secure publications or grant support an assistant professor might have to put teaching aside or might have to significantly alter one's favored research program and this might lead them to experience inauthenticity.

A clear example of how expectations operate differently nowadays comes from looking at the tenure process. Currently at MU there are two types of socialization for tenure: implicit and explicit. Explicit socialization is typical of recent years, and it occurs when a department chair and/or tenure committee explicitly tells an assistant professor what the expectations for tenure are. Departments that opt for an explicit socialization also often tend to provide the tenure track professor with a variety of employee-friendly services to guide the new professor through the process. For example a department may match the tenure track professor to a senior mentor or even to a tenure committee made of three senior professors who dispense advice, counsel, and guidance to the novice. Implicit tenure socialization is more typical of the past. Department chairs in the past tended to be more vague in communicating expectations for tenure and they relied on the awareness that: "academics just knew, because it was part of the culture" as a professor put it. Therefore, older faculty received minimal communication regarding tenure expectations, while young professors are now being "babied" as a department chair put it.

But together with advice and counsel younger professors also receive considerable pressure from their tenure advisors/committees. Generally, interview data show that current tenure-track faculty members at MU are pressured to publish more, to publish more in "leading" academic journals, to spend less time with teaching-related tasks, and to apply for more external grant support than were their senior colleagues. Over the six year-long tenure track these demands regularly lead professors to feel stress and at times inauthenticity. In contrast, not many current senior professors

admitted having experienced great stress, pressure, demands to conform, and consequently many inauthentic moments on their path to tenure, as the following excerpts show:

Back then tenure was a fairly routine thing. I wasn't even aware of being voted on. My chair called me and said you got tenure (Professor, Humanities).

I remember worrying a little bit that I'd get tenure and worrying a little bit that I'd get promoted to full professor. But it was so long ago, that frankly it's a different system than it is now. If you're speaking to younger professors, assistant professors, they'll tell you that the way the university works now, the tenure process is so rigorous and so demanding and I'm not sure that the things we look for ensure that we make the best possible decisions. This university is so stuck in a rut in finding evidence in certain kinds of publications, and in certain kinds of pieces of evidence that will swing the power whether that person should be tenured. So, it creates an artificial atmosphere in which you really don't find the best qualities of someone who can be a really brilliant teacher and really inspire students and really make this university a world-class institution and a teaching institution, which ought to be two of our main objectives (Professor, Chair, Natural Sciences).

With decreasing funds and mounting skepticism toward the economic feasibility of the tenure system, with an increasing public demand for accountability and higher productivity, and with the high volume of PhDs seeking employment (see Atlbach 1997; Levine 1997), universities like MU can now afford to raise tenure expectations and impose new and greater demands on young professors. New demands and the younger people who face them, however, now coexist in the same workplace along with the older faculty who benefited from a less demanding system, and this is often a source of friction between junior and senior professors at MU and in higher education in general (Levine 1997).

While all departments these days push younger faculty to work harder than their older colleagues did before tenure, many departments at MU also has the “dead-wood” problem: professors who have gotten tenure and are no longer productive thus making it difficult for departments and colleges to have the monetary resources to hire new, more active and productive younger faculty. I mention the “dead-wood” problem here because it is also closely related to the role that instructors have begun to play in the contemporary American university, and also at MU. The hiring of instructors gives universities the economic flexibility that they need to deal with shrinking resources (in part caused by salaries going to professors who abuse the tenure system), but it also creates a highly hierarchical system in which tenure works as the main discriminating factor. In such system some instructors feel they end up publishing three times as much and teaching twice as much while receiving a third of the pay that some of their senior colleagues receive. This state of affairs leads to some instructors’ feeling contempt toward the institution, as well as alienation, exploitation, and inauthenticity.

Through their stories many young MU tenure-track professors—currently in their thirties—told me they feel that tenure would be a highly desirable state of things for them because they believe it would give them the stability that senior professors have. Stability for them translates into a more relaxed work environment where they feel they can dedicate themselves to the pursuit of their values, passions, goals, and ideals without having to worry as much about conforming to institutional demands. Young professors who have just earned tenure clearly feel the relief, as the following excerpts show:

Once I got tenure it felt liberating in the fact that I felt more comfortable (Associate Professor, Natural Sciences).

After I got tenure I felt like I wasn't forced to do this by the system, I felt like I was doing this because of my values, or work ethic, or whatever (Associate Professor, Social Sciences).

But while it is fair to say that current MU assistant professors feel more pressure to publish research than assistant professors did thirty or twenty-five years ago, it would not be accurate to say that current MU assistant professors have fewer occasions to feel authentic than current senior professors. In fact, the data show that while young professors on a tenure track need to deal with the demands of a tenure-track position, tenured professors need to deal with the increasing demands and responsibilities of a senior professor. Senior professors are often asked to dedicate more time to institutional governance, and for those faculty members who view themselves as dedicated researchers and/or teachers, having to spend time away from research and/or teaching may cause them to feel inauthentic. Beside administrative duties many senior professors feel they have the responsibility to serve the university, the community in which they live, or the larger community of intellectuals with whom they interact, and as a result the time that they can freely dedicate to the pursuit of their passions, goals, and values may decrease. However, it is a mistake to suggest that tenure always results in a decrease in academic pressures, as the following excerpt shows:

Demands have increased as my career has gone on. Some people have taken tenure as a sign that they could relax and they have done that. I'm not like that. Because I love to do research and I love to play with discovery. And then there is a whole bunch of stuff that is quite positive. You get invited to lectures and conferences, you get invited into governmental committees, you know all these things put you in the spotlight and they're ego-massaging (Professor, Social Sciences).

So far, I have mostly looked at tenured and tenure-track faculty, but do all instructors feel underprivileged and marginalized? Judging from my sample, instructors are a very diverse group and it is almost impossible to come to general conclusions about them collectively. There are at least

two groups of instructors: instructors who have chosen their position willingly, and those who find themselves to be “stuck” and in desperate search of something better. Much of the literature on faculty portrays instructors as marginalized, alienated victims of a system that has spun out of control, but at MU the majority of instructors feel quite true to themselves in their occupational identity because it was their free and conscious choice to work as instructors. Happy in their basements, where their offices are usually located, many instructors at MU in fact want nothing to do with the “rat race,” the “publish or perish,” and the “business” world typical of the “upper floors.” These instructors were perfectly true to themselves in the context of teaching, and while spending time with otherwise neglected undergraduate students, writing letters of recommendation for them, and helping freshmen and sophomores catch up on homework. After working in their position for anywhere between four and twelve years, these instructors showed mixed feelings about the idea of tenure, as the following exemplifies:

That’s a double-edged sword. The tenure track is a nightmare, in a lot of ways. There is security in it, and at the same time there are a lot of advantages to my current job in that I don’t have to do committee work, I don’t have the tenure bear on my shoulders. Sure on the other hand I could be fired, but why? The department needs me. No one wants to teach the classes I do. So in a sense they need me and they leave me alone to do what I do because nobody is interested (Instructor, Natural Sciences).

The case was different, however, for two instructors who did not make the conscious choice to take limited term appointments. These instructors felt they had found themselves in a position in which they had the choice between abandoning academia altogether or taking a temporary position. While they admitted that choosing to work for a university was a decision motivated by their long-term values, they also complained that they regularly felt under-appreciated, underpaid, and overworked and very much “stuck.” This sense of being stuck came especially from the realization that the large

amount of classes they had to teach prevented them from conducting research, something they felt they need to do in order to make themselves marketable for tenure-track positions.

In conclusion, there are important differences between younger and older faculty at MU. Younger faculty members who want to achieve tenure have to meet higher demands than their older counterparts did. Nevertheless, for younger professors expectations are clearer, more explicit, and more strongly internalized than they were for their older counterparts. Therefore, even though they may have to bow to institutional pressure more frequently than their older counterparts did, they are also more aware than their older colleagues were that this is now part of common set of conventions and practices in the contemporary academic social world—and thus less of a cause for inauthenticity. On the other hand, older professors commonly experience moments of inauthenticity too because they need to meet several demands of their own, mostly dealing with having to perform more and more service and institutional governance as years go by—tasks that most MU professors do not value highly. Differences in terms of authenticity between younger and older professors and amongst ranks thus originate as a result of different practices and conventions existent in the contemporary social world of academia.

## **CONCLUSION**

My goal in writing this paper was to apply the diverse body of theory on authenticity built by Gecas (1986, 1991, 2000), Holstein and Gubrium (2000), Turner (1976; Turner and Schutte 1981), and Erickson (1995). Despite their differences these authors believe that a symbolic interactionist approach to authenticity must encompass a phenomenological and interpretive analysis. Following the research strategy of interpretive biography (Denzin 1989) I have attempted to apply symbolic interactionist theory in order to analyze authenticity as the emotional experience that professors perceive when acting in congruence with their self-values. My research has shown that self-values are extremely variable over the life course, but despite such variability professors manage to maintain

a sense of biographical coherence that allows them to make sense of their present, past, and future in relation to their sense of true self. The narratives of the professors studied also indicate that the true self works as a source of motivation, by influencing how professors will define their work situation and therefore how they will act as a consequence. By analyzing epiphanies I also suggested that moments of intense inauthenticity tend to constitute turning points in professors' narratives. And finally, I have demonstrated that professors' narratives, while similar in structure, vary widely in content. I explained this variation by contextualizing professors' stories within the recent history of MU and higher education in general.

Throughout the pages of this paper I have argued that for the self to experience authenticity what is needed is not a metaphysical notion of the "True Self" but instead a pragmatic view of the reflexive self's ability to define its own authenticity. In doing so my argument has been in line with the work of Turner (1976), Hochschild (1983), Erickson (1991, 1995), Gecas (1986, 1991, 2000), and Holstein and Gubrium (2000). Such social psychological and symbolic interactionist conceptualization of authenticity has allowed me to ground authenticity not in ideology but in phenomenological experience, and precisely in the experience of being true to one's self. Such experience, as I explained, is the feeling that one's self-values are congruent with one's conduct. The value of this conceptualization resides in its pragmatic simplicity but also in its breadth. In fact, because individuals may assign different meanings to their selves, the sociological study of authenticity becomes a true exercise in understanding people, their feelings, and their conduct rather than an act of moral judgment. Such conceptualization, as explained earlier, also allows us to see authenticity within everyday contexts of concerted action, thus enabling us to focus not on micro dynamics exclusively but instead on the meso domain of sociological analysis.

There is wide consensus that academia is undergoing a variety of crises. Among the most widely lamented are the crisis of freedom of academic expression, the crisis of the tenure system, the

crisis of academic administration and academic leadership, the crisis of the humanities, the crisis of teaching, the crisis concerning the student population's level of preparation, the crisis in the public worth of the university, the crisis of intellectual leadership, and of course a plethora of financial crises. There is also a wide consensus over another fact of academic life: there are fewer and fewer material rewards available for the professoriate. Long years of schooling lead to years of uncertainty at worst and a middle-class salary at best. To boot, academics are generally right when they complain they are overworked, under-appreciated, and misunderstood (whenever at least someone deigns to listen to them). As limited term and part-time appointments grow in volume and "traditional" tenure-track faculty careers rapidly become a minority even the old certainties of tenure seem to fade away. So, with all these problems, why is authenticity in the academic world important? Because *professors love their work due to the intrinsic pleasure they derive from it*. Their intrinsic motivation stems from their love of freedom to pursue what is meaningful to them. Hence, studying the meanings that individuals give to themselves in relation to their work, or lifeworld, is important for our understanding of their social worlds.

Professors who feel authentic will be prone to carry out good work, that is, to teach with care and passion, to pursue difficult research questions, to recreate an institutional environment that fosters the pursuit of knowledge in an effective and responsible way, and to provide society with direct benefits. Conversely, professors who feel inauthentic while performing their work would instead be prone to perceive the meaninglessness and uselessness of the academic world, would become estranged from themselves, would neglect students and publics alike, and would not serve in the quest for knowledge that is beneficial to our society. If indeed professors are witnessing some level of erosion in autonomy and self-control over their work performance, capacity for self-monitoring, internal motivation, professional commitment, and sense of community it is easy to

foresee that at least some of them will be experiencing more and more often feelings of inauthenticity.

Whether people perform face work on an airplane cabin—like Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) flight attendants—or in academic offices, classrooms, and hallways, their experience of authenticity defines their relation with their colleagues, superiors, clients, subordinates, and themselves. And whether it is emotional labor (Hochschild 1983) or restrictions to one’s academic freedom, occupations make demands that push workers to question their personal values, ideals, goals, and motivation. How workers will negotiate with personal and institutional pulls and pushes will ultimately define the nature of their occupation and their own experiences at work. In an occupational culture that puts the highest premium on freedom and intrinsic motivation authenticity cannot be anything but the most important aspect of work. Whether professors will have to yield even more freedom to various institutional forces, and whether authenticity and intrinsic motivation will continue to play an important role in the definition of the occupational culture of faculty will ultimately depend on how well they will utilize their own power to negotiate with the changing going concerns of American higher education.

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### **NOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> As I further explain below, from a symbolic interactionist perspective we can conceptualize authenticity as the feeling of being true to one’s self (Erickson 1995; Gecas 1986, 1991; Turner 1976; Turner and Schutte 1981).

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<sup>2</sup> Mountain State University is a fictitious name created to protect the confidentiality of those employed by it.

<sup>3</sup> My investigation of ruling relations – which draws from the analytical framework of institutional ethnography – is treated in a separate publication (identifying reference).

<sup>4</sup> This question was asked twice. At first it was asked in relation to authenticity and being true to one's self and later it was asked in relation to inauthenticity and being untrue to one's self.

<sup>5</sup> There is an important difference between older and younger professors as I will discuss later.

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