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“Let us salute one of our kind.” How academic obituaries consecrate research biographies

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ABSTRACT

Academics undertake considerable efforts in order to define positions for themselves and for their peers that are meaningful and convey who they “are”. The current article examines how academics manage the practical task of making sense of one another by analyzing the way in which academic obituaries beget and consecrate research biographies. A qualitative analysis of 216 obituaries published in academic journals from the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany, in physics, history, and sociology, and from the 1960s to the 2000s reveals (e)valuative practices that consecrate academic subjects. The results demonstrate how obituaries: (1) categorize academic subjects by positioning them within spheres of academic knowledge and institutional posts, and (2) legitimize academic subjects by applying biographical narratives of talent and merit. This biographical (e)valuation evokes naturally talented, highly devoted academic subjects with coherent research profiles, and omits both biographical hurdles and the decedent's gender and class. The insights shed light on underlying academic virtues and values.

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1. Introduction

Academia is a relational undertaking. Researchers cannot define who they “are” by themselves; rather, scholars are constantly evaluated, classified, and positioned by their peers. Given this relentless collegial gaze, it is not surprising that researchers continuously work on forging a meaningful biography from institutional affiliations, publications, research projects, and various formal and informal memberships. Academics undertake this biographical work in an attempt to create coherent, meaningful positions for themselves in the relational interplay of ascriptions and classifications. The current research improves the scholarly understanding of how academics manage the practical and – literally – existential task of making sense of one another via consecration.

Academic obituaries provide rich empirical material for this purpose. These documents evaluate researchers' efforts to forge a meaningful biography. To this end, obituaries consolidate the distinct, sometimes accidental and incoherent, stations and achievements of an academic life course into a linear trajectory. The resulting biographical artifacts are coherent depictions of legitimate research careers. The way in which obituaries construct biographies provides insight into the customary rules that their authors must follow in order to consecrate the decedents. These rules are not formally defined, but rather are informally created, learned, and reinforced within academic practice (Lamont, 2009). Thus, the specific way in which obituaries (e)valuate research biographies is determined by more than just personal recollections—authors are agents of the customary rules that must be followed in acts of (e)valuation (Bourdieu, 1988). Guided by these informal and taken-

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for-granted rules, depictions of academic lives therefore represent and reproduce a professional ethos as well as a system of academic virtues and values.

Based on a sample of 216 obituaries, published in academic publications from the United States (U.S.), United Kingdom (UK), and Germany, in physics, history, and sociology, and from the 1960s to the 2000s, this study examines two general aspects of the consecration of academic lives: the categorization of biographies in a relational and fluid interplay of positioning and ascriptions, and the legitimizing narration of life courses as a meaningful, comprehensive sequence. The resulting insights go beyond the genre of obituaries—they are relevant to questions of academic careers, research biographies, identities, and professional values. As the following section demonstrates, the study of obituaries (Fowler, 2005) generates findings about the consecration of academic life courses that contribute novel insights to the research fields of academic (e)valuation (Lamont, 2012) and academic positioning practices and narratives (Angermüller, 2013).

2. Academic (e)valuation and positioning, and the study of academic obituaries

Questions of academic evaluation, including inquiries into both the values and virtues underlying this evaluation and the positions and classifications it engenders, have yielded a broad body of literature. A first strand of this literature has paid tribute to the central importance of evaluation in academia. While numeric measures, focused mainly on publication or citation counts, are a more recent approach, judgment by peers is a long-standing form of determining quality and achievements (Zuckerman & Merton, 1971). Research on peer review conducted for academic journals, funding agencies, or the evaluation of potential faculty members is primarily concerned with the reliability of such judgments (Bornmann & Daniel, 2005; Sonnert, 1995), their potentially dysfunctional effects (Hamann, 2016; Lee & Harley, 1998; Sandström & Hällsten, 2008), differences in the definition of merit (Guetzkow, Lamont, & Mallard, 2004; Lewis, 1998; Tsay, Lamont, Abbott, & Guetzkow, 2003), and how reviewers reach a consensus about “quality” (Bakanic, McPhail, & Simon, 1987; Hirschauer, 2010; Lamont, 2009).

A second strand of literature is concerned with the values that form the symbolic backdrop against which scholarship is evaluated. Numeric measures such as publication output and citation statistics may be benchmarks for research governance (Nederhof, 2006), but they do not fully capture the broad range of peer judgments that permeate academic culture (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Knorr Cetina, 1999). These judgments assess a wide variety of virtues mobilized in academia, which appear to be more fluid and ambiguous than the virtues reflected in merely statistical measures, and thus are difficult to conceptualize. Not surprisingly, most investigations cover a broad spectrum of qualities and virtues, ranging from professional characteristics such as “originality” (Guetzkow et al., 2004) and “excellence” (Lamont, 2009) to personal traits such as “intellect” (Tsay et al., 2003), “persistence” (Hermanowicz, 2006), and “charisma” (Gustin, 1973).

While contributing a great deal to the scholarly understanding of peer review and (e)valuation, as well as their underlying virtues and values, these two strands of research have focused primarily on academic judgments that target very specific aspects of academic life. For example, the focal review practices are often geared toward the orientation of a journal, the quality of a research proposal, or the compatibility between an applicant and a department. Academics’ judgments and classifications of one another’s research biographies *as a whole* have not yet received much attention. This void is surprising considering the centrality of biographical trajectories to the constitution of subjective identities. Contemporary biography research highlights the relevance of narrative and positioning practices for the formation of identities. It draws especially on pragmatic, performance-based claims to identity and subjectivity (Bamberg, 2010; Georgakopoulou, 2006). Biographical trajectories bring academic subjects into being by representing where researchers come from, what their fields of expertise are, who their friends and foes are, and what they have achieved.

A third strand of research has adopted this broader focus by addressing the question of how academics judge and categorize one another at a more general level: studies on academic positioning have identified a variety of ways in which scholars occupy positions in academia and ascribe certain positions to others. The literature examines positions as identities, roles, and subjectivities that emerge from the dynamic attribution of, for example, expertise, institutional status, or reputation.¹ This research highlights the structural constraints and opportunities of positioning by examining how intellectual, cultural, institutional, and social conditions influence the legitimacy of a position (Baert, 2011; Lamont, 1987; Maeße, 2015; Morgan & Baert, 2015). Academic positioning has also been studied in terms of how intellectual self-concepts and self-narratives affect academic self-positioning (Gross, 2002; Lamont, Kaufman, & Moody, 2000). In addition, this strand of research has stressed the importance of conflict and power, analyzing, for example, the way in which academics engage in symbolic struggles, pre-reflexively pursuing certain positioning strategies based on their endowment with different types of capital (Bourdieu, 1988). Research has also described positioning as a practical problem; studies in this area focus on academics’ ongoing engagement in both a multitude of positioning dilemmas in power-knowledge complexes (Angermüller, 2013, 2014; see also Baert, 2012) and in boundary work that establishes and reinforces demarcations between fields of knowledge (Abbott, 1995; Gieryn, 1999; see also Lamont & Molnár, 2002). This strand of the literature facilitates an understanding of the dynamics and practices involved in academics’ ascription of certain roles to themselves and others. While valuable, few of these analyses have extrapolated their findings beyond empirical studies of particular and situational

¹ In this text, the term “position” is used to refer to general locations in the academic world to which academics are ascribed via positioning practices. The term “post” is used to refer to a specific job within an academic institution (e.g., assistant professor, emeritus professor).

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