Department Chairs: More Than Floating Heads With Absent Hearts

Summer Cowley, OISE/University of Toronto, Canada

Abstract: This position paper argues that university department chairs should be considered as emotional subjects, rather than solely rational ones. Literature on higher education administrators has tended to focus on task-oriented conceptions of administrators and has left discussions of administrators' emotional lives by the wayside (Luthar & Šadl, 1998; Mumby & Putnam, 1992). By examining chairs' emotional work (Hochschild, 2003), researchers of higher education may be able to expand theorizations of higher education leadership positions as task-oriented jobs while taking the emotional strain of the roles into account. In this paper, I recommend that research on university department chairs should pay equal attention to the rational and emotional components of chairs' work.

Keywords: Department Chairs, Emotional Labour, Higher Education, Administration

Introduction

In this position paper, I argue that university department chairs perform significant, challenging, and emotional roles at work. This topic is significant due to the lack of consideration in higher education literature of chairs as individuals with unique emotions operating within a complex social environment. Information on the emotional aspects of the role of department chair may aid aspiring professors, new professors, and aspiring chairs to both appreciate and prepare for the work of this position. Further, this information may help new education scholars to view their department chairs as individuals with complex personalities, aspirations, and idiosyncrasies. Department chairs, as people managers, should be conceptualized as playing significant and challenging emotional roles, rather than as solely serving instrumental functions as "bean counter[s]" (Chu, 2012, p. 52). Thinking of chairs as task-oriented floating heads (solely rational individuals) with no corresponding emotional connection to their work ignores the significant and important task they perform in managing their own emotions as they address the duties required within their role.

Due to the significance of the role of department chair in leading departmental colleagues towards institutional goals, research aiming to understand the role more deeply is valuable to higher education researchers and the literature in this area. The role of chair is regarded as challenging due to stress (Gmelch & Burns, 1993, 1994; Gmelch & Chan, 1995; Gmelch & Gates, 1995), role conflict/ambiguity (Gmelch, 1995; Gmelch, Tanewski, & Sarros, 1998), and a lack of professional development available during the chairship (Morris & Laipple, 2015; Schwinghammer et al., 2012). As a result of these challenges, there tends to be a steep learning curve for new chairs (Gmelch & Parkay, 1999) and a high turnover of chairs in general (Gmelch, 1991). Further, within higher education research there exists the tendency to treat the human administrators who run universities as solely rational subjects, separated from their idiosyncrasies, preferences, and emotions (Luthar & Šadl, 2008; Mumby & Putnam, 1992). Although this characterization is applied to all levels of university administration, the focus of this position paper will be on department chairs, the first rung in the ladder of university administrative hierarchy. Compounding the need for further research into the emotional aspects of the chairship is the fact that certain educational leadership theories espouse charismatic, embodied, moral, and transformative leadership (Bush & Glover, 2014) as do "best practices" handbooks (Chu, 2012) for department chairs. There also exist "lessons-learned" guidebooks (Jenkins, 2009) that suggest self-care, mindfulness, and reflection as essential to this role. However, studies on chairs have generally characterized the administrative functions that department chairs fulfill, as well as the tasks they perform (Aziz et al., 2005; Boyko, 2009), even when discussing stressors inherent to the role (Gmelch & Chan, 1995; Lees, 2016; Wilson, 1999). Accordingly, there is a lack of published research on chairs' individual emotional experiences as social beings who manage other people.

In this paper, I argue: (a) the role of chair is important and has significant emotional aspects; (b) leadership theories lack agreement on best ways to lead; and (c) department chairs should be considered as performers of emotional work. I close this paper by stating that department chairs need to be considered as performing work that demands ongoing emotional self-management and that research on chairs should have a dual focus of task-oriented *and* emotion work-oriented inquiry. The goal of this paper is to expand current discussions that treat chairs as solely

rational and highly similar role-players, rather than as complex and distinctly individual persons in social environments. Given the highly relationship-oriented nature of the role of department chair, which includes faculty meetings, performance appraisals, disciplinary reviews, and crisis management (University of Alberta, 2009a, 2009b; University of British Columbia, 2016), the description and investigation of this population still needs to extend to the internal world of the emotional experience of department chairs at work. To begin this discussion of the emotional labour of department chairs, I describe the ways in which chairs are considered significant to universities.

Literature Review

In this review of recent literature on department chairs, I discuss the ways in which the role of chair has been described as significant, complex/social, and challenging. Throughout the review, I build a case that, beyond the objective task-oriented requirements of their roles, (e.g., budget writing, departmental meetings, promotion and tenure decision-making) (Berdrow, 2010; Boyko, 2009; Boyko & Jones, 2011), chairs may also perform emotional work by attempting to manage the emotions of their colleagues and senior administrators. Previous literature on chairs has focused mainly on their tasks and duties, rather than their emotional and individual experiences of the role.

The role of department chair has been described in higher education literature as significant. Czech and Forward (2010) described leadership at the level of department chair in universities as vital to the successful implementation of policy, due to the chair's proximity to academic staff. As the rank of administrators who have the most direct contact with faculty, chairs are responsible for leading departments through new and sometimes unpopular changes using little positional power (Berdrow, 2010). Although chairs do technically hold positions of authority, due to their place in institutional hierarchy their practical power is limited by the sometimes-temporary nature of their terms in the role and the varying effects of unionization. Due to these factors, chairs must often rely on personal and professional authority to achieve the ends of the university (Berdrow, 2010).

The role of department chair has also been described as complex and social throughout the literature. Chairs' work has been described as multi-faceted (Aziz et al., 2005; Boyko, 2009; Boyko & Jones, 2010; Gmelch & Burns, 1994; Sarros, Wolverton, Gmelch, & Wolverton, 1999), with various tasks/roles of the chair often occurring in isolation from or in conflict with each other. Among the many aspects of the chairship, the importance of chairs' relationships with regular faculty and senior administration has been emphasized (Brown & Moshavi, 2002; Leary, Sullivan, & Ray, 2001; Sarros et al., 1999). Department chair job descriptions at Canada's 15 research-intensive universities, referred to as "U15" institutions (U15, 2017; University of Alberta, 2009a, 2009b; University of British Columbia, 2016) point to chairs' abilities to build departmental unity, common vision/goals, and a collegial and respectful environment as central to the chairship. This emphasis on outcomes that require social and interpersonal skills suggests the need for chairs who have excellent relationship-building capacities. In a recent study of chair emotional labour (Cowley, 2017), chair emotions were examined through a sociological lens to examine individuals' emotions as connected to social environments. Thinking of chair emotions as socially driven can help reveal the ways in which chair performance of emotional self-management is connected to the social context in which they work (Hochschild, 2003). Throughout the literature on department chairs, there is a strong agreement that the role of chair, though complex and challenging, matters to the success of universities. The challenges of the role of chair are the subject of the following section.

Since the early 1990s, the role of department chair has been described as inherently challenging by higher education scholars. These challenges include role complexity (Boyko, 2009; Boyko & Jones, 2010), role ambiguity (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017), and stress of the role (Burns & Gmelch, 1995; Gmelch & Burns, 1993, 1994; Gmelch & Chan, 1995; Gmelch & Gates, 1999). Being a chair seems to be reducible to a few basic facts: (a) chairs will require training, but it may be inadequate or absent (Aziz et al., 2005; Gonaim, 2016); (b) the skills chairs exercised to gain tenure will not be useful (Gmelch & Parkay, 1999); (c) the transition from regular faculty to chair will be confusing and marked by a lack of structural support; and (d) chairs will feel isolated from their peers (Foster, 2006; Gmelch, 2004; Gmelch & Parkay, 1999; Jenkins, 2009). In addition, chairs' roles will be ambiguous, and they will struggle to address an endless list of tasks (Berdrow, 2010; Boyko, 2009; Boyko & Jones, 2010; Gmelch, Tanewski, & Sarros, 1998; Sarros et al., 1999). Yet people do take on the chairship, serve their terms, and

some seek second and even third terms as chair, despite the fact that the emotional labour of the role appears to be very challenging for some and relatively effortless for others (Cowley, 2017). The variability in the amount of effort required to be a department chair has not been taken up in detail in the literature, apart from Gonzalez and Rincones (2013), who studied the emotional labour of one American department chair in depth. Given the social nature and significance of positive relationships to the role, an examination of the effort required to express and suppress the "right" emotions are appropriate. As I discuss in the next section, there is a lack of consensus in higher education literature on the "best" way to lead.

Leadership Theories on Educational Administrators

There are many theories of leadership in higher education (Samad, 2015; Bryman, 2007; Bush & Glover, 2014), which include frameworks that focus on objective and social-emotional leadership concerns. These theories include the efficiency-, productivity-, and profit-minded new managerialism (Deem, 1998; Deem & Brehony, 2005; Hoyle & Wallace, 2005; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999). In the last 20 years, new managerialism has been noted in educational leadership literature as being as significant as the more emotionally expressive transformational and charismatic leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Brown & Moshavi, 2002; Bush & Glover, 2014). Proponents of the various leadership styles appear to have agreed to disagree, explaining the lack of agreement as reflecting ideological, contextual, or practical differences between leaders and their institutions (Bush & Glover, 2014). Along with the wealth of described leadership theories, there is also a lack of agreement on which styles or methods of leadership are the most effective. Some theories espouse a hierarchical and task-oriented style of leadership as the most effective, (Bush & Glover, 2014; Davis, Dent, & Wharff, 2015; Degn, 2015), while others describe the significance of more flexible interpersonal approaches (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2008; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Hafford-Letchfield & Harper, 2014; Jones, LeFoe, Harvey, & Ryland, 2012; Osiemo, 2012). That is, current literature on leadership theory supports that there is no consensus on a "best" leadership theory in education.

There are, however, indications from the literature of the importance of context to educational leadership (Bush & Glover, 2014). So, one can take the social-performative (Goffman, 1971) and relationship-oriented (Brown & Moshavi, 2002; Leary, Sullivan, & Ray, 2001; Sarros et al., 1999) nature of the role of department chair as a vital aspect of the context surrounding the chairship. The social nature of the chairship stands out as particularly significant when compared to the relatively isolated and non-social role of a regular faculty member. Due to the social nature of the role of department chair, it is possible that one can take emotions and emotional expression as central to departmental leadership in universities. The consideration of leader emotions has not been the focus of literature on university chairs.

Literature on department chairs addresses best practices to transition from research-focused academic to administrator, focusing on practical strategies to "survive" the changes that occur in tasks and relationships when an academic becomes a chair (e.g. Buller, 2012; Chu, 2012; DeLander, 2017; Taggart, 2015). The practical suggestions for new department chairs describe taking on the role as a potentially difficult adjustment (Wolverton, Ackerman, & Holt, 2005). However, how to best lead in education is not agreed upon by scholars writing on educational leadership. The diverse theoretical frameworks for leaders in higher education do not provide an obvious best model and the lack of agreement in leadership theory literature (Bush & Glover, 2014) suggests that no one theory has been demonstrated to be ideal.

However, the literature does provide some indication of potential areas for further investigation. From the literature conducted between 1985 and 2006, Bryman (2007) identified "13 aspects of leader behaviour that were found to be associated with effectiveness at departmental level" (p. 696). Of these 13 aspects, at least five could be considered to be connected to the chairs' emotional expression (i.e., being considerate, acting fairly/with integrity, encouraging communication, being a role model, creating a positive environment). These aspects can be thought of as part of chair social integration and emotional self-management. For example, the aspect of "being considerate" points to a complex set of social-emotional behaviours that include recognizing and identifying the emotions and social preferences of colleagues and altering one's own behaviour so as not to upset or put off colleagues. The aspect of "creating a positive work environment" also requires department chairs to be aware of the social and emotional desires and needs of others and to manage the atmosphere of the department to suit all staff, faculty, and students. The other aspects of effective chair behaviour also required similar emotional self-management and

emotional labour. Given the apparent significance of social and interpersonal interactions to many aspects of the chairship, it is appropriate to look at emotions, an important part of building and managing any relationship, especially those of leaders.

The Emotional Facets of the Role of Department Chair

Emotion in leadership, and especially in leadership in higher education, is understudied (Gonzales & Rincones, 2013). Literature exists on leaders' management of emotions at work on primary and secondary schools (Maxwell & Riley, 2016), business (Kaiser & Kaplan, 2006), industry at large (Fineman & Sturdy, 1999), university instructors (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004), and nursing (Gunther, Evans, Mefford, & Coe, 2007; Muller-Juge, et al., 2014). Only a small number of studies have investigated the significance of emotion in higher education leadership (e.g. Bolton & English, 2010; He et al., 2000; Knight, 2002; Pemberton, Mavin, & Stalker, 2007; Zembylas, 2010) and fewer still focus on the emotional work of being a university department chair (Gonzales & Rincones, 2013). This lack of research on emotions in university administrator contexts may suggest the topic has been theorized in higher education leadership based on findings from other contexts. By focusing specifically on the emotional labour of department chairs in higher education, one can highlight the uniqueness of the role of department chair in conversations about emotional self-management in the workplace, or *emotional labour*.

According to Hochschild's (2003) framework, *emotional work* can be defined as the work required to control one's emotions and emotional expression in order to display emotions deemed appropriate for a given work context. As an example, consider a funeral—sadness, seriousness, hysteria or similar emotions are considered appropriate; displaying other emotions (e.g., excitement) could cause offense to others in attendance. If socially appropriate emotions are not part of a person's grieving process (or if the person is not experiencing grief), then the individual is expected, and may experience social pressure, to display one or more of these emotions regardless. That is, they must obey contextual *feeling rules*. *Emotional labour* is the term Hochschild used to refer to emotional work performed by employees in a work environment. While heeding these rules, workers will find narrowed avenues for *social exchange*, and "much less room for individual navigation of the emotional waters" (Hochschild, 2003, p. 119). This type of constrained emotional self-management has been described by Hochschild for both public and private contexts, with a focus on emotional labour at work. Applying the sociological lens of Hochschild's framework to the context of chairship enables us to view the experiences of department chairs at work as related to group processes and interactions, rather than solely individual traits and abilities. Hochschild also refers emotional labour as divided along lines of gender, which was reflected by the findings in Cowley (2017).

From a theoretical standpoint, the sociological lens of emotional labour lets us think of "good chairs" as enjoying successful integration into the emotional culture of their departments and "bad chairs" as less successful in this task. However, considering chair success in a department as tied to a chair's ability to fit in to the social context of their workplace may suggest that chairs who are similar to their colleagues in terms of gender, race, age, religion, ability/disability, and sexual orientation may find their work as chair to be simpler and easier to manage. Thinking of chairs as part of a social group may allow education scholars to better understand why new chairs may find their role unduly difficult, and why chairs with successful administrative records in chairships sometimes struggle to succeed in a new department (Cowley, 2017). That is, what worked in one social context may not translate to success in another. When considering the work of department chairs, one should include the effort of choosing the right emotions to show, the right ones to hide, the drain social performance can have on a person's energy, and the way social environments require people to manage their own emotions. In the concluding paragraph below, I summarize the main arguments of my position on this topic.

Significance of Chair Emotional Labour to Higher Education Research

Throughout this paper, I have argued that the research on the work of department chairs should examine emotional aspects of department chair labour. This argument is based on several concepts, including: (a) the significance of the role of chair to the department and institution; (b) the complexity of the role; (c) the challenges of the role; and, (d) its emotional, social, and relationship-driven nature. Rather than treating chairs as rational automata, guided by logic and objectivity alone, researchers on leaders in higher education should analyze chairs as individual human beings working in a highly social and relationship-oriented role that require near-constant emotional labour. A focus

on chairs as emotional individuals may also have practical benefits. Chair recruitment processes may be able to be improved by expanding research on chair emotionality. If policies and job descriptions connected to the role of department chair explicitly stated that the role requires the performance of emotional labour, it might result in the legitimization of emotional labour as part of the work required by university administrators. By legitimizing emotional labour in the work of university department chairs, prospective chairs might be able to make better informed decisions regarding taking on the chairship, thereby avoiding some of the difficulties associated with transitions from regular faculty to chair.

The significance of the argument I have made in this paper lies in the emotional, social, and relationship-oriented tasks of the role of department chair, as defined in the literature I have referenced throughout. Given that the role of chair has been noted to require the ability to perform objective as well as social-emotional tasks, a consideration of the emotional role of chair in the literature is warranted. Although studies have pointed to the emotional labour required by department chairs (Cowley, 2017; Gonzales & Rincones, 2013), further research on chair emotional labour is required in order to address the topic more comprehensively. Future research on this topic might include investigations of the appropriateness of strong emotions, such as anger, disappointment, fear, and excitement, in the role of department chair. In a recent study of department chairs (Cowley, 2017), many chairs expressed strong opinions regarding the appropriateness of expressing strong emotions at work. A deeper understanding of chairs' attitudes towards expressing strong emotions would provide information on the complex emotional self-regulation at place in chairs' work lives. By examining chairs as using diverse processes of emotional self-management, research on these leaders can expand to include inquiry on chair emotion alongside inquiry on chair tasks. By increasing the volume and depth of scholarly literature on chair emotional labour, researchers in higher education can build theorizations of the emotional work required of leaders in education and describe largely unexplored emotional characteristics of "good leaders" in higher education. This information may be able to help senior administrators anticipate incoming chair professional development needs and support chairs in working happily as well as productively.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Summer Cowley: Summer is a Ph.D. student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto, in the Higher Education group. Her research interests are centered around the psychological, sociological, and organizational factors that affect leaders and administrators in Canadian universities.