Symbolic Spaces in Dirty Work:

Academic Service as Authentic Resistance

Drawing from in-depth ethnographic interviews conducted at an American public research university with forty-six professors I analyze the meanings that faculty in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities assign to the aspect of their work known as service and institutional governance. Regardless of disciplinary affiliation, almost all faculty perceive feelings of self-inauthenticity when they engage in service and governance and view this aspect of their work as meaningless, inconsequential, trite, and as waste of time. Yet, interviews with two professors show that service and governance work leads them to feel true to themselves because they view it as of a meaningful symbolic space where a truly effectual cultural politics of resistance against alienating institutional forces can take place. I reflect on the latter two professors’ agency and power to redefine symbolic occupational spaces within and outside their selves and occupation.

Keywords: College Faculty; Higher Education; Work and Occupations; Self-Concept; Symbolic Interactionism; Ethnography.
Research on the occupation of university professors regularly yields two findings: professors love their job, and they love to complain about it (e.g. Blackburn and Lawrence 1995; Bowen and Schuster 1986; Clark 1987). Nevertheless, such research only tells a partial story. Whenever professors research their own work and occupational structure they tend to view themselves as either researchers or teachers, but hardly as bureaucrats or administrators. Yet, service and governance are important components of professors’ work.

Through their institutional governance faculty members contribute to the smooth running of universities and their departments. Faculty members are in charge of numerous administrative activities individually and collectively, in large part due to the highly abstract and specialized nature of academic work, which requires the expertise of insiders. Institutional governance tasks for example include the hiring, firing, and promotion of faculty members, departmental policy-making, consulting with the administration on long and short term plans, organizing instruction, communicating with students, alumni, and administration through cabinets, senate committees, councils, and task forces, conducting commencement and other ceremonies, contributing to innumerable extra-curricular activities, organizing campus life and much more. Due to the very nature of professorial work, faculty members are also often asked to perform service for the public in different ways. These may include testifying in judicial courts in the role of specialists, addressing citizen groups, appearing on mass media, delivering health care, collaborating with administrative and legislative local, state, and federal units, providing artistic, cultural, and recreational activities and services, consulting with businesses or interest groups and organizations, working as anonymous reviewers for academic publications, volunteering the governance of professional associations, and meeting a vast number of social needs (Bowen and Schuster 1986: 14-24).¹ Despite the importance of service and the amount of occupational time professors dedicate to it, much of our knowledge on
professors’ attitudes toward it still comes only from anecdotal evidence, hearsay, or nothing but personal experience. This research study is an attempt to fill that gap.

In an attempt to contribute to the interactionist literature on the work and occupation of college professors, and in an attempt to shed light on everyday practices common in this writer’s work-life as well as in the work lives of my informants and many of my readers, in this paper I look at professors’ rapport with the “dirty work” (Hughes 1958) of service by drawing from a larger ethnographic study of faculty at an American public research university. The particular institution under analysis here is the university I fictitiously named Mountain State University (MTSU from here on) to protect the confidentiality of those employed within it. My study of MTSU is based on observation, text analysis, and especially on forty-six in depth ethnographic interviews I conducted with faculty members in the social sciences, natural sciences and the humanities.

There is a second objective to this paper, however. As my analysis shows professors relate to service primarily in terms of their emotional experience of authenticity and inauthenticity. Most professors loathe doing the majority of service tasks (or to be precise, they loathe institutional governance, in most cases) because they feel untrue to their sense of self, and in particular to their most meaningful values, goals, and passions. A minority of professors, however, surprisingly feel most authentic during the performance of most service tasks. For this latter group of professors authenticity is derived in large part by resisting what they perceive to be the injustices of certain organizational practices at MTSU. In reflecting on the role of authenticity as an agent of structural and cultural resistance I attempt to contribute to the body of symbolic interactionist theory and research that is influenced by, and a source of influence of, cultural studies.

The concept of authenticity lends itself well to romanticization. From the lens of authenticity it is easy to view the world as colored in black or white. Yet authenticity comes in different degrees of intensity, it is often mixed with other emotions, and is at times extremely
contradictory (Vannini 2006a). Additionally, the experience of authenticity is often interconnected with that of sincerity, and it is therefore important to investigate where one ends and the other begins. The strength of a pragmatist and ethnographic perspective on authenticity is that it allows us to investigate the multiple meanings of this experience in concrete situations and from the perspectives of members of unique social worlds. A symbolic interactionist approach to authenticity, resistance, and cultural studies allows us to shed light on cultures as lived experiences of existential meaning-making and negotiating (Denzin 1992). I begin this paper with a very brief overview of pertinent research literature on the academic profession and then I introduce the issue of self-authenticity and resistance. Subsequently, I introduce my method and data, and finally I reflect on authenticity as a social force.

Service and the Culture of the Professoriate

Everyday work in any given occupation is made of concrete and specific problems, goals, actions, and experiences that straddle the continuum between routine and emergency and between local and global contexts of action. These micro “going-concerns” (Hughes 1958, 1970, 1971) are the “stuff” of which work is made, the stuff that awaits people at their desks, counters, cash-registers, fields, steering wheels, and street-corners every workday of the week. Academic work is not much different from other types of work. Just like other occupations faculty members have peers (other faculty members), superiors (department chairs, deans, provosts, university presidents, etc.), support staff (a department’s staff members, administrators), and even customers of some kind or another (audiences of their work, students, the public, etc.). The institution of academic work, some have argued, does not even differ too much from other seemingly conceptually distant institutions, such as the family (see Thorne and Hochschild 1997). Much like family, academic work is also a very meaningful social world for faculty members: a going concern and “field of play” that spans and defines different areas of their biography and self (Richardson 1997) and a going concern that
demands specific face work, identity work, and context-dependent performances (Hermanowicz 1998, 2003).

A number of works that have shed light on professors’ attitudes, experiences, and behavior in terms of institutional differences have appeared in recent years. Among the largest and most comprehensive monographs are the works by Clark (1987), Bowen and Schuster (1986), and Blackburn and Lawrence (1995). All of these three research projects were based on large surveys of national samples of professors employed in different institutions. Drawing from their interviews with faculty members Bowen and Schuster (1986) noted that three negative themes emerged: professors were dispirited, fragmented, and devalued. Dispirited faculty members told interviewers that their morale was low for a number of reasons, including poor university leadership, pressure from external agencies, the low level of monetary compensation, deteriorating working conditions, and increasingly competing work demands. Dispirited faculty also lamented the worsening of collegiality and conflict with university administration.

In terms of fragmentation Bowen and Schuster (1986) noted that the trend toward narrow research specialization had resulted in professors feeling isolated from their colleagues. Research pressures, in the form of publish-or-perish expectations were especially strong for junior faculty, but even tenured faculty had to cope with newer organizational pressures. Both associate professors and full professors in fact were found to be having difficulty adapting to the rapid changes in organizational culture caused by the adoption of marketplace-type policies and practices (see Slaughter and Leslie 1997). Faculty who felt devalued also felt underpaid and underappreciated. But despite these problems, Bowen and Schuster (1986: 158) found that professors were still fully dedicated to their work: “no single finding stands out so consistently across all thirty-eight campuses than the unwillingness of faculty to abandon their academic careers. They like their work, whatever its shortcomings.”
Later research has also generally shown that professors are highly satisfied with their job and that work satisfaction is common across different types and prestige of institutions (Blackburn and Lawrence 1995; Clark 1987; National Center for Educational Statistics 1990). In a recent survey, researchers for the National Opinion Research Center (2000) found that over ninety percent of faculty members were highly satisfied with their work and would choose the same career all over if they were to start again. Clark (1987) found that academics share common frustrations, such as low pay and having to deal with increasingly poorly prepared students, but in spite of these frustrations Clark’s respondents—thus confirming the findings of Bowen and Schuster (1986)—manifested their attachment to the intrinsic rewards of the profession. Such intrinsic rewards (see Deci 1976) include a strong belief in the value of education and the instrumentality of their job in furthering education, the pleasure of interacting with young people and actively shaping their minds, and most importantly, in Clark’s (1987: 222) words: “the rewards of doing academic work for its own sake, its own challenge and passion.”

Beside the paradox of professors who love their work despite all their complaining, Clark (1987) found another paradox in academic culture: while on average the greatest majority of professors spend more time on teaching than on anything else, “teaching is not the activity most rewarded by the academic profession nor most valued by the system at large. [...] Professors themselves do the one [teaching] and acclaim the other [research]” (Clark 1987: 99). Something similar could be said about service: despite all the time that professors—especially tenured ones—spend on service, they largely perceive this activity to be unimportant at best and a nuisance at worst. And yet, even more paradoxically in relation to an occupational culture that devalues it, professors who choose to dedicate themselves exclusively to service and governance—thus becoming chairs, deans, provosts, etc.—see meaningful increases in the their salary and in their institutional status.
As Clark (1987) suggested, professors may be passionate about their work, but they direct much of their passion only to the values of teaching and research—to which graduate school directly socializes them (see Tierney and Rhoads 1993). The socialization to academic work per se begins in graduate school, where students undergo a series of courses, seminars, workshops, roundtables, meetings, and advising sessions meant to prepare them for the diverse demands of teaching and research, to the exclusion of service. Later on in their careers, as professors are asked to perform more and more service, they need to undergo a process of secondary socialization to adequately respond to the demands of different occupational agents. Because neither graduate school nor the institutions that employ them formally prepare professors to deal with cultures other than the latter, faculty are pretty much left to their own devices to figure out how to adjust to the culture and politics of service.

**Authenticity and Inauthenticity**

The meanings that people give to work are important not only for their occupational cultures and work organizations, but also for their sense of self (Hughes 1958; and see Shaffir and Pawluch 2003). In studying the occupation of professors my focus in this and in related studies (Vannini 2006a, 2006b) is on the experience of authenticity and inauthenticity of the self. Authenticity is the experience of being true to one’s self, whereas inauthenticity is the experience of being untrue to one’s self (Erickson 1995; Hoschschild 1983; Turner 1976; Turner and Schutte 1981). Let it be clear that by discussing authenticity I am not referring to the metaphysical notion of being a true self, but rather to the pragmatic, phenomenological, and emotional experience of feeling true to one’s self. Rather than on metaphysics, here I draw here upon pragmatism and on symbolic interactionism, especially on its existential tradition (see Denzin 1984; Douglas 1977; Douglas and Johnson 1977; Kotarba and Fontana 1984; Kotarba and Johnson 2002; Manning 1973; Tiryakian 1962, 1968).
We can easily conceptualize authenticity by thinking about how “humans will act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them” (Blumer 1969: 2) and how consequently people will act toward their selves on the basis of the meanings that their selves have for them. Holstein and Gubrium (2000; Gubrium and Holstein 2000) have followed this approach in their recent treatise on the authentic self. According to them, the self is a bricoleur of meanings, as individuals craft stories from locally available resources “all the while constrained, but not completely controlled, by the working conditions of the moment” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 153). Earlier, Gecas (1986, 1991)—following Turner (1976; Turner and Schutte 1981) and Hochschild (1983)—had similarly conceptualized authenticity as the emotional response to the self’s reflective assessment of the meaning of its own conduct and being. In other words, authenticity is a self-feeling (Denzin 1984) in relation to self-meanings.

The self, of course, is made of various meanings; these are the meanings that individuals attribute to one’s being in the world, and to which one becomes more or less committed. The continuous construction of what is meaningful to the self includes the valuation of passions, goals, ideals, political and cultural values, and so forth. Acting in congruence with these self-meanings gives rise to the emotion called authenticity (Gecas 1986, 1991, 2000). The opposite scenario, that of a self that betrays significant meanings thus acts incongruently with one’s true self gives rise to inauthenticity.

Authenticity is a complex emotional experience. Emotions are not simple, discrete units of experience. Because of their situated-ness in complex emergent joint acts feelings of authenticity may be, and often are, mixed with other emotions. Hence, for example, seeking authenticity may yield unpleasant outcomes as it may cause distress, fatigues, disharmony, and anger, or material loss. The emotional experience of authenticity, like most emotions, is therefore to be understood as a particularly complex and multifaceted experience involving hierarchies of conflicting perspectives.
Take for example my act of writing this paper. At this very moment in my workday I need to accomplish three different tasks. I need to finish this paper, I am supposed to lend a hand in the revision of a couple of courses in our graduate curriculum, and I should mark what feels like an avalanche of student essays. As I choose to focus on writing this paper I feel a great sense of dedication to my commitment to research and thus a sense of self-accomplishment and congruence with my identity as a researcher. Yet, I also see myself as a dependable colleague and teacher. I do enjoy working with my colleagues and helping students reach their goals and thus doing my fair share of work allows me to feel at peace with related values. Thus, there is a certain feeling of inauthenticity lingering in my body as I type these words, a feeling that dilutes my otherwise authentic dedication to writing up my research (not to mention that this morning I feel rather guilty for dishing off my family responsibilities entirely to my wife). In sum, it should be obvious by now that experiencing “perfect” or “pure” authenticity is nothing but an ideal: we all experience authenticity and inauthenticity in different degrees of intensity.

Furthermore, it must be said that in the majority of everyday life situations authenticity and inauthenticity fall under the cracks of routine, habit, and even a bit of ennui. While this may on the surface sound like a disconcertingly apathetic and jaded view of life, we ought to question whether living life’s ups and downs in an intense state of constantly overwhelming emotionality would be desirable at all. No one likes to live on a constant “roller coaster,” and everyone knows how unrealistic soap operas’ emotionally dramatic depiction of life is. Authenticity and its emotional counterpart are seldom “peak” experiences; for the most we experience these emotions as mild “plateaus” (Vannini 2006a) or hardly at all.

Finally, there is an important difference between authenticity and sincerity. Whereas authenticity is the feeling of acting in congruence with our sense of true self, sincerity is about being truthful to others and to oneself (Trilling 1972). One may feel perfectly authentic when lying to
others—at least if one puts a low premium on sincerity or at least on being truthful to the particular person is lying to, given a specific situation. One may also feel authentic when lying to oneself, since mechanisms like rationalization, compensation, projection, reaction formation, repression, selective interpersonal interaction, and selective imputation and valuation (Rosenberg 1979) are common aspects of self-defense—common enough, that is, to be even necessary for healthy and normal self-development. The latter point raises an important question: in fact, is authenticity meaningful at all if it is based on self-denial and disillusion? The answer is yes, authenticity is still meaningful to the self—even when it is insincerity—because it is real in its consequences. I will further discuss this and issues related to authentic resistance in my conclusion.

Resistance and Authenticity

As Denzin (e.g. 1992) has noted, the perspectives of cultural studies and symbolic interactionism share much in common, theoretically, substantively, and in terms of historical development, but to date, despite the fertile work of several cultural studies-oriented interactionists and interactionism-friendly cultural studies scholars, interactionist cultural studies of resistance within the context of work and occupations are absent. This paper attempts to fill that void by focusing on resistance—a quintessentially classic concern of cultural studies—and the meanings of work, likewise a central issue in interactionist research.

The concept of resistance, more than any single other, has shaped the history of cultural studies (e.g., see Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1976; Morley and Brunsdon 1999; McRobbie 2000; Willis 1978). According to Saukko (2003) there are at least three types of resistance in cultural studies: critical contextualism, textualist optimism, and contingent resistances. For example in the ethnographic work of Willis (1978) British working class boys’ practices of resistance at school highlight the subversive potential of their challenges to the academic and societal status quo. The “critical contextualism” (Saukko 2003: 39-43) typical of studies like Willis’s is marked by a view of
resistance as both creative and futile; creative in that it represents a counter-hegemonic force and futile in the sense that ultimately it fails to change the structural “realities” of the social contexts in which it occurs. In contrast, the “textualist optimism” (Saukko 2003: 47-50) more typical of studies like Fiske’s (e.g. 1989, 1994) is marked by an upbeat tone on the possibilities of resistance. Fiske’s (1989) study of how Madonna fans explore oppositional forms of sexuality exemplifies how resistance may be primarily and perhaps exclusively symbolic, and yet endowed with the potential of changing political and cultural structures.

To date, the concept of resistance seems to have fallen out of grace with most scholars. Classical cultural studies scholars have been criticized for unduly romanticizing the lived experiences of their informants, and consequently for pushing forward their theoretical agenda and political fantasies at the expense of the phenomena object of analysis (Morris 1990; Nightingale 1992; Saukko 2003; Stabile 1995). Critical contextualist and textualist optimistic versions of resistance seem particularly guilty of this. In contrast, Saukko (2003: 40) argues, a contingent approach to “resistances” “analyzes a particular resistant activity from several perspectives and from the points of view of different spheres of life, evaluating what types of power this activity resists and what types of power it buttresses.” In other words, the contingent approach to resistances is more nuanced, heterogeneous, and reflexive of the complex and often contradictory meanings and outcomes of resistant practices. Furthermore, in paying closer attention to locally lived experiences of resistance, this conceptualization of authenticity relies more on the phenomenological underpinnings of this concept rather than on a realist definition of an outsider/scholar.

A contingent approach to the multiple meanings of resistance is here coupled with a contingent approach to authenticity. Much like it has been the case for resistance, students of authenticity have employed selective vision and their ideological predispositions in searching for “true” authenticity. Multiple forms of experiencing authenticity are here juxtaposed with the
contradictions of exercising resistances, thus drawing attention to the complex power of the self as a social force. In doing so, I attempt to acknowledge the relevance of authenticity as a symbolic practice and experience, as well as its effects on organizational structure and occupational cultures.

Method

The main research question of this paper deals with professors’ experience of authenticity in the realm of work known as service, and can be phrased as follows: How do faculty members experience (in)authenticity in relation to service? Data come from observation, text analysis, and especially from in-depth, ethnographic interviews with forty-six faculty members employed at MTSU during the academic year 2002-2003. To approach professors I obtained lists of faculty members employed in three departments in each of three academic fields: the social sciences (psychology, political science, and anthropology), natural sciences (physics, chemistry, and biology), and the humanities (English, music, and philosophy), and divided faculty members in groups according to their rank. 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.

I contacted professors via email. All interviews were scheduled and completed during the academic year 2002-2003. All interviews took place in professors’ own offices or labs, and lasted in length between one hour and one and one half hour. I taped and transcribed all interviews. I assured professors that my research was fully confidential and in order to maintain such confidentiality, in the following pages not only do I use pseudonyms to protect faculty members’ names, but I also use a pseudonym for the institution that employs them, MTSU. MTSU is a mid-size public university currently classified by the latest Carnegie classification system as a Doctoral/Research University – Extensive. Nevertheless, at MTSU some departments are clearly
more nationally competitive than others, whereas some departments do not even offer doctoral degrees. In general, MTSU is far less competitive than other schools in the same Carnegie category.

Because my main interest is in professors’ description of their experiences of (in)authenticity, I generally began my interpretation of transcribed interviews by searching for linguistic indicators of professors’ self-meanings. In the majority of cases this turned out to be a rather simple process because many informants explicitly made reference to what their “true self” was as they narrated stories of how they made the choice to become professors in their field. Common indicators were such sentences or sentence fragments as: “this is who I am,” “I know myself and this is why I…,” “…I wouldn’t be true to my self if…,” and so forth. I made a schematic summary of professors’ self-meanings by using thematic descriptors and I coded interview excerpts with each thematic category. Then, I checked to see whether these self-meanings were actually meaningful for each of my informants by referring to their answers to one of the questions included in my semi-structured interview protocol (“Is feeling true to your self, or authentic, important to you in relation to your work?”).

Subsequently, in order to find the link between self-meanings and self-feelings I proceeded to evaluate professors’ answers to two questions present in my interview protocol that were derived from Turner and Shutte’s (1981) True-Self Test. Slightly modified in terminology from the original, I posed such question(s) as follows:

- I’m very interested in understanding what it means to you to be (in)authentic, or (un)true to your self, in the context of your work. Can you tell me some personal stories of times when you felt that you were being (in)authentic, (un)true to your self, in the context of work, and in particular in the context of performing service and institutional governance? What was it about your experience on each of those occasions that made you feel you were (un)true to your self?
Generally, answers to such question(s) encompassed a phenomenological description of feelings. And generally, professors told narratives from which a sense of self and others clearly transpired.

In what follows, I use excerpts from the data to make my analysis as transparent as possible, and in order to show excerpts which as “exhibits […] create windows within the text, bringing into view the social organization of my informants’ lives” (Smith 1998: 312) for readers to examine. After bringing these data to the forefront of my analysis in order to describe the experience of authenticity I shift to the description and interpretation of two professors’ experiences that I deem to be particularly enlightening for our understanding of authenticity and the meanings of service.

**Service and Inauthenticity**

Most professors find most service tasks to be a nuisance. Throughout my interviews MTSU professors explained that they have made a conscious choice to work in academia to be researchers and/or teachers and not to “push paper” and administer departments, colleges, or the university. Nevertheless, as a faculty member goes through the steps of the academic ladder, from assistant professor to full professor, he/she may expect to be asked to perform more and more administrative tasks. There are no differences in this phenomenon across departments; every tenured professor is expected to contribute to the organizational life of the department, college, and school, and more so as time goes by. Dirty work, it seems, must indeed be done.

On the basis of my data I argue that there are roughly four groups of professors in relation to the performance of service. The first group is made of professors who believe that all of service tasks is a waste of their time and energy. These professors will often negotiate—more or less desperately—ways to do as little as possible. A second group sees most service as a necessary evil, and will do just enough to feel at peace with themselves and colleagues. A third group, a small minority, mostly because of their natural talent (certainly not because of their training), are perceived to be good at it. These faculty members are then in turn asked to do more service, simply “because
somebody has to do it.” Indeed this is one trajectory that most professors follow in becoming department chairs or program directors at one point or another in their career: the story is always the same and is always told similarly: “somebody has to do it and I was afraid nobody would do a decent enough job. Besides, I kind of like it.” These professors are generally more sympathetic to their institution’s administrative needs. They may not invest all of their own sense of authenticity in doing service, but they certainly feel more at harmony with it than do professors in the two groups I mentioned above. Then, there is a fourth group, a very small minority in my sample who actually deeply enjoy most service and institutional governance tasks because in performing them they feel true to themselves. Let us then look in some detail at excerpts from my interviews with faculty members. For the clarity of my argument I focus on the first three groups together because many of their characteristics overlap, and subsequently I focus on the fourth and radically different group.

*Service as a Nuisance*

Time is scarce in academic work, as in many occupations. Ylijoki and Mantyla (2003), Sorcinelli (1988, 1992), Thorsen (1996), and Whitt (1991) found time demands to be a notable source of stress for faculty. Van der Bogert (1991), who attempted to study how many hours per week professors worked, found that his question was often met with laughs, and I too received a lot of smiles in answer to this question. Because professors tend to invest much of their time on teaching and research (Blackburn and Lawrence 1995; Bowen and Schuster 1986; Clark 1987) and because they feel truer to themselves as researchers and teachers (identifying reference), service-related tasks—which can be quite time-demanding, especially when professors lack the necessary training to perform them—are often perceived as a nuisance and a waste of precious time. In fact, one of the most common statements I heard throughout almost a year of interviews was: “If I could I would get rid of the service.” The reasons for this attitude, it turned out, are often the same: service may be necessary, but for the most part it is an inevitable byproduct of a meaningless, unimaginative
bureaucracy that is disrespectful of professors’ true vocation, passions, and needs, as this department chair explained:

(PV): You said that there are certain aspects of your self in relation to your work that you feel untrue to; what are these aspects?

(Professor, Chair, Humanities): For me, the administrative side is the one that I struggle with. I don’t feel that I’m very good at it, and I have to tell you that I was never trained to be an administrator. And that is one of the faults of MTSU within the department-chair-structure. People get into it because they’re good in the field, not because they know how to lead. Not that I feel that I’m not a good leader, but the things that I have done have not come about because of the fact that I have really learned how to be a good department head. I don’t know how to manage the finances as well as I should. […] So it is research and it is teaching that is sacrificed. Something has to go: it isn’t possible to keep all those balls in the air.

(PV): So, why did you choose to chair the department?

(Professor, Chair, Humanities): You know, it really wasn’t my choice. The previous chair was getting really burned out. So he called me in here and said, I have to ask you something, we need a new chair to run this place and I really can’t think of anybody here that could run this place. I really did not want to. I had to sacrifice, in certain ways, in doing it. So, I said, well, for the good of the program I will. But it wasn’t without a great deal of soul searching, and a lot of sacrifices, but I’m close enough to the end of my career that it’s okay, if I were a younger professor with more need to improve myself and become an internationally known scholar I wouldn’t be able to do this.

Performing service leads these professors to feel untrue to their goals and passions because by doing service these professors contradict the most significant meanings they have associated with their
sense of true self. Whenever conduct is incongruent with values, goals, ideals (i.e. self-meanings) an individual is bound to experience the self-feeling of inauthenticity. Feeling inauthentic is unpleasant and reduces faculty work satisfaction—though it may be accompanied by positive outcomes, like salary rises, a higher professional status, etc.

As I also discussed elsewhere (Vannini 2006a) the binary opposition between authenticity and inauthenticity needs to be uncoupled to make space for variations in degree and quality of emotional experience. For example, a common feeling which is different from “pure” inauthenticity is that frustrated authenticity. The following excerpts detail that sensation of frustration:

(PV): So I gather that you feel inauthentic because you feel that chairing the department is not what you should be doing?

(Professor, Chair, Social Sciences): Yes. You see, my time in the field has been abbreviated, and that’s unfortunate. Last year I only spent eight days on the field, and two of those were spent driving. Being a chair can be frustrating. I think I excel at that, but I like to do research, and I like to teach, but there aren’t enough hours in the week. It’s very frustrating. One of the biggest problems with doing administration is that I don’t have time for my graduate students. Right now I have a few graduate students who are really struggling with their thesis, and I feel that they wouldn’t be struggling as much if I had more time for them. So I’m worried about that. I do stay awake a lot thinking of all the different things that I have to take care of. So when I spend time ruminating on all kinds of administrative decisions, then I stand back and I think: why am I doing this? It’s frustrating.

Other professors lamented a similar feeling of “missing out.” The emotion of frustrated authenticity is different from that of inauthenticity per se. Feeling frustrated means feeling unable to pursue authenticity as a goal, as these excerpts also illustrate:
This week I’ve written one entire sentence. My first regret is that my teaching load is reduced. My second regret is that I do not participate in undergraduate teaching (Professor, Social Sciences).

What doesn’t make me feel authentic is the amount of time I spend working toward the organization of this conference. I’d rather spend more time working on my everyday teaching and research and whatnot (Assistant Professor, Humanities).

The feeling of frustrated authenticity clearly exemplifies how authenticity and inauthenticity are not black or white experiences. Organizing a conference, for example, was a source of great pride, recognition, and self-accomplishment for the above cited professor—and a source of authenticity as well, as he explained.

MTSU professors were also upset because of their lack of preparation and training for the demands of service. As one professor in the natural sciences put it “as scientists we are not trained to be bureaucrats.” But institutional expectations are such that as a professor’s familiarity with the workings of one’s institution increases over the years, so should their administrative responsibilities. Familiarity and seniority, however, are not necessarily synonymous with expertise with the technical mechanisms and functions of bureaucratic work. Therefore, even though a professor may be a good administrator, he/she may very well lack self-confidence doing this kind of work:

When you reach the full professor level people start asking you more things, like service. I try to avoid service jobs that don’t fit me well. It’s awful to be doing what you don’t feel comfortable doing. But sometimes you can’t really say “no” (Professor, Humanities).

It was sort of implied that if I had done it, it would have been good for the future of the department. There was pressure outside of myself because I knew very well that there was
no one else who could have done this. I really liked it here so if I wanted to stay I’d have to help the program survive (Professor, Social Sciences).

The latter professor, like many others, had gotten “trapped” in the web of organizational demands and expectations because in his mind no one else could have done a half decent job, and the problems someone could have caused with their incompetence might have jeopardized the future of the department. Such a situation is quite common at MTSU, and arguably at other universities: performing service is hardly ever a choice for professors as it is more likely to be a necessity and a course of action “by default.” Of course most professors, in most cases, can choose what kind of service tasks they wish to perform. For example, in my own case I know that even though I must perform some kind of service I can choose to dedicate my service time to the professional organization to which I belong. Doing so is more enjoyable and more authenticating (given that I identify is greatly invested as a member of that organization) than, say, organizing next year’s commencement. Yet, this is a highly structured “freedom” and at times choice is absent altogether. Ultimately then, practices of negotiation have to be undertaken. While much in academic culture is left open to negotiation, involved parties’ negotiative practices are also obviously limited by organizational structures. This also opens up an interesting analytical avenue: authenticity and inauthenticity are seemingly often riddled with contradictions. Feeling authentic may be a pleasant experience, but it can come at the cost of feeling guilty for dishing off responsibilities to friends and colleagues. And feeling inauthentic may not feel good, but the outcomes of inauthentic conduct may be instrumental for the survival of a program or even one’s own employment. The following excerpt shows very well the nature of this dilemma:

Days, nights, holiday breaks. I never had a break. It always irritates me when people say college professors take summers off. I think it is exploitation and I have complained about this before with my chair. He did not disagree with me; he said that whenever I don’t feel
like taking responsibilities I can say no. And I have started doing that. I’ve started saying no to people, but I have to do some things, with service especially I can say no but I have to be doing something because I’ll be evaluated on it (Associate Professor, Social Sciences).

The emotion of authenticity, indeed, is contingent on multiple outcomes of conduct structured by complex and often contradictory arrays of costs and opportunities for action, and thus varies along a multi-faceted continuum of pleasant and unpleasant feelings, all of which make authenticity as a black or white experience nothing but an ideal case. Authenticity as a concept and as an experience therefore implodes into complex dialectics of negotiation within self and social worlds and between selves and social worlds.

“Wasting” time by doing the dirty work of service, or at least most of it, also causes some professors to feel inauthentic because it impinges on other salient identities, like being parents or spouses. There were no gender differences in my sample in regard to this: every professor explained that they wished to have more time for their life outside of academia:

It’s frustrating. I’m a family person. The little time I have I give it to my wife, my daughter, and my dog. I wish I had more. I wish I didn’t have this paperwork on my desk to prevent me from that (Professor, Social Sciences).

Finally, a professor may feel inauthentic and insincere in the context of performing service because at times the demands of such work lead them to violate their values and to have to lie to themselves. Authenticity is not synonymous with sincerity. One may be insincere but feel perfectly authentic, but whenever one feels that the lie is something in which they themselves (have to) believe, one may feel inauthentic:

Sometimes I am being untrue to myself when I’m consciously bullshitting to others and to myself. It’s always a means toward an end; it’s what I do as a chair. Like, I know that when
I have to ask something from the dean I know that I have to put it in such a way that it will benefit to the dean, to the college, and the university at large (Professor, Chair, Humanities).

Having to lie to others and to oneself also constitutes an interesting proof of the complexity of authenticity. This professor, Harry—whose experiences I will examine in greater depth later—went on to explain that having to lie to others and to himself (for example by arguing in favor of hiring sessional lecturers in order to save the institution money) was quite painful given his humanistic and equalitarian ideals, but this feeling of inauthenticity was accompanied by an authentic experience: by hiring sessional lecturers he was in fact helping out freshly minted PHDs from his own department that could not find employment anywhere else. Again, this example speaks to the contradictions of the concept and experience of authenticity; contradictions that only a phenomenological and multiperspectival perspective can detect.

Service as Resistance

As Saukko (2003) as explained, it is fundamental for a qualitative study inspired by the perspective of cultural studies to shed light on the diversity of data and the contingency of the experiences under analysis. Instead of discounting contradictions as unimportant deviations from the norm, it is important to shed light on them. Failing to do so may push a theoretical agenda farther, but only at the expense of our responsibility to describe and understand the complexity of social life. For this reason I have decided to focus in some depth on the stories of Daniel and Harry. Daniel and Harry are unique in my sample in that they find institutional governance to be highly meaningful for their sense of true self. Furthermore, they both believe that a motivated, inspired, and adversarial style of institutional governance constitutes a form of resistance to organizational unbalances of power and inequalities. Both Daniel and Harry are aware that what they do is a form of resistance and explicitly refer to it as such. Yet, they are also explicitly aware that their feelings of authenticity in practicing resistance are full of contradictions. Let us examine their stories in some detail.
Daniel’s career story is quite different from others. Daniel realized as a young performer that his future in the world of classical music was inevitably limited:

Musicians spend a great deal of time alone, practicing in a room, and then we go out and do some of the most public things you can do, like performing in front of an audience. And you bring to that experience not only the skill of playing an instrument or singing but all of the communicative skills that relate to emotions and emotionality, and excitement and disappointment. Generally I’d say about myself that the early stages of my training were not conducive to the physical apparatus of playing. I did not have a fine instrument and my teachers were not particularly effective at taking whatever talents I had and bringing them to the highest level. And I was not individually talented enough to overcome any of those shortcomings. So while I had done performances even at high levels, there were always frustrations at that level. I was never happy with myself although I practiced so much. Somehow I never overcame my limitations. And so as I moved to higher levels of intensity performance what became clear to me was that my interest in academic administration were going to move me further along in satisfaction than was continuing to beat my head against the wall as a performer. As an administrator I began to have considerable success. At my former school we started with 250 music majors and when I left there were 450. And here I pretty much was the central person instrumental in getting the new building and in bringing enrollment up by one-hundred percent and lots of those kinds went on where there were satisfactions about administration that I had never really experienced as a performer. What that did for me was significantly reduce the amount of time that I was teaching individual students but you see, I was helping all of them, and it also reduced the amount of time that I was practicing… It was hard to do in a way, but once I did it I was really glad (Daniel, Professor, Program Director, Humanities).
For Daniel administration may have been a “default” solution, a “plan B,” as it were, but it was nevertheless a motivated choice that led him to drastically redefine his sense of true self. There is of course a sharp difference between professors like Daniel who have enthusiastically embraced this new self-definition, and professors who end up chairing programs or departments simply “because somebody has to.” What constitutes “dirty work” and a source of inauthenticity for the latter is a passion and a source of authenticity for the former.

An alternative interpretation is also possible. Authenticity, in Daniel’s case, could be an illusion, a plot implicated in order to defend the self from the painful realization that one is not as successful and competent as one once thought. While on the surface this argument seems to dismiss the validity of the very concept of authenticity, I argue that this is not the case. Certainly Daniel could be lying to himself. Or more precisely he could be unconsciously engaging in an act of self-defense, a rationalization (Rosenberg 1979) as it were. Authenticity—as expressed through Daniel’s words could then be understood as nothing but a motive. Yet, if this motive feels true to Daniel, if it is sufficiently internalized to be true, it will be true in its emotional consequences. More on this later.

In my mind Daniel’s story is also interesting because despite his realization of his shortcomings as a musician, he continued to dedicate all of his passion to music not by teaching or performing, but by making the teaching of music at MTSU better. By investing more emotional energy in administration than in teaching or performance Daniel was still committed to music and to his own sense of self, but his instrumental strategies were now different. Daniel literally described directing a program much like he would have directed an orchestra:

(PV): I hope you don’t mind me saying this, because it kind of points to a possible contradiction in what you have been saying, but it seems to me that the performing arts and
institutional administration are very different activities. How can you feel true to yourself in both?

(Daniel): They are different on the surface, but you can perform both of them in a similar style, and thus maintain that sense of commitment to your values and to your sense of who you really are. For example, when I was a department head, before directing this program, I never wanted to lead by control; I wanted to lead by consensus. 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. You know, with me, it’s less of what I’m interested in than a synthesis of what everybody is interested in. So my inclination was still 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, it’s there when I do administrative work.

(PV): So, you basically found a way to “play” with bureaucracy your own way, with your style, and your own way of making it meaningful for yourself?

(Daniel): Yes! You know, if you’re simply dealing with a budget, if the budget is just there, it’s meaningless, you can’t advocate for it, you can’t even feel good when you get an addition to it. But if you shape it the way you want, to reflect your values, your goals, or whatever, then it makes you feel good about yourself.

Daniel’s experience of authenticity tells us that a professor may feel true to himself even in the context of service and governance, as long as his self-meanings allow for him to feel coherent with his conduct. But it also shows us that something else is possible: the capacity to carve a personally meaningful symbolic space within the dirty work of service. Such capacity speaks volumes for
theories that view that self as a reflexive and interpretive social force. Individual agency in this context has a powerful cultural and political emancipatory potential: through his service Daniel advocated and ameliorated the institutional place that music occupies in his university. That is “the maverick level” as Daniel put it:

(Daniel): The university decided that they didn’t have enough money to finish the building and they decided to downsize the two departments that were there [Music and Theatre]. When I arrived the building completion project was not a priority. […] But in time I convinced the dean and the administration that this school would not be the same without our program. They didn’t want to listen to me at first and they wanted to go ahead with other priorities in the five-year plan, but I held my ground and went against a lot of people, always trying to negotiate with them. […]

(PV): It sounds like you took some risks in doing that; you must have stepped on a lot of people’s toes. After all, from my understanding the university doesn’t care too much about the humanities…

(Daniel): Yep. I’m happy to work and promote good people and good ideas, and the maverick element in me comes at the point when I no longer allow someone to do whatever they want. So there has always been an element of moral ground in what I have done.

That moral element for Daniel comes in standing up for the humanities, which as a whole have struggled at MTSU—lagging behind many other fields in budget allocation. Because his authenticity entails moral goals it translates into forms of voluntary action with deep consequences for the social organization of the university. Authenticity in this context then has a great potential: that of providing an individual with the ideology to resist institutional forces.

Harry’s stories allow us to learn more about the institutional inequalities that structure work at MTSU. Harry, also a full professor and chair in the humanities, admitted feeling strongly about
the way he values the humanities and their disciplinary ideals. Harry’s commitment to the humanities was typical of many other faculty members at MTSU. All the professors in music, philosophy, and English I interviewed at MTSU lamented their condition of “second-class citizens,” and accused the university, the system of higher education, and society as a whole to be oblivious to their needs. The humanities, they told me, cannot compete for funding with the natural sciences at MTSU, and as a result their survival is in danger. Harry, in particular, believes that as more and more students view universities as providers of a service that will eventually lead them to get a “job,” the liberal arts will continue to decline in institutional influence. Even though MTSU has recently launched initiatives to improve students’ composition skills, for Harry “funding literacy is only a token interest:”

Since the Reagan era funding for the humanities is not existent. So we can’t compete with folks in the sciences. Part of being able to get million dollar grants is by providing a line of information that is of interest to the state. Funding literacy is only a token interest. And there is the conception that it is only an amateur field. In other words, if you can read and write, you can teach reading and writing; anyone can. There is also the perception that most of the work of an English department is literary criticism, and that literary critics are parasites that exist on the talents of others. So funding for us is not an option. What keep us alive is the literacy needs of the university as a whole. The state won’t pay for rhetoricians. There’s no money there. But in figuring out how to get an atom to explode as it’s going through a lot of dirt and getting 1200 feet underground, oh yeah, that’s the big one. I just head that one yesterday on the news. But look, in order for the state to survive, to continue to do what it does, it needs to maintain the consensus of the people. So it’s funny that they don’t recognize that the greatest weapon must be communication. And so the school is affected in two ways by this current political climate. One is in the budgets and
funding being cut. And two is in the students who now come to the classroom and see themselves as consumers and make the demands that are typical of consumers, and education becomes compromised in the process.

Harry explained how he lives his life by a philosophy inspired by the writings of Gramsci, Marx, and other counter-hegemonic theorists and writers. His personal identity is that of a fighter. Thus, working as a chair is a viable option for him; by being a chair Harry explained he feels he can somehow affect the fortunes of his institution, rather than just complain about it:

(PV): In light of what you said, it might seem to somebody that what you do is a contradiction. I mean, as you mentioned before, and as I have found out through my interviews, your department has its share of problems, lots of disgruntled sessional lecturers, for example, who complain about being exploited and alienated… doesn’t that make you feel bad?

(Daniel): It does, but by chairing I have the power to make things change.

(PV): How much power do you feel you have in resisting these trends?

(Daniel): Well, there’s the possibility that I could help people out, mainly graduate students or fresh PHDs as I told you before [see excerpt from Harry’s interview on page 17 of this manuscript]. The power is limited. I couldn’t for instance, reshape the department because there is faculty governance. I have the same power as any other faculty member, in the sense that I have the power to make my case and argue it, but the power to change is not there. Only the power to instigate a process whereby change might happen is there, however).

Having some power by performing an administrative role, even though at times it may feel like being in “collusion with the system,” allows Harry to exert resistance, which in turn makes him feel authentic. Again, we witness here another set of contradictions affiliated with the experience of
authenticity. At times Harry admitted to feeling like a “sell-out,” but those moments are inevitable and necessary to the pursuit of other authenticating goals. For example, raising the enrollment of his undergraduate program may play into the university plans, but it is also a strategic political maneuver. Students, Harry believes, are the potential instigators of future socio-political and cultural change:

In society’s past intellectuals have always been troublesome. How that has been handled historically is in two ways. One is by believing that intellectuals are not in the real world; they’re in ivory towers, even though we are given substandard pay and therefore we deal with problems of the real world very much based on our problems and our direct experience with it. The other way is that if we’re kept busy all the time—and this is from Gramsci—where is the energy to come together to have real political say? So we mainly do it through students, since what we publish is considered silly by the general public and is therefore insulated and limited to us.

Thus, through his work as a chair and through his various contributions to institutional governance Harry is able to advocate for the humanities and feel true to himself. Once again we see how the moral force of authenticity can have a powerful political relevance.

Despite the role that authenticity may play in motivating resistance, it would be a mistake to conclude that authenticity and resistance are the cure for all of the world’s troubles. Classical cultural studies scholars idealized the power of both authenticity and resistance, and it is important not to commit the same mistake again. Indeed, even for Daniel and Harry—despite their motivation and determination—at times it is simply impossible to resist institutional forces and foster positive change. In those cases authenticity and resistance have to subside to the realities of compromise and defeat. Harry for example mentioned that among the compromises he had to
make with both himself and the institution of higher education is the hiring of limited term sessional lecturers:

(Daniel): It’s a national trend. It’s much cheaper to hire folks that you don’t have to tenure. They’re underpaid and on-call. I think it is patently wrong. But it is the system. It is typical of this phase of capitalism in which we see more and more temp hiring and off-shoring. We can’t ship our 101 classes out, though. It is plainly disrespectful when you put it in these terms: any student that comes through our school must take English but anybody can teach it. The system does not recognize that it requires professionals [tenured and tenure-track faculty]. And yet from our side, we do hire professionals because they are available, it is a weak market, and so it is the worst case of exploitation: people who are desperate for jobs and we give them bad ones.

Compromises are necessary, even if they lead to painful moments of inauthenticity. And resistance is not omnipotent, yet it holds the potential to carve deeply meaningful symbolic and structural spaces. Authenticity and resistance, therefore, are best seen not from an idealistic and romantic perspective, but from a pragmatic one centered on the role of negotiation in social interaction. Another way of understanding this important point is by juxtaposing authenticity and inauthenticity with, respectively, counter-hegemonic and hegemonic interpretive practice (cf. Hall 1980). In his famous encoding/decoding model Hall (1980) identified three main codes utilized by audiences to interpret meaning. Counter-hegemonic (or oppositional) readings deconstruct the ideologies present in cultural texts, hegemonic (or preferred) readings accept these ideologies at face value, and negotiated readings locally shape and modify the meanings of texts while partly accepting them—or having to accept them—and thus having to contend with contradictions. Over the late 1970s and 1980s, and also in lesser part up to date, cultural studies research has more or less associated authenticity (broadly defined) with counter-hegemonic cultural practices and inauthenticity with
hegemonic ones. While this is suggestive, it betrays more like a utopian hope for cultural and social renovation than it reflects everyday reality. As this study shows, experiences of self-authenticity falls more often than not somewhere along the middle of a continuum, thus feeling more like negotiated practices than anything else.

Conclusion

By interpreting service as a symbolic space where meaningful work and self-authenticity are possible professors like Daniel and Harry can construct a critical space where institutional forces can be resisted through artful negotiation. Within such symbolic spaces of dirty work—as I intended this concept here—not only can faculty challenge institutional authority and pose the conditions for the (partial) renewal of their occupational culture and structure, but they can also validate their sense of true self.

While I remain confident that authenticity and the self can work as powerful social forces, I also maintain that self-authenticity and resistance can only be both understood and enacted contingently—that is—as complex and potentially contradictory activities with multiple meanings and outcomes which may resist hegemonic power structures while buttressing them at the same time (cf. Saukko 2003). The need for such understanding is especially clear when we take into consideration the somewhat disenchanting notion that what seems authentic resistance on the surface may be nothing but a self-illusion or a conformist act. Take Daniel and Harry, for example. Are they simply rationalizing their practices to defend themselves from the possible realization that they are falling short of their ideal self? Or are they claiming to act authentically because of the premium placed on the ideals of autonomy, resistance to inequality, and authenticity within professorial occupational cultural culture?

The answer to these questions, from a pragmatist perspective, is that whether self-defense or conformity matter or not it does not matter. Mechanisms of self-defense and subsequent ways of
rationalizing less-than-ideal conduct—through the constitution of vocabularies of motive—are common features of social interaction. They are inevitable, and their ideal counterpart (that of a world full of subjects who cannot be anything but sincere and authentic) is just that: a utopian ideal present only in the shallowest of philosophies. Hence, because of the very emergent constitution of vocabularies of motive, and because vocabularies of motive become shared within common social worlds (as in professors’ occupational culture), it becomes inevitable for social agents to conform to a local culture made in part by collective values, morals, ideals, goals, etc. Hence, Daniel and Harry’s practices of resistance are authentic to them only if we accept the fact that the values which inform their sense of true self are not exclusively their own, but they are in fact common to many others and this does not make their actions any less genuine.

From this it follows that authenticity and resistance, are based on contingent interaction, intrapersonal and interpersonal negotiation, and the necessity of compromise with “dirty work”—whether the dirty work is to perform an unpleasant job, or the kind of “dirty work” done to protect one’s self and identity—and not on idealistic and romantic notions of the politically autonomous subject or metaphysical concepts of true selfhood. The genuineness of experiences of authenticity, and the very validity of this concept are thus possible only from a contingent, phenomenological, and multiperspectival point of view. Indeed, as this study has shown the meanings of authenticity and resistance are highly variable amongst different people, as well as across different circumstances for each individual and activity. Viewing the self and social life as reflexive, multi-faceted, and polysemic and viewing institutions as going concerns ought to lead us away from thinking of concepts, practices, and experiences in terms of rigidity, determination, and fixed order. An interactionist agenda for cultural studies, built on pragmatism and contingent validities can allow us to transcend the limitations of critical contextualism and textualist optimism (Saukko 2003) and thus
inch closer toward a more responsible understanding of concepts such as resistances and authenticities.

Endnotes

1. Despite the difference between service and governance, and despite the fact that institutional governance duties are generally believed to occupy professors more than service, professors generally use “service” to refer to both. From here on I follow this convention.

Works Cited


