THEMATIC SECTION

SEKCJA TEMATYCZNA

Johannes Angermuller
Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom
e-mail: johannes.angermuller@open.ac.uk
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4675-9202

Marta Natalia Wróblewska
SWPS University in Warsaw, Poland
e-mail: mwroblewska2@swps.edu.pl
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8575-5215

"It's Creative Stuff!" The REF Impact Agenda and the Discursive (Re)Positioning of Academics

Abstract

The higher education sector is increasingly subject to formal evaluation practices. Individuals, institutions and entire systems are assessed, evaluated and ranked by actors from the public and private sectors. Existing research often focuses on the goals, values and criteria of academic evaluation. In this article, however, we discuss evaluation as a discursive practice consisting of academics positioning themselves across different social arenas. Closer scrutiny will be applied to the evaluation of (extra-academic) impact as defined by the British Research Excellence Framework (REF). Based on interview data collected in the context of REF 2014, we analyse how academics negotiate their subject positions linguistically and socially across different academic arenas. As positioning experts, academics respond to the challenges of institutional evaluation by switching between different and often contradictory logics. We present both the theoretical background – social perspectives on polyphonic subjectivity – and a methodological approach

to evaluation as a practice of positioning and repositioning by academics in the social world of academia.

Keywords: REF, research evaluation, discourse, positioning, repositioning.

Introduction: institutional evaluation as a discursive positioning practice

Throughout their careers, academics navigate various spheres of activity, including teaching, research and management.[1] While, according to the Humboldtian model of the university, teaching and research constitute the core of the academic activity, academics also engage in management, as managing and managed academics. The managerial aspect of academia has been growing over the past decades, which has been accelerated by the rise of the "entrepreneurial university" (Best, 1988; Bertrams, 2015).

Teaching, research and management designate social arenas in which academics relate to each other and also to non-academic actors. These arenas are characterized by specific practices, rules and values. To succeed in their careers, academics respond to the expectations across arenas, which sometimes differ to the point of contradicting each other. Evaluation can be cited as one area in which academics face discursive dilemmas, as they navigate in the social world of academia. Academics participate in ongoing valuation practices in large academic populations which allow their careers to advance (or not) (Angermuller, 2017).

In this paper, we look at the example of one of the longest-standing and influential exercises of evaluating research across the higher education institutions of an entire academic system: the British Research Evaluation Framework (REF). At the time of submission of this paper (autumn 2022), two rounds of REF (2014 and 2021) have been completed. REF is the successor of a previous system of evaluation, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which had been organised in approximately five-year cycles since 1986 when it

---

originated in the context of entrepreneurial university reforms under Thatcher. Like the RAE, REF relies, at least in part, on peer and expert reviews. Since its inception, RAE/REF has grown into a major management dispositif that measures and ranks the research output of British higher education institutions in order to distribute the research funding from the UK government according to performance criteria. Universities doing well in REF will not only receive funding from the government but also enjoy substantial prestige.

By the last evaluation period 2014–2021, "impact", i.e., the measurable effects of research outside academia, had become a crucial area of evaluation in REF. The REF's impact component has redefined the way academics are seen and assessed, not only in the UK but also in other academic systems worldwide, including Australia, Hong Kong, Norway and Poland (Grant et al., 2009; Wróblewska, 2019; 2021). "Impact" is now cited as an established criterion for evaluation in many areas of academic activity, for many funding decisions, as well as for career progression. This general trend to assign more weight and recognition to the extra-academic impact of scholarly work, including in evaluative contexts, is often referred to as the "Impact Agenda".

In the following contribution, we focus on "impact" as a discursive challenge for academics involved in writing impact case studies. We define "discourse" as the social production of meaning through language. More specifically, we understand "discursive practices" to mean the activity of using language for social purposes among discourse participants, such as making scientific knowledge claims in publications or enacting a position of authority in an academic talk (Angermuller et al., 2014, pp. 3–7). While REF policy documents offer a general definition of "impact" as well as some guidelines for how to measure it,[2] it is up to the many actors in the institutions to engage in creative discursive practice to make sense of "impact" and come up with viable solutions to the challenges raised by the policy. To respond to REF requirements, the actors need to construct a story of the impact their (or

---

[2] The REF 2014 and 2021 documentation defined impact as "the effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia" (UKRI, 2022, p. 68).

others') research has in non-academic contexts. Writing an impact case study, therefore, is a challenging discursive exercise, testifying to the contradictory demands and expectations which will often lead academics to reposition themselves. Faced with the impact imperative, academics develop discursive repositioning skills, i.e., the capacity to discursively switch between different social arenas, such as research, teaching and management.

We understand the evaluation of impact as an ongoing process of social actors reconciling different and sometimes even contradictory practical logic related to positioning oneself in the various social arenas of academia. Academics, in our view, are not only experts in a disciplinary specialty but also positioning experts who respond to practical constraints and dilemmas in their social world. Theirs is a practical positioning expertise, which is fundamental if we want to account for what institutional evaluation does and how it is done. But their practical capacity as nimble (re)positioning experts is also crucial to understanding the nature of academic work more generally, including the social demand dimensions of "pure" research.

Our paper draws on the analysis of 25 interviews conducted with authors of impact case studies developed and submitted to the REF 2014 exercise period. Out of this corpus, we have selected three typical cases of discursive positioning under the impact imperative, namely "strategic repositioning" as researcher and manager, "*ad hoc* repositioning" as researcher and manager and "anti-managerial positioning". We have a closer look at some passages where the interviewees switch between subject positions as they talk, while simultaneously reflecting on their unstable place between research and management. We draw on linguistic and social perspectives on discursive subjectivity to account for how the interviewees construct and negotiate their subject positions. Thus, we analyse the interviews as practical examples of positioning dilemmas that interviewees face when confronted with the task of research evaluation.

We start this contribution with a historical perspective on REF as an evaluation-based policy of the UK higher education sector. In the second section, we offer a discursive perspective on evaluation as a linguistic and social positioning practice. The third section presents examples of discursive

repositioning in three interviews with academics who submitted impact case studies to REF 2014. We conclude with a reflection on the unintended effects of the Impact Agenda. While the REF Impact Agenda is to encourage academics to produce knowledge that makes non-academic impact in the social world, we should also recognise the discursive social impact of REF on the academic world. It seems that the REF approach to evaluating impact forces academics to get involved in increasingly complex and demanding positioning practices, which divert energies from other academic tasks, including activities crucial for the impact UK researchers make on society.

Context: the making of the REF Impact Agenda

A periodic system of research evaluation organised by the British research councils, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), plays a crucial role in British higher education, contributing to the creation of hierarchies of importance, prestige and power. In REF, submissions are evaluated in Units of Assessment which cover core disciplines. Since REF assesses entire Units of Assessment, individual scholars do not receive feedback on their performance. However, to select the best pieces of research, universities have created internal evaluation procedures which sometimes create hierarchies between members, with consequences for their careers in the institution.

Alongside outputs (publications) and research environment, research impact has become an increasingly important evaluation criterion in REF. In REF 2021, the weighting of the elements was 65% for outputs, 15% for research environment and 25% for research impact (in REF 2014, these were 70%, 15% and 20% respectively). Impact is evaluated qualitatively based on case studies showcasing the impact of research conducted by one or more members of staff. Around one case study is submitted per ten active researchers. Case studies are usually four to five page-long and follow a pre-given template (for more on the genre of impact case study, see: Wróblewska, 2021).

It is difficult to assess the influence of REF on UK academia. However, the direct and indirect effects are significant. REF constitutes an incentive for decision-makers in universities to recruit academics with a strong research

profile. A typical research university will rely on dozens of support staff to help academics build and write up case studies. Moreover, REF is on the mind of many academics who want to step up the career ladder or simply secure a job in academia. Yet, how exactly REF changes the practice of the academic profession is still unclear. The impact of REF on what academics do as researchers is often indirect and therefore difficult to account for systematically.

Existing studies on impact evaluation consider the issue from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including organisation or management studies (Chikoore, 2016), policy (Gunn & Mintrom, 2016; Hill, 2016), education (Chubb, 2017; Laing et al., 2018), sociology of workplaces (Gozlan, 2015), accounting (Power, 2015), and broadly understood Higher Education Studies (Watermeyer, 2012; 2014; 2016; Chubb et al., 2016). The linguistic aspects of academic evaluation have remained a largely overlooked aspect in these fields. And yet, social actors cannot deal with the REF impact agenda without developing a fine sense of its rhetorical and discursive challenges.

It is through language that a discourse community makes sense of its world (Sarangi & Roberts, 1999). Discourse is also central to the way academics are coordinated. REF rules are negotiated and introduced through linguistic practices, such as defining particular notions and developing a shared understanding of them. These practices inform, inspire and affect the discourse of a community on the level of vocabulary, style and rhetoric. Existing research that examines questions related to academic identity in light of new evaluation procedures has largely focused on academics' attitudes towards the impact agenda on a positive-negative scale (Chubb et al., 2016) or studied reactions, depending on career stage or disciplinary affiliation (Chikoofre, 2016; Chikoore & Probets, 2016; Weinstein et al., 2019). In assuming that what academics think and do results from stable identities, such approaches often overlook the heterogeneity and creativity of discursive positioning which takes place whenever subjects express their attitude towards a social phenomenon. In the present study, we did not encounter 'fixed' positions which are clearly located on a scale of positive-negative attitudes. Instead, we

came across several instances of discursive repositioning, which resonates with the sociolinguistic idea of code-switching (Myers-Scotton, 2017). In conceiving subjectification as an ongoing negotiation between discourse participants, we make the case for a poststructuralist approach to academic discourse that traces the movements of the positioning and repositioning of academics as they use text and talk. We thus extend a previous proposal of a systematic study of academic discourse within Higher Education Studies (Wróblewska & Angermuller, 2017).

Towards a discourse analytical understanding of academic evaluation

When we use language, we usually want to convey meaning. We say something about the world, and this refers to the semantic dimension of language. Yet, as we engage in meaning-making, we also refer to ourselves and others. We cannot use language without speaking from somewhere to somebody. Through language, we enact speaking subjects and inter-subjective relationships with others. Language allows us to *do* things – this phenomenon is explored by pragmatics. From a pragmatic viewpoint, language is a meaning-making resource through which speakers construct their places of enunciation and position themselves and others in a spatio-temporal space. By occupying the subject positions language provides, they can say and do things as socially recognised subjects in a socially structured space (Angermuller, 2015).

The pioneer of the linguistics of subjectivity is Emile Benveniste (1902–1976). In his view, subjectivity is encoded in the language system which is appropriated by speakers in the act of speaking: "Language is possible only because each speaker poses as a subject by referring to him/herself as *I* in her/his discourse" (Benveniste, 1971, p. 225). Speakers, in other words, show their position deictically, through the formal apparatus of enunciation, which includes deictic expressions such as *I, here* and *now.* "The speaker appropriates the formal apparatus of language and utters their position as speaker by means of specific signs, on the one hand, and by using secondary procedures, on the

other. […] The individual act of appropriation of language places the speaker in their own speech" (Bühler, 1970, p. 14).[3]

Benveniste defended a structuralist idea of language; his conception of subjectivity was humanist. He understood language as a system that allows anybody to express a universal subjective experience – language as the structure that houses "the" subject, as Heidegger would have it. In the 20th century, the subject as the zero point of speaking has been progressively decentred (if one considers Derridean deconstructive philosophy). Post-Benvenistian linguists too have emphasised the dialogical and polyphonic nature of utterances (Angermuller, 2014). Resonating with pragmatic ideas of language in context, the linguistics of enunciation has come to view language as instituting a relationship of inter-subjectivity between ego and alter. If ego marks its presence through deictic expressions (such as *I*), speakers address other speakers who may be part of the situation (e.g., through *you*) or not (*she*). Rather than expressing a unitary source of meaning, utterances are seen as polyphonic bundles of nested perspectives that refer to many positions in discourse. By enacting the complex polyphonic organisation of utterances, speakers define relationships of proximity and distance between those who occupy positions in discourse. Hence, by following a pragmatic turn, we defend a poststructuralist approach to subjectivity that asks how utterances refer to complexly configured places of enunciation (Angermuller, 2023, forthcoming).

The linguistics of subjectivity systematises the semiotic resources through which speakers display their identity and that of others. Through enunciative markers, speakers perform social practices and occupy their subject positions in a community. Language, therefore, is constitutive of an ongoing positioning process among members. Whenever individuals interact with each other, they

---

[3] Benveniste inspired the linguistics of subjectivity, whose representatives often forget that the initial idea came from the German linguist and social psychologist Karl Bühler. Bühler's 1934 *Theory of Language* pointed out the nexus between subjectivity and linguistic deixis (*deignymi*, Greek, to show): "the deictic field of language in direct verbal exchange is the here-now-I system of subjective orientation. The sender and the receiver are constantly within this orientation, on which basis they understand the gestures and directive clues of *demonstratio ad oculus* (to show by eye)" (Bühler, 1970, p. 149).

define themselves as participants in a social situation. In such encounters, they mobilise identities, construct their subjectivities and turn into socially recognised subjects of a group or society. In these processes, participants testify to their practical creativity as experts in dealing with new or contradictory constraints. If language allows them to negotiate their relationships with others, it also gives observers numerous cues as to how they subjectify and are subjectified in a social space.

To some extent, whenever we use language, we realise, defend or boost our subject position in a community, regardless of whether or not we do it intentionally. Academics are no exception, as they vie for occupying visible subject positions in the academic space. In this view, academic subject positions are socially constructed places of enunciation which enable participants to be visible and make a difference in the academic world. Scholars are not indifferent to how they are subjectified and attach significant value to how they are positioned as subjects of the academic debate. They invest much time and energy in the discursive work of positioning themselves or others. Subject positions are enacted through utterances, which always presuppose a ground, a deictic centre or a place of enunciation from where text and talk originate. Linguists know that language defines the speaker's relationship, stance, attitude, and affect towards the world. Yet, at the same time, the subject positions created and negotiated through language are also an object of social struggles. While people use language to make themselves visible, they also participate in the social practices of producing and reproducing social order.

When academics use text and talk, they too participate in discursive positioning practices in their communities. For them, it is particularly important to become visible as recognized subjects in their fields. At the same time, it is challenging to build up one's reputation in the free marketplace of specialised ideas. By using text and talk, scholars claim the authorship of certain specialised knowledges and also reveal themselves and others as subjects in academic discourse. This is the case regardless of whether or not they have the position they seek to occupy in mind and whether or not they act with the idea of strategically building up an academic CV.

The discursive practice of academics is not limited to one "positioning game" (even though securing a position in some areas may take more time and concentration than in others). Academics are normally active in several games simultaneously and the positions often most decisive for their career progress are in the arena of specialised knowledge production ("research"), knowledge reproduction ("teaching") and institutional decision-making ("management") (Angermuller, 2013). Academic careers are subject to positioning dynamics in many other academic and non-academic arenas, which include their engagements in public or private life. As academics deal with everyday life, they are confronted with positioning practices in various arenas which they straddle in discourse. The REF exercise is an example of positioning challenges and dilemmas that academics face as participants in specialised research and institutional decision-making.

"Evaluation" normally signifies a procedure of ranking entities to inform institutional decision making. Academics are subject to many instances of evaluation throughout their careers. In the area of teaching, students are assessed in terms of their academic performance, for awarding diplomas and grades. The research of academics too is continuously assessed. When they want to publish, gatekeepers will assess and decide on their manuscripts, sometimes with the help of anonymous external peer reviewers. When they seek research support, they usually make a case following a certain format and are then subjected to certain criteria. At some point, they get their research recognised by an institution through a research degree (such as a doctorate) or a (better) position within the institutional hierarchy. These discursive positioning practices usually occur on various levels at once. Receiving/ awarding a degree entails straddling the positioning circuits of specialised knowledge production (i.e., the build-up of reputation, standing and recognition as a specialist in a disciplinary field) and of institutional decision-making (i.e., the pursuit of qualifications required to move up the institutional status hierarchy). Yet, the positioning processes in these two arenas are organised in distinctive ways: in disciplinary communities, academics strengthen their subject positions through the more or less spontaneous dynamics of scientific controversies, whereas they occupy institutional positions in formal decision

procedures carried out according to institutional goals and needs, such as gaining resources, creating an organisational brand, organising the teaching process, etc. It takes time, energy and other resources to respond to expectations and constraints in both arenas. As academics move through different situations, they need to prove their practical creative sense to "fit in" and build up a relevant, distinctive and coherent profile in the many exchanges they go through over time.

As a social practice, academic evaluation places somebody or something into a hierarchy of value. REF too is a scheme that comprises processes and practices of assessing various aspects of research conducted at universities. It takes several years to prepare, word and select submissions to REF. To prepare a REF submission, academics need to collaborate with decision-makers and professional support staff to present their research activities, so that they can be perused, compared and ranked by the REF panels. This requires the social actors to address the anonymous audience of potential REF evaluators and understand how their output might be received by the latter.

While academic actors need to anticipate how their activities may be evaluated in the REF, non-academic actors need to develop a basic understanding of how disciplinary communities work. The translation of research recognised in disciplinary communities into submissions that do well in REF requires actors to position themselves to be relevant in both arenas. Producing "REFable" work essentially means writing texts that can be received by both disciplinary specialists and institutional evaluators. The genre of impact case studies forces academics to pose as unique originators and adopt a rhetoric of certainty, which is unusual in the academic field (Wróblewska, 2021). As they seek to recontextualise their research, scholars are forced to reposition themselves as creators of "REFable" impact – a process that testifies to their capacity of switching between subject positions in different arenas. Impact case studies can therefore be seen as an especially challenging genre since they force academics to straddle disciplinary, institutional and non-academic positioning games. A good impact case study starts from the academic's established position in a disciplinary discourse and ends with what, in the eyes of institutional evaluators, can be perceived as her/his position in

a non-academic discourse. Hence, as contributors to an impact case study, scholars negotiate an uneasy and unstable place between their disciplinary, institutional and non-academic subject positions. Our interviews bear witness to the actors' ongoing positioning work across those arenas. When quizzed about their REF experience, respondents refer to various subject positions whose linguistic traces can be found in the interviews.

Data analysis

Data

Our study builds on a corpus of 25 interviews (~30 hours of recordings) conducted by one of the authors in 2015–2016 with UK-based actors involved in the REF2014 evaluation, including researchers (authors of impact case studies), managerial staff (heads of departments), support staff (impact officers) as well as policy-makers. In the following pages, we focus on the transcripts of three short excerpts of interviews with impact case study authors representative of three ideal types of discursive positioning and repositioning that can be observed in most interviews.

The invitation to talk about REF mostly met with a good response. Many interviewees viewed the interview as a welcome moment of reflection, which is often missing from overloaded academic schedules (Gill, 2010; Vostal, 2015; 2016). Tensions related to academics' attitudes towards the exercise invariably came to the fore in the exchange. Academics usually expressed their ambivalence towards the REF Impact Agenda and their attitudes tended to be neither negative nor positive. Throughout the interviews, respondents weighed the desirable and undesirable aspects of REF. Interviewees often reflected on the way the Impact Agenda is articulated in the different roles they usually assume in their jobs. For instance, researchers might approve of the exercise "as a manager" but not "as a scholar" (or the other way around). Acceptance and rejection of REF were often intertwined, suggesting the complexity of the respondents' positions, as well as the contradictory organisation of their

academic discursive space. These complex positionings were played out during the interviews, where the positions of the interviewer and interviewee were co-constructed. Depending on the dynamics between the two, various frames of reference were activated. This led the participants to perform acts of discursive repositioning between their various roles in the academic world. In these acts of multiple positioning, we will see how academics activate certain subject positions that enable them to respond to the practical tasks of the situation at hand.

We selected three interviewees who represent the different institutional positions one can occupy in the context of the REF evaluation and beyond. The first interviewee holds a managerial position; an impact case study based on his work has been written entirely by support staff. The second respondent participated in overseeing the impact submission in a managerial role but did not evaluate his own work from the perspective of impact. The third respondent was responsible for the submission in a managerial role but has also authored an impact case study based on his academic activity. These institutional positions reflect the range of roles represented by the respondents in the broader corpus of interviews. The interviews exemplify various attitudes towards evaluation: strategic repositioning, *ad hoc* repositioning and critical repositioning. The first one reflects the conscious and reflexive juggling by the interviewee of his different positions in the academic space. The second highlights a repositioning in response to a specific incentive or stimulus, while the third involves entertaining two opposite attitudes which can be conceptualised in terms of front and backstage performance (Goffman, 1969).

Example 1 – strategic repositioning as researcher and manager

The first excerpt is from an interview with an established scholar, successful in his research work and outreach activities and holding a high managerial position at a university. Before the evaluation took place, the scholar moved to a different institution. However, as per REF regulations, the institution could still submit a case study of his research impact. The case study was authored entirely by an impact officer at the institution. The respondent has a back-

ground as a researcher (many years of conducting fieldwork and working with non-academic communities, including outreach and dissemination) and has also held managerial roles in the institution (which involves evaluating his subordinates). He became familiar with the notion of *impact* while performing the two distinct roles.

In response to the interviewer's question concerning whether "impact" comes into play when he assesses other academics, the respondent explains:

> Well, when I look at their work as a linguist, I don't worry about that stuff. I want to find out if they are doing things that I find interesting and useful and helpful for me. As an administrator, when I look at other people's work, I think that linguistics, like many sciences, has neglected the public. […] [When discussing a subordinate's promotion] I would want to take a look at the impact of their work. But I would look in two forms, you know, what is the impact in academics – what is the impact on their field. And then I would also look at what the impact is for the general public. And that would come into my thinking at different times…

This passage starts with many assertions in the first person. The interviewee thus constructs a space grounded in a deictic centre, from where a value hierarchy is constructed between "things that I find interesting and useful and helpful for me" and, by implication, the other things are presented as uninteresting, useless or irrelevant. In evaluation, in other words, an object is given a value on an axiological scale (which translates Chilton's modality axis – 2017). The speaker is placed in a space where objects have more value, the closer they are placed towards the spatiotemporal centre. The social practice of evaluation is fundamentally dependent on the discursive construction of such a zero point of subjective value.

Yet, characteristically, the interviewee has difficulty establishing a stable and unique subject position. Here, we see a switch from one subjective space to another, which is signalled by the self-categorizations of "linguist" and "administrator". These labels signify professional roles that accompany different spaces

of subjectivity. Speaking as a linguist, the interviewee ascribes little value to recognition from the non-academic public. This changes when he switches to the administrative role and decides, for example, on a promotion case. Then, impact on non-academics becomes a relevant consideration. A double meaning is given to *impact*, one of which can be understood as "impact on the discipline", and the other as "impact on the general public". So, this respondent's approach to impact will depend on which of his professional roles he is performing at the moment – "it comes into [his] thinking at different times". The interviewee is perfectly aware of this tension between two different value systems evoked. Switching between the two is challenging as academic actors, just like many others, are under pressure to achieve a coherent identity across different situations and arenas, since changing one's evaluative standards may be easily perceived as inconsistent and morally dubious by others.

The above excerpt is a clear example of evoking different roles, belonging to the various spheres of academic activity – in this case, research and management. The respondent is conscious of how his understanding of the concept of impact, and the importance given to it, will vary depending on the role he is performing at the moment. The repositioning between the two roles appears seamless, natural and based on a reflexive process – we define this type as "strategic repositioning". This is typical of those presenting themselves as responsive, strategic and versatile academics who are aware of the institutional dimensions of the work. These academics have often pursued their career in the 'central' academic systems and identify more fully with the expectations of managers and policy-makers.

Example 2 – *ad hoc* repositioning as researcher and manager

Our second selection is from an interview with a senior academic who, as Head of Research, was responsible for the department's REF submission. In this role, he supervised and supported the process of drafting impact case studies but did not author one himself. To understand the shift in discursive positioning in this fragment, it is important to know that the interview was initially framed by the researcher as focused on the respondent's engagement

with the REF in his role as a manager i.e., reviewing impact case studies written by colleagues and overseeing the unit's submission. The framing of the interview in the context of REF turned out to be key, as in evoking the REF in her invitation, the interviewer had invoked the "institutional academic other".

During the initial phase of the interview, when the respondent's career trajectory was discussed, the conversation turned to his work and its possible impact. The respondent was not expecting an exchange on this topic, which may explain the hesitant initial response followed by a re-positioning.

> **Interviewer:** I was wondering… how would you see the impact your research has on these areas or other areas outside academia?
> **Interviewee:** Well, that's a… yeah… uhm. That's… that's an interesting question because I don't see any direct impact… in the sense that my work…. Oh no, that's not true! I don't see the impact of [area of work]. That's further back. I see that as indirect influence. Because I think if I can help however in a small way [practitioners in the area] then ultimately that will improve the quality of [work] which ultimately will feed into, you know, the Impact Agenda. In a very indirect way. The other one I think is much more direct. […] My history is of working with people in industry, and consultancy, with direct impact. I can give you examples if you want…

When the interviewer poses the unexpected question about the impact of the interviewee's work, the respondent starts with a filler "Well, that's a… yeah… uhm. That's, that's an interesting question…" as if trying to buy time. He goes on to discuss one area of his work which, according to him, has "indirect influence", to finally bring up a second area of work that has "direct impact" and offers examples.

According to discursive polyphony analysis (Ducrot, 1984; Nølke et al., 2004), "I don't see any direct impact" negates an implied other who does see direct impact, which we can associate with the REF model academic "who checks the impact box". We can understand the beginning of this passage as a response to what the interviewee perceives as what the sector, through REF,

expects him to be, namely an academic conducting research with a non-academic impact. The negation in "Oh no, that's not true!" which follows points to a new subject position defined by its opposition to the locutor of the first utterance. Here, we see an instance of a discursive repositioning from an academic *without* towards an academic *with* impact, which is realised by a dialogue with himself over the REF model actor. The discursive repositioning of the interviewee is reinforced by the initial hesitance in asserting the impact of his own scholarly work (and indeed an initial declaration that it is non-existent).

In this fragment, we can observe the interrelation between the two roles the respondent is juggling: the first one ("manager") having a strong bearing over the second ("researcher"). The respondent seems to be examining his academic work from the perspective of standards and norms required of others in his managerial role. Given that the respondent's role in the submission process was managerial, it is safe to assume that he entered the interview with an institutional mindset, ready to discuss the administrative side of the submission. The interviewer's unexpected question about his own work and its impact triggered a shift in positions – from manager to researcher. Hence the term we apply to this type of positioning: "*ad hoc*" repositioning.

In the analysed fragment, the researcher re-examines his own work. The position of researcher implies being subject to the REF framework and in that role, he aligns with the REF policy framework. This retrospective reframing of his work, in light of the policy framework, seems to also reveal a commitment to the system or a certain "naturalisation" of the terms of external evaluation as the terms of one's own internal evaluation. This case of repositioning as an academic is typical for those who see themselves primarily as academics. While the ambition to achieve impact (in the REF sense) is not very important for the academic of example 2, they are happy to acknowledge it as an unintended effect of their work and thus in line with the institutional expectations.

Example 3 – critical positioning as anti-managerial academic

The last example is from an interview with an established scholar who has authored an impact case study submitted to REF 2014. He has also been involved in the submission from the managerial side of the exercise, as a member of a board that selected case studies for submission. He had moved to the UK from a different academic system. The scholar's responses to questions regarding his attitude towards impact suggest his stance on the topic is well thought through (as in the case of respondent 1) but at the same time laden with emotion. Unlike the two other respondents, this academic has a resolutely critical view of evaluating impact in general.

> **Interviewer:** Can you tell me when you first learned about the Impact Agenda, when people started looking at their own work and looking for impact? Perhaps you can talk about yourself?
>
> **Interviewee:** It's creative stuff. Given that this is anonymous, I can say that that's just creative fiction. I mean, you look at your stuff and you think "can I claim some kind of impact?". […] To be completely honest… […] the REF with the impact reminds me of centralist [communist country] probably most. I think we live in a socialist system, where… I wouldn't say we lie, because we don't, but we kind of… we spin… We try to show a reality which, by some stretch of imagination… yes, it is there. […] It's all true what I said [in the case study], but in a particular way.

With minimal prompting from the interviewer, the respondent discusses his vision of impact in REF as something akin to performance reviews in communist countries, which were notorious for presenting a type of "Potemkin village" – a manipulated construction of reality for impressing the authorities. The interviewee implicitly ratifies the idea that impact case studies construct, rather than document, academic realities. Without prompting, the interviewee states: "I wouldn't say we lie, because we don't, but… we spin". This effort at reframing one's professional biography to fit the current institutional requirements can be seen as an attempt to present reality from the best possible angle.

Academics often attempt to "game" the exercise (Kulczycki, 2017) and this is indeed "creative stuff".

In this exchange, the interviewee consistently distances himself from the evaluation exercise and the overarching academic culture focused on productivity and accountability. These regulatory practices are presented as artificial and lacking in authenticity. In another part of the interview, the respondent contrasted the current micromanaged academia with the more autonomous "old-fashioned" system in which he started his career. Throughout the interview, the respondent discursively distances himself from the UK academic system. He clearly does not identify with the values and practices of the environment he works in, even though he is perfectly aware of how the British system works. Hence the term "critical repositioning" which we apply to this type of discursive positioning.

The fact that the respondent held an influential place in the institutional structure related to the submission and that he himself has authored a case study (assessed positively) demonstrates that he is well-versed in the practices of institutional evaluation. The respondent's migrant experience may allow him to observe British academia from a critical subject position. However, critical views of REF, including the impact criterion, can be observed among many academics, especially among the most research-oriented ones who are sometimes less invested in the institutional machinery. Further, established researchers who have secured their positions and are not working for a major promotion may also be prone to explicitly critical views. During the analysed interview, the respondent inquires several times "is this anonymous?" (e.g., the first line of the interviewee's answer cited above). This is a clear marker of the "back-stage" nature of the exchange taking place between the interviewer and the respondent. In this informal exchange, the respondent is ready to harshly criticise and distance himself from the academic system of which he is part, both in his role as manager and academic. And yet, he simultaneously ensures that his words will not be taken out of context and presented on the "front stage" where the "official" subjectivity is enacted. This difference between the front stage and backstage stance i.e., the respondent's official performance in the evaluation exercise and his privately held opinions on its usefulness is

a quality that differentiates this interview from the previous two, and most others in the corpus.

Discussion: academic subjectification as a discursive process of (re)positioning

In the preceding section, we showcased fragments from three interviews that represent three "ideal types" of discursive repositioning quite common in the larger dataset. Two passages, namely examples 1 and 3, contain reflexive accounts of the respondents' shifts between academic and managerial roles. The respondent in example 1 seems to have no trouble in assuming these different roles at different times, aware of the different values which each of these evokes. The academic cited in example 3 seems to experience more tension in negotiating the different roles required by the academic system. Throughout the entire interview, the respondent affirmed a strong "academic" identity while referring to the entire "administrative" sphere rather disparagingly. And yet, the interviewee's frequent references to the anonymous nature of the interview suggest that the "academic" identity, with the values it evokes, is not always on display. The case of the interviewee in example 2 is perhaps the most interesting, as it shows the act of discursive re-positioning as it unfolds *ad hoc*. Together, these examples show the variety of discursive moves characteristic of the practice of building up academic subject positions.

Based on the aforesaid analysis, we conclude that academics do not usually have stable attitudes and orientations towards the objects and aims of evaluation. In reality, occupying a subject position in academia is a complex discursive operation and subject to continuous renegotiation. Institutional evaluation mobilises different frames of reference that point to different social games. Academics routinely move between roles (such as management and research) and their attitudes towards particular practices or values will differ depending on the position from which they enunciate a given stance.

In the two socially defined arenas between which they switch, scholars address different specialised communities in which people compare themselves

to the academic peer (in the "research" role) and the institutional professional other (in the "managerial" role). In each role, subjects address specific public and imaginary interlocutors, such as the institutional other (the evaluator), the disciplinary community, or other end-users of their research. To each of these interlocutors, a speaker will attribute certain expectations and norms. Navigating these contexts in which one is subject to evaluation from various perspectives is a complex process requiring a knowledge of the norms and values of the different fields, as well as resourcefulness and creativity. These acts of discursive negotiation can be understood in terms of Foucauldian subjectification (Foucault, 1990) – producing one's "self" on the contemporary shifting academic terrain.

The question presents itself: "can academics still speak as 'authentic' academic subjects in the face of institutional pressures and demands such as REF?" While the REF may not push academics to *lie*, it certainly creates a major incentive for actors to reinvent their identities, to be perceived in line with institutional expectations. Some academics seem to develop a kind of institutional façade that they put on when they speak to colleagues from their institutional space and remove once they feel they can speak "in private" (backstage communication). Others seem to have less difficulty reconciling institutional and academic expectations.

Considering the polyphonic nature of subjectivity, however, the aforementioned question may appear to build on false premises. The academic subject is not a one-dimensional, stable and coherent identity expressed always identically in different contexts. Rather, subjectivity is a fragile product of discursive processes whose contradictory positioning logic cannot always be reconciled. Academics may enact subjectivities that appear fluid and still credible within certain limits, a flexibility that can allow academics to swiftly come up with appropriate responses according to situational needs. Our interviews testify to the constant negotiation of academic subject positions. If they respond to and align with the interviewer as interviewees (as in example 2), they also respond to and align with the various logics in their world as academics.

Against such a polyphonic understanding of subjectivity, shifting between these roles and navigating their inherent contradictions is a practical skill and

a resource that academic actors acquire over time. Such shifts, particularly the ones which require navigating contradiction, are sometimes performed reflexively, as indeed seems to be the case in the interviews above – they reveal not constant attitudes, but ones that continue to develop and unfold during the interview. Hence, our question is not "what do academics *think* about the evaluation of research impact?" but rather, "how do academics *reposition themselves* according to shifting norms and expectations?".

Conclusion: the discursive impact of the Impact Agenda

Many academics perceive the historically recent practice of evaluating the impact in REF as yet another managerialist distraction from their "real" mission, i.e., as the pursuit of truth and the training of good citizens (Masschelein, 2006). The neoliberal turn may have pushed UK academics towards an instrumental understanding of academic knowledge as a good that responds to certain institutional needs. It has also increased the pressure on academic knowledge production to serve external interests. Yet, we should not forget that academia has always been a world of competing practical logic. If academics are experts in the specialised knowledge of a field, they are also *practical* experts who are good at responding to contradictory social expectations.

While existing research often discusses attitudes towards academic evaluation in terms of an opposition between *rejection* (critics of REF impact) and *appropriation* (converts of REF impact), in this paper, we reconceptualise the problem by highlighting the discursive practice of repositioning in academia. Rather than having "fixed", rigid and unchanging identities as scholars or managers, academics constantly navigate between different arenas by occupying discursive subject positions which are not always coherent. Researchers as well as practitioners of evaluation should consider that their interlocutors do not have one fixed identity or position; rather, they are active discourse participants who constantly negotiate their social positions across different social contexts.

The example of evaluating impact reminds us of the wide gap between the explicit objectives of REF and its real impact on everyday academic work (Sauder & Lancaster, 2006). Significant resources are mobilised by universities to address the REF impact criterion. REF requires academics to spend significant time and energy on discursive positioning work while responding to the evaluation criteria. Yet, it remains unclear whether the Impact Agenda has helped UK research to increase its impact on the non-academic world. Policymakers would do well to acknowledge the unintended discursive effects of institutional evaluation schemes such as REF and ensure that the costs do not outweigh the benefits.

References

Angermuller, J. (2013). How to Become an Academic Philosopher. Academic Discourse as a Multileveled Positioning Practice. *Sociología Histórica*, 3, 263–289.

Angermuller, J. (2014). *Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis. Subjectivity in Enunciative Pragmatics*. Houndmills/Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Angermuller, J., Maingueneau, D., & Wodak, R. (2014). The Discourse Studies Reader. An Introduction. In: J. Angermuller, D. Maingueneau, & R. Wodak (Eds.), *The Discourse Studies Reader. Main Currents in Theory and Analysis* (pp. 16–36). John Benjamins.

Angermuller, J. (2015). Le discours comme pratique langagière. Construire la place des chercheurs dans le discours académique' [Discourse as Linguistic Practice. Constructing a Place Academic Discourse]. In: C. Canut, & P. Munchow (Eds.), *Le langage en sciences humaines et sociales* [Language in Social Sciences and Humanities] (pp. 145–154). Limoges: Lambert Lucas.

Angermuller, J. (2017). Academic Careers and the Valuation of Academics. A Discursive Perspective on Status Categories and Academic Salaries in France as Compared to the U.S., Germany and Great Britain. *Higher Education*, 73(6), 963–980, doi: 10.1007/s10734-017-0117-1.

Angermuller, J. (2023, forthcoming). The Analysis of Discursive Subjects. In: P. Cap (Ed.), *Handbook of Political Discourse*. Cheltenham–Northampton: Edward Elgar.

Benveniste, E. (1971). *Problems in General Linguistics*. Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press.

Bertrams, K. (2007). From Managerial to Entrepreneurial: Universities and the Appropriation of Corporate-Based Paradigms. An Historical Perspective from Europe and the United States. In: G. Krucken, A. Kosmützy, & M. Torka (Eds.), *Towards a Multiversity. Universities Between Global Trends and National Traditions* (pp. 179–200). Verlag, Bielefeld: transcript, doi: 10.1515/9783839404683-009.

Best, J.H. (1988). The Revolution of Markets and Management: Toward a History of American Higher Education Since 1945. *History of Education Quarterly*, 28(2), 177–189, doi: 10.2307/368488.

Bühler, K. (1990). *Theory of Language. The Representational Function of Language*. Amsterdam–Philadelphia: J. Benjamins.

Chikoore, L. (2016). *Perceptions, Motivations and Behaviours Towards 'Research Impact': A Cross-Disciplinary Perspective*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Loughborough University. Retrieved 15 June 2022 from: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/22942.

Chikoore, L., & Probets, S. (2016). How Are UK Academics Engaging the Public with Their Research? A Cross-Disciplinary Perspective. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 70(2), 145–169, doi: 10.1111/hequ.12088.

Chilton, P. (2017). Toward a Neuro-Cognitive Model of Socio-Political Discourse, and An Application to the Populist Discourse of Donald Trump. *Langage et société*, 160161(2), 237–249, doi: 10.3917/ls.160.0237.

Chubb, J.A. (2017). I*nstrumentalism and Epistemic Responsibility: Researchers and the Impact Agenda in the UK and Australia*. University of York: Unpublished PhD Thesis. Retrieved 15 June 2022 from: https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/18575/.

Chubb, J., Watermeyer, R., & Wakeling, P. (2016). Fear and Loathing in the Academy? The Role of Emotion in Response to an Impact Agenda in the UK and Australia. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 36(3), 555–568, doi: 10.1080/07294360.2017.1288709.

Ducrot, O. (1984). *Le Dire et le dit* [The Saying and the Said]. Paris: Minuit.

Foucault, M. (1990). *The Use of Pleasure. The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 2. Trans. by R. Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.

Gill, R. (2010). Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of Neo-Liberal Academia. In: R. Flood, & R. Gill (Eds.), *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections* (pp. 228–244) London: Routledge.

Goffman, E. (1969). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Allen Lane The Penguin Press.

Gozlan, C. (2015). L'autonomie de la recherche scientifique en débats: Évaluer l'« impact » social de la science? [Autonomy of Scientific Research Under Debate: Evaluating the Social "Impact" of Science?]. *Sociologie Du Travail*, 57, 151–174.

Grant, J., Brutscher, P.-B., Kirk, S., Butler, L., & Wooding, S. (2009). *Capturing Research Impacts. A Review of International Practice*. Vol. 1. RAND Europe. Retrieved 15 June 2022 from: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/documented_briefings/2010/RAND_DB578.pdf.

Gunn, A., & Mintrom, M. (2016). Higher Education Policy Change in Europe: Academic Research Funding and the Impact Agenda. *European Education*, 48(4), 241–257.

Hill, S. (2016). Assessing (for) Impact: Future Assessment of the Societal Impact of Research. *Palgrave Communications*, 2(16073), doi: 10.1057/palcomms.2016.73.

Kulczycki, E. (2017). Punktoza jako strategia w grze parametrycznej w Polsce [Running for Points as a Strategy in the "Parametric Game" in Poland]. *Nauka i Szkolnictwo Wyższe*, 1(49), 63–78, doi: 10.14746/nisw.2017.1.4.

Masschelein, J., Simons, M., Bröckling, U., & Pongratz, L. (2006). The Learning Society from the Perspective of Governmentality. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 38, 415, doi: 10.1111/j.1469-5812.2006.00201.x.

Myers-Scotton, C. (2017). Code-Switching. In: F. Coulmas (Ed.), *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics* (pp. 217–237). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., doi: 10.1002/9781405166256.ch13.

Nølke, H., Fløttum, K., & Norén, C. (2004). *ScaPoLine. La théorie scandinave de la polyphonie linguistique* [ScaPoLine. Scandinavian Theory of Linguistic Polyphony]. Paris: Kimé.

Power, M. (2015). How Accounting Begins: Object Formation and the Accretion of Infrastructure. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 47, 43–55, doi: 10.1016/j.aos.2015.10.005.

Sarangi, S., & Roberts, C. (1999). Introduction: Discursive Hybridity in Medical Work. In: S. Sarangi, & C. Roberts (Eds.), *Talk, Work and Institutional Order: Discourse in Medical, Mediation and Management Settings* (pp. 61–74). Berlin–New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Sauder, M., & Lancaster, R. (2006). 'Do Rankings Matter? The Effects of U.S. News & World Report Rankings on the Admissions Process of Law Schools'. *Law & Society Review*, 40(1), 105–135.

UKRI (2019). *Guidance on Submissions*. Retrieved 15 June 2022 from: https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1447/ref-2019_01-guidance-on-submissions.pdf.

Vostal, F. (2015). Academic Life in the Fast Lane: The Experience of Time and Speed in British Academia. *Time* & *Society*, 24(1), 71–95.

Vostal, F. (2016). *Accelerating Academia: The Changing Structure of Academic Time*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Watermeyer, R. (2012). From Engagement to Impact? Articulating the Public Value of Research. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 18(2), 115–130, doi: 10.1080/13583883.2011.641578.

Watermeyer, R. (2014). Issues in the Articulation of 'Impact': The Responses of UK Academics to 'Impact' as a New Measure of Research Assessment. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(2), 359–377, doi: 10.1080/03075079.2012.709490.

Watermeyer, R. (2015). Lost in the 'Third Space': The Impact of Public Engagement in Higher Education on Academic Identity, Research Practice and Career Progression. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 5(3), 331–347, doi: 10.1080/21568235.2015.1044546.

Weinstein, N., Wilsdon, J., Chubb, J., & Haddock, G. (2019). *The Real-Time REF Review: A Pilot Study to Examine the Feasibility of a Longitudinal Evaluation of Perceptions and Attitudes Towards REF 2021*. Working Paper. University of Cardiff and University of Sheffield, doi: 10.31235/osf.io/78aqu.

Wróblewska, M.N. (2019). *Impact Evaluation in Norway and in the UK: A Comparative Study, Based on REF 2014 and Humeval 2015–2017*. ENRESSH Working Paper Series, 1, doi: 10.3990/4.2666-0776.2019.01.

Wróblewska, M.N. (2021). Research Impact Evaluation and Academic Discourse. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 8(1), 58, doi: 10.1057/s41599-021-00727-8.

Wróblewska, M.N., & Angermuller, J. (2017). Dyskurs akademicki jako praktyka społeczna. Zwrot dyskursywny i społeczne badania szkolnictwa wyższego [Academic Discourse as a Social Practice. For a Discursive Turn and Social Studies of Higher Education]. *Kultura – Społeczeństwo – Edukacja*, 2(12), 105–128, doi: 10.14746/kse.2017.12.5.