

A5: Money Talks? The Cloak of (Pay) Secrecy Experienced by Academics at Two English Universities

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Social comparison of pay and its potential relationship with the gender pay gap (GPG) has received little attention by organisational and employment researchers. This is surprising in contrast to growing awareness of the importance of pay transparency as a tool to promote equal pay. The persistent—and some consider ‘British’—taboo against discussing pay has remained largely without critical analysis. Then-Minister for Women and Equalities Jo Swinson suggested the problem when in 2013 she acknowledged, “I think there's something very British in our culture where we don't talk about money, and I think that is one of the things that holds women back.”

UK academia presents an interesting employment arena in which to explore social comparison of pay. Various elements suggest academic pay should be transparent, such as high trade union density, public sector regulations, and years of institutional-level GPG reporting in the Times Higher Education. However, the industry continues to struggle with a persistent GPG and problematic secrecy.

The cloak of secrecy over professorial pay faced legal pressure in 2011 when a UK Employment Tribunal awarded a discrimination settlement to a female Royal Holloway professor, partly stemming from inadequate transparency. When the case was brought, Royal Holloway had among the worst professorial gender pay gap in the country and no banding system. The judgement was expected to promote university pay transparency in universities up and down the nation. On March 31, 2017, the Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties and Public Authorities) Regulations 2017 came into force. This expansion on the existing Public Sector Equality Duty requires governing bodies of English higher education institutions to publish annual gender pay gap details, with a first deadline on March 30, 2018.

A connected shortcoming of both developments is that UK employment anti-discrimination protections remain largely individualised. The Trade Union Congress has called on government, largely in vain, to allow employment tribunals to provide representative action remedy. Instead, government has raised barriers to bringing an individual employment tribunal claim by imposing fees in 2013 and revoking the statutory Equal Pay Questionnaire in 2014. Discussing pay with colleagues, which is protected by the UK's Equality Act 2010 when illegal discrimination is suspected, could provide a useful reference for academics concerned about their standing.

This paper provides foundational data on the experience of this problematic culture of silence within academia. The research is based on a survey which revisits Burchell and Yagil's (1997) early attempts to identify demographic and labour market factors associated with the propensity to engage in social wage comparison. A web-based survey was distributed to academic staff in two research intensive universities in Southeast England in late 2016. For the first time, this paper illustrates and explores the hidden pay discussion behaviour of UK academics. More than half of respondents report this behaviour. However, a binomial logistic regression model indicates that professors are about 3.5 times more likely to ‘talk pay’ than their junior colleagues. Qualitative analysis of those discussions and links between employment structures and pay secrecy should be further explored.