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Rise of the killer contract

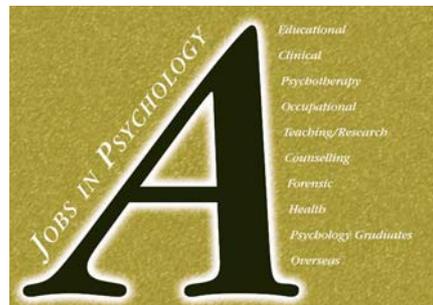
SARAH NORGATE on the implications for researchers working in higher education.

If you've recently been successful in securing a research grade position in psychology in a UK university, my guess is that your post will run until around spring 2006. No crystal ball was needed for this prediction – it simply arose from working out the average length of contract based on 62 psychology vacancies advertised in July's edition of the BPS *Appointments Memorandum* and online from jobs.ac.uk.

The shortest of these posts stood at five months, the longest at 48 and the average at 22. Some 39 per cent were less than 12 months and 10 per cent six months or less. Absent from the analysis – but not forgotten – are 'bridging' contracts where contract researchers (CRs) typically scrape by on a series of one- or two-month contracts. There was much clustering around the 12-, 24- and 36-month mark – reflecting the current priority of research councils to invest in the short-term future at the expense of social science's tomorrow.

That none of these advertised posts were permanent follows a pattern entirely in line with other disciplines – a cross-discipline study by Bryson and Barnes (2000) showed an overwhelming 96 per cent of UK research grades posts to be fixed term. Over the last three decades, the proportion of permanent research posts has gone down from 13 per cent to 4 per cent, while the number of contract researchers

has quadrupled. Notably, casualisation impacts particularly negatively on women – for those with more than 10 years' experience, 34 per cent of women compared with 14 per cent of men were still on fixed-term contracts (Bryson, 1999). One contributing factor here may be the lack of mobility associated with those in a major caring role juggling home and work responsibilities – 27 per cent of



men would be prepared to move anywhere in the UK compared with 20 per cent of women.

Whilst, of course, only a few CRs can enjoy a meteoric career rise to secure a five-year fellowship of the sort offered, say, by the Royal Society, a bottleneck keeps the majority of high-performing CRs in a 'holding pattern'. Even for those without the slightest intention of pursuing a career in academia, the lack of time devoted to training directly sabotages the development of transferable skills – ironically, the very ones identified by the DTI's training working group (DTI, 2002).

So if you are a CR jaded from life as a 'serial-contractor', you will be only too familiar with the day-to-day challenges you face, like trying to secure a mortgage, the strained aspects of the employee-employer relationship and other factors highlighted by recent studies (e.g. Bazely, 2003; Bryson, 1999; Collinson, 2004):

- dividing time between research funders' deadlines and efforts to secure another contract;
- no career structure and career progress minimal;
- lack of training and development;

- lack of a sufficiently long contract to apply for funds as a principal investigator (PI);
- lack of opportunity to build meaningful research networks necessary to open up future collaboration and employment opportunities;
- tensions between postdoctoral CRs and their principal investigator – a relationship characterised by a competition rather than collaboration;
- contribution not recognised and poorly rewarded;
- lack of inclusion and integration with academic colleagues – perceived to be inferior;
- insecurity and inability to plan future life;
- inability to work effectively;
- limits to commitment and low trust;
- disempowerment and frustrated ambitions;
- tension between presenting a confident occupational self and position of institutional marginality; and
- erosion of disciplinary knowledge and academic identity.

A joint DTI and UK universities initiative has looked at the difficulties faced by CRs. The final report (DTI, 2003) included a foreword by Sir Gareth Roberts, who concluded: '...there is still some disappointment that improvements are not yet taking effect in all the areas we might like to see – in greater security of employment for more staff, greater clarity of career paths, and more take-up of the excellent provision that is available. Isolated from wider national and institutional developments, the day-to-day experience of many individual research staff, has, too often, not changed substantially for the better.' Further disappointment comes from the UK's implementation of the European Union Directive on fixed-term contracts. The regulations state that if a contract is renewed (or there is re-employment on a new contract) and if there has been four or more years of continuous employment since 10 July 2002, then unless the use of

WEBLINKS

AUT 'Employment of contract research staff': www.aut.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=397

JNCHES Fixed-term and casual employment guidance: www.ucea.ac.uk/ft&cguide_aug2002.html

NIH guide to training and mentoring: www1.od.nih.gov/oir/sourcebook/ethic-conduct/mentor-guide.htm

Research Careers Initiative working group on training: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/activities/RCl/downloads/RCltraining.pdf

a fixed-term contract is objectively justified the contract will be deemed to be permanent. Although on the surface this sounds a positive step, the JNCHEs guidance (see weblinks) cites an objective justification as 'where there is no reasonably foreseeable prospect of short term funding being renewed nor other external or internal funding being available'.

This spells bad news. What can be done? The Association of University Teachers (AUT) is keeping the pressure on universities, by reminding them of full employer responsibilities to negotiate with research councils and government over future research policy (see weblinks). In particular, they are working towards 'the movement of contract researchers to meaningful permanent posts' and 'to make funds available for promotion within the period of the contract' along with 'access to training, conferences and career development'. Despite the best of intentions of making the case for permanency, should this be the highest priority? Perhaps a more realistic first step would be to focus on lobbying for contract lengths to shift from their current nanoscale dimensions up to ones that at least are more experientially detectable – take the situation in Italy where the government is offering postdoctoral researchers a five-year contract with a chance for renewal (Lorenzi, 2004).

One possible solution would be to persuade the BPS to lobby research councils to ring-fence sufficient time for CRs to look for new posts and participate in career advancement. In terms of promoting career advancement, the BPS could set up 'early career' workshops to include 'question and answer' sessions, 'career surgeries' or 'networking days' with talks by psychology's most talented players – outstanding mentors, gifted communicators, prolific publishers, and those who don't mind sharing what they learnt from making their own career mistakes. The BPS could also help to facilitate a healthier PI–contract researcher mentoring culture by developing programmes along the lines of the National Institutes of Health.

Want to get involved in improving conditions? If you want to offer your support to these proposals or offer alternative ones, or if you are a postdoctoral researcher who wishes to

get your voice heard via an electronic postdoctoral network, please get in touch on S.H.Norgate@open.ac.uk.

References

- Bazeley, P. (2003). Defining 'early career' in research. *Higher Education*, 45, 257–279.
- Bryson, C. (1999). The consequences for women in the academic profession of the widespread use of fixed term contracts. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 11(2), 187–206.
- Bryson, C. & Barnes, N. (2000). The casualisation of employment in United Kingdom higher education. In M. Tight (Ed.), *Academic work and life: What it is to be an academic, and how this is changing*. Amsterdam: JAI Press.
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■ *Sarah Norgate is a contract researcher at the Open University and postdoctoral representative on the Society's Research Board.*

RESEARCH REQUESTS

■ I AM conducting a survey about volunteers with mental illness, their characteristics and how volunteering benefits them, for a chapter of a volunteer management book. Please get in touch with me if you have experience of this group of people.

Rosanna Tarsiero

Volunteer Manager

www.bipolardream.com

E-mail: lobster@bipolardream.com

■ I AM conducting research (dissertation for the MSc in counselling psychology) on the impact of a client suicide on psychologists. Ideally participants would be qualified or trainee counselling or clinical psychologists, but I would appreciate hearing from anyone outside of these areas who has had this experience. The research will be qualitative; participants will be asked to answer some questions about their experience. Please call me with your contact details, and I will call back.

April Facer

Tel: 0117 973 7180 or 0776 846 5668

FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES listed by deadline

15 September 2004

Cancer Research and Prevention Foundation. Fellowships Program and Grants Program. Contact: 00 1 800 227 2732; e-mail: info@preventcancer.org

Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Cannabis research – social and psychological consequences of heavy usage. Contact: Charlie Lloyd. Tel: 01904 615911; e-mail: Charlie.lloyd@jrf.org.uk

20 September 2004

European Research Advisory Board. Awards for Young Researchers. Contact: info@erab.org

MRC. Neuroscience and mental health research grants. Contact: Declan Mulkeen. E-mail: Declan.mulkeen@headoffice.mrc.ac.uk; website: www.mrc.ac.uk

29 September 2004

MRC. Health services and public health research grants. Contact: George Sarna. e-mail: george.sarna@headoffice.mrc.ac.uk; website: www.mrc.ac.uk

30 September 2004

British Academy. Senior Research Fellowship and Research Readerships. Contact: secretary@britac.ac.uk; tel: 020 7969 5200

1 October 2004

Colt Foundation. Project Grants for research on occupational and environmental health. Contact: Jackie Douglas. Tel: 023 9249 1400; e-mail: Jackie.Douglas@uk.coltgroup.com.

A searchable database containing full details of the various national and international funding opportunities for psychologists can be found on the Society's website at www.bps.org.uk/careers/funding.cfm

If you are a grant-awarding body, please e-mail Lisa Morrison Coulthard (lismor@bps.org.uk) with details of your scheme for inclusion in this column.

MRC. Special Training Fellowships in health services and health of the public research. Contact: Fellowships Section. Tel: 020 7636 5422; e-mail: fellows@headoffice.mrc.ac.uk

BBSRC. Industrial CASE Studentships. Contact: Mary McDonagh. Tel: 01793 413275; website: www.bbsrc.ac.uk

National Institute for Mental Health. Research grants for research on mental health consequences of violence and trauma. Contact: Office of Communications. Tel: 00 1 301 443 4513; e-mail: nimhinfo@nih.gov

National Institute on Aging. Research grants for research on aging, genetics and behaviour. Contact: 00 1 301 496 3138; website: grants.nih.gov/grants/guide.html

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Research grants for research on the treatment of adolescence with alcohol disorders; advancement of behavioural therapies for alcoholism treatment; and mechanisms of action of behavioural treatments for alcoholism. Contact: Extramural Outreach and Information Resources Office. Tel: 00 1 301 435 0714; e-mail: grantsinfo@nih.gov; website: www.nih.gov/grants/oer.htm

4 October 2004

ESRC. Science in Society Programme. Contact: Freda Lang. e-mail: sci-soc@sbs.ox.ac.uk; website: www.esrc.ac.uk