Gender Inequity in Academic Profession and Higher Education Access:
Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States

Research Institute for Higher Education
Hiroshima University
COE Publication Series No. 22, September 2006
Gender Inequity in Academic Profession and Higher Education Access: Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States

Published and Edited by:
Research Institute for Higher Education, Hiroshima University
1-2-2, Kagamiyama, Higashi-Hiroshima, 739-8512, Japan
TEL: +81-82-424-6240, FAX: +81-82-422-7104

Printed by:
Nishiki Print CO., Ltd.
7-5-33, Shoko Center, Nishi-ku, Hiroshima, 733-0833, Japan
TEL: +81-82-277-6954, FAX: +81-82-278-6954

September 2006
Academic Journeys and Gendered Stories:
Careers in UK Higher Education

Arwen Raddon*

Introduction

UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have gone through a series of major changes over the last few decades. Different authors have asked what changes such as widening participation (Anderson and Williams 2001), changing management and audit practices (Deem 1998, Morley 2003), and relationships with the world of work (Jarvis 1997) mean for academic careers and the university. One notable change has been the continuing growth in the number of women working and studying in UK higher education. It could be argued that we are now seeing the incremental improvement in the gender balance that will inevitably result from women’s greater representation in the academy. As Walsh (2002) remarks, it was thought that bringing more women into academia would change the balance of power in HE. However, while women are here in numbers, they tend to dominate the lower ranks of the universities. In terms of academic jobs and structure, women make up 40% of academics in the UK, but only around 14% of the top professorial positions (AUT 2005).

If we examine the culture of higher education in the UK, this tends to both reflect and maintain the relative positions of women and men in the academy. Feminist research continues to play a vital role in highlighting the impact of gender and other power relations in academic careers, despite the wider view of academic meritocracy (Howie and Tauchert 2002; Anderson and Williams 2001). And while the number of women working in HE continues to grow, women can still face major challenges and deeply embedded social practices. Elsewhere I have explored some of the micro practices that sustain the male-biased discourse of the successful academic who is focused, aggressive, puts their academic career before everything else, probably doesn’t have a family (or has a non-career-minded partner that cares for the children), and has a very planned, linear career pathway (Raddon 2002). As such, the “silhouette” of the academic (Marchbank 2005), or what we expect the academic to be, look or act like, remains heavily gendered. The fact that the majority of women working in HE continue to dominate the lower ‘ranks’ in many ways reflects the persistence of this gendered silhouette. As Marchbank notes, “…it is not so much that discrimination is overt, nor even sneakily covert, but that it is culturally so strong that it appears nonexistent” (2005, p.142). As such, experiences that are deeply gendered come to be seen as natural, rather than being recognized as something that requires

* Lecturer, the Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester, U.K., e-mail: arwen.raddon@le.ac.uk
reflection, critique, challenge and transformation.

This paper draws on interviews with a small group of women and men academics in the UK to explore how gender can be seen to shape individual career journeys. This includes a focus on journeys into HE, developing a career and more specific gendered tensions experienced in the academy. The paper concludes that there are a number of areas of experience that are shared by both these women and men within their academic careers. However, it is highlighted that certain aspects of the academic journey remain particularly gendered. It is vital to explore the areas in which there are specifically gendered experiences in order to counter their acceptance as natural or simply ‘the way it is around here.’

Method: Telling tales about academic journeys  The research on which this paper draws set out to explore individual journeys to becoming and being an academic. A biographical approach was taken, focusing on individual's stories about their academic journey. Underpinned by a subjectivist ontology, a biographical approach starts from the position of the individual in order to form an understanding about the social world (Chamberlayne et al. 2000). Indeed, such an approach is not merely a means of collecting data, but ultimately aims to develop social theory by drawing on that individual-level data (Rustin 2000). In other words, a biographical approach focuses on the micro level in order to explore how relations at the macro level impact upon, and are shaped by, the individual, and what this can tell us about the interactions between individuals and wider social structures. This approach was judged particularly useful in exploring the journeys that individuals have taken through their career in HE, the way that wider relations have impacted upon these, and the values individuals attach to their profession. By placing an individual’s story within a wider social and historical context, it enables us to explore changes over time and the impact of the past on the present.

Indeed, perceptions of higher education practice and policy can be quite different between those new to HE and those with established careers (Deem and Lucas 2004). In order to consider some of the changes that have occurred in UK higher education over the last 40 years or so, the sample of respondents included different “generations” of academics based in both pre- and post-1992 universities in the UK who entered HE between the 1960s and the 2000s. This is part of on-going research, which aims to expand both in terms of sample and in terms of academic disciplines covered. Thus, this current paper draws on interviews conducted with 20 academics ranging from individuals who were just entering academic careers through to those that had retired. As a qualitative and biographical study, this research does not aim to be representative, but to gather a range of in-depth, individual stories from which we can learn about a specific issue and draw contrasts and comparisons between individual experiences and meanings. As such, any conclusions drawn from this data are not intended to be generalized to the wider population, but to highlight issues raised within these
individuals’ stories and which may have resonance with others’ experience, further support existing research findings, or can be followed up with further research in other settings. As Eisner notes:

The generalizations derived from qualitative case studies are essentially heuristic devices intended to sharpen perception so that our patterns of seeking and seeing are more acute. We don’t use the generalizations drawn from the specific case to draw conclusions about other situations but, rather, we use them to search those situations more efficiently (2001, p. 141).

The academic journey can also differ quite considerably across the disciplines (Deem and Lucas 2004). So, to provide some point of comparison, the research at this initial stage has focused on academics in education and sociology/social studies areas. In order to ensure confidentiality, any identifying aspects of individuals’ stories are removed or substituted and names are replaced with pseudonyms. Table 1 below provides general information on the groupings of interviewees by discipline and ‘generation.’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation and Discipline</th>
<th>Number of interviewees</th>
<th>Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retired/retiring (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology/social studies</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior (6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology/social studies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-Career (7)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology/social studies</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Career (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology/social studies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviewees were identified using a ‘snowballing’ technique. This involves using leads from interviewees or other contacts within the field in order to identify potential interviewees and can be a useful means of accessing a large and dispersed group of people. One downside to this approach is that it is not a means of gaining a representative sample or matching the exact plans that the researcher sets out with. For example, I set out with the aim of interviewing similar numbers of people in each ‘generation’ but this was not always as straightforward as it might seem. Some interviewees were in
the process of a job change at the time of the interview, for example, and therefore were not in the anticipated generation. Equally, I planned to interview similar numbers of men and women, but the outcome at this stage is that 15 women and 5 men out of those contacted agreed to be interviewed. Nevertheless, the aim of this research is to explore a range of biographies, as opposed to seeking a representative sample. The interviews were semi-structured and in-depth, using a standard set of fairly broad questions to guide the discussion, but being open to new issues, alternative foci, and following up on issues raised in response to the questions. Each interview took between one through to three hours, depending on the individual respondent, and produced a wealth of data on a range of issues. The interviews aimed to explore the journeys individuals have taken towards an academic career, spanning from their earliest experience or memory of higher education as an environment or a notion, to considering an academic career, critical incidents that led to this pathway, experiences of building a research reputation, teaching, management and administrative responsibilities, the forms of support they have had in their career journey, any barriers encountered and aspects of HE that have changed over time.

It is worth noting here that the research on which this paper draws aimed to explore the idea of academic journeys, with gender forming one of the key dimensions but not the sole focus. Rather than asking respondents directly about issues of gender, class and ethnicity within their journeys, my approach was to let respondents talk about these within the context of their individual journeys, reflecting to what extent these issues were important to them; although I did note my interest in a range of power relations at the outset.

Gender and gendered relations can be a difficult and complex area to research, since they are often so deeply ingrained in our everyday life and experience. So when we are asked to draw out a specifically gendered experience or issue, even if we have the theoretical tools of feminism or gender theory to draw on, it can be difficult to articulate such experiences. Again, as Marchbank reflects:

A couple of years ago I was interviewed for a U.K. government sponsored project on discrimination in higher education, in the course of the interview I was asked to describe any instances of discrimination or disadvantage I had experienced. This was very difficult to do – I could not produce a single example of any occasion that I could cite as a prime facie case of overt discrimination. However, I could reflect upon the structure of the values within academia to illustrate where my silhouette, this time my academic silhouette, worked to my detriment (Marchbank 2005, p. 143).

Similarly, Goode notes that, unlike ‘structural’ aspects of discrimination, such as an individual’s contractual status, it can be difficult to identify ‘hard evidence’ of discriminatory or alienating experiences that are embedded within the wider ‘culture’ of higher education, such as biased or exclusionary practices (2000, p. 269). Indeed, gender can be so intertwined with other relations of
power in our lives that we cannot ‘extract’ that one dimension of our experience. Is the way someone treats me in a particular situation because I am a woman, because I am considered junior, because I work in a particular role, or because that’s just part of the culture? As such, it is these embedded micro practices that are often overlooked or accepted as ‘the way things are around here’ when we cannot quite link them to overt structures.

An interest in gender is often read as an interest in women and something that is irrelevant to men. The centering (rather than marginalization) of women’s experience has been an important aim in feminist work. Nevertheless, particularly with the influence of poststructuralist thought, it is increasingly recognized that gender is a dynamic relation and that women’s positions and experiences and the wider notions of femininity need to be understood in relation to men’s positions and experiences and the wider notions of masculinity (Flax 1990; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). By considering both women’s and men’s experiences, we can begin to build a more complex appreciation of areas of commonality, areas of difference and areas of overt and covert discrimination.

**Academic journeys and gendered stories**

Three key themes within these academics’ stories about their individual journey toward and through their career are now explored. I start by focusing on the two more general themes of how individuals came into HE, and their experiences of developing a career and the support they felt they had in doing this. This leads to the third theme of gendered tensions in the academy. These three themes highlight both the shared elements and the deeply gendered aspects of women’s and men’s stories about their journey to becoming and being an academic.

**Journeys into HE**  The common view of the academic career journey is shaped by the traditional linear male career model, involving a fairly straightforward pathway from education through to retirement (Blaxter et al. 1998). However, this highly gendered pathway positions as ‘other’ the career journey of women who take career breaks to have children, and overlooks the diverse ways in which people enter or leave academia at different stages of their working life. Indeed, like most modern organizations, jobs in UK HEIs are increasingly dominated by short-term and flexible contracts (Bryson 2004). As such, the linear academic career path is becoming less of a reality for most academics. Indeed, respondents in this research came into academic careers through a variety of different routes. There are some gendered patterns in these journeys, however, these tended to differ most noticeably according to discipline. I had expected to see different career patterns within different disciplines, but was quite surprised by the gender patterns evident across disciplines.

As we might expect, the women and men working in the discipline of education tended to enter HE after some training and gaining experience by working as school teachers. For a number of respondents, the opportunity or potential to change careers occurred once they had reached more senior levels of their teaching career, with the opportunity to take up a period of postgraduate study.
The move to higher education was not immediate, but returning to study was recognized as having raised their awareness of the possibility and attraction of working in HE. This later led them to consider applying for academic posts. There tended to be many similarities here between women’s and men’s stories.

For example, Hugh, a senior male academic, enjoyed his undergraduate days, but left university after completing a degree feeling “ready to move on.” After some time developing his career in school teaching and gaining promotion to senior positions, he was offered the chance to return to university to study for a postgraduate qualification.

I was one of those very lucky people who got a year’s secondment to go back into HE as a student…What that did was introduce me to academic ways of thinking about teaching in school…at that particular time I was keen to get back to school, so it wasn’t that I was then looking to move. But, with hindsight, I think that year was quite important when the move finally arrived.

Although this return to study did not lead immediately to a career change, it did shape Hugh’s choices when he eventually became very dissatisfied with his school teaching career.

Penny, a senior female academic, was “born into an academic family.” After some indecision as to what to do after her undergraduate degree, Penny “turned [her] back on” an academic career to train as a school teacher. Penny’s time as an undergraduate had not been a positive experience, with an atmosphere of overt sexism and discrimination in a male-dominated discipline. Like Hugh, after a number of years in school teaching and working her way rapidly up the ranks, she returned to higher education to study at postgraduate level.

…because what I knew was that I didn’t want to be a school Head…so I thought well, I’d better get some qualifications. So I did an MEd…part-time, which the LEA paid for. Which was wonderful really. And it was just really exciting and I got interested in academic work again in a way that I hadn’t been really since I finished my degree.

For both of these respondents, enjoying the return to studying in HE and later experiencing dissatisfaction with working conditions in their school teaching careers, led them to look at other opportunities. Both applied for research posts in higher education. Interestingly, while Hugh took up a post paying half of his existing salary, Penny’s post matched her existing salary, which she later realized was “massive money for an academic researcher…I didn’t realize it was very good money but I could see that I could afford to take this job.” Hugh, on the other hand, took a risk, balancing his ability to support his young family as “the only breadwinner” with a very strong need to change
careers after a period of dissatisfaction and depression. As he reflected, “it shows you how determined I was to get out at all costs, really.”

Both Penny and Hugh found being on temporary contracts difficult at times, with limited options open to move to a permanent position within the same institution. As Penny noted, researchers can be ‘marginalized’ within academic departments, having different working conditions and rights, and relying on permanent members of staff for continuation of contract:

…one of the things about being on rolling contracts is you’re only as safe as the favor of the current head of department.

Nevertheless, both respondents found the move into HE an exciting and positive time. Indeed, Hugh remarked that he felt like a young man starting his career all over again.

In some respects these two respondents had a fairly similar journey into HE, although for Penny there was a strong sense of gendered discrimination in her student experience of university life. This shaped Penny’s earlier choices about pursuing an academic career. Equally, Penny’s story might have been quite different had she made the same career change with a young family in the way that Hugh did. Hugh worried about his ability to support his family on a lower wage, but he did not face the simultaneous expectation of being the primary care giver, as is the case with mothers in the academy (Raddon 2002).

What appear to be more overtly gendered patterns are evident for those working in sociology and social studies disciplines. While there is a need for further research in order to confirm whether these patterns can be seen more widely, some interesting differences were apparent within the stories of this particular group of academics. Women respondents had worked for a number of years in different fields such as childcare, administration, education, social and health care and leisure before entering higher education. They had all entered HE for the first time as mature students and subsequently progressed through from studying to taking a research or teaching post in higher education. For example, Becky, an early career academic, entered HE as a mature undergraduate after some years working in the service sector and in community work. Her lecturers encouraged her to take on part-time teaching whilst studying. Although her time at university was “fantastic”, she commented, “I never thought I’d stay in academia.” After leaving university and going into a full-time job outside HE, Becky got involved in a university-based research project – an extra alongside her “real job” in community work. It was only after some years of involvement in research projects that an opportunity arose to become a full-time researcher and she began to think about an academic career. Interestingly, Becky, like a number of respondents, had never really thought about her academic journey in terms of a ‘career.’ Instead, it had been about doing research which might “make a difference” and help her earn a living:
I’ve just thought about what job am I going to get with whatever qualification I’ve got to maintain my family and live and still be able to go shopping, you know. I have this thing for shoes and clothes and, you know, I like to go and get my hair done, you know <laughing>. That’s my life. So I never really had a career plan.

Similarly, Lynnette worked for a long time in the social and care field before entering higher education as a mature undergraduate. She soon realized that she did not want to leave the HE environment:

When I was doing the undergraduate degree I just knew that I liked it so much I wanted to carry on, I just wanted to keep going, so the next thing I did was I had an opportunity to apply for an internal grant to do a PhD, so I did that and I got it. And alongside the PhD I did some teaching. And then again, when I was doing the PhD I then knew that I didn’t want to stop really, I didn’t want to give it up.

After completing her PhD, Lynnette took a part-time teaching job before getting her first lectureship at another institution.

These women’s stories reflect the growth and experiences of women ‘returners’ entering HE in the late 1980s and early 1990s (e.g. Edwards 1993). Even for those with potential to go to university when they were younger, these women had not considered university as an option for them, or had been guided by careers advisors away from academic studies towards work considered more suitable for young women, such as secretarial and care work.

The men, on the other hand, all entered HE for the first time as ‘traditional’, young, full-time students; a number being the first person in their working-class family to go to university. After a short time working elsewhere, they were encouraged by academics from the department where they had studied to return as lecturers or postgraduate students and presented with an opportunity to develop an academic career. After this, they settled into what is perhaps viewed as the classic academic career journey: progressing through different, usually permanent positions, generally within the same institution and being guided by a senior academic to do so.

Adam, a senior retiring academic, left university after finishing his undergraduate studies. After spending a year in industry, he was offered jobs at two universities:

And I had the chance of going to [University 1] when they were developing a school there, or… that’s right, or [University 2] because they’d offered me a job as a lecturer and they said they would use my one year’s experience in industry as a substitute for a higher degree. And so I went to work with this bloke [well-known professor] for a year. And so from leaving [industry] I finished up with a full lecture course to give…the year after I’d graduated.
Similarly, Haydn, a mid-career academic, left university after his undergraduate studies. He was strongly encouraged to continue to a postgraduate degree, but decided to “have a year out” to think about it. After working for a year in the service sector he returned to study for a postgraduate degree. As he reflected, he had enjoyed his job, but:

…somehow I always felt like I was missing out on this cathedral of knowledge…I was always missing out on this university life.

During his time as a PhD student, Haydn was encouraged to take on teaching responsibilities and was then to apply for a lectureship within the same institution. He felt that a number of lecturers and his peers had encouraged him to develop his career, and that he had benefited from a “very collegiate environment.”

Interestingly, Daniel, a retiring professor, commented that he had never had to fill out a job application in his entire career. Opportunities had presented themselves and in his early career senior academics had “sponsored” him, encouraging him to put himself forward for posts or take up opportunities.

[T]he Head of Department. Well I mean he was virtually certain that he’d have more lectureships after one year…I didn’t get one until a year later. I was guaranteed it, there was no…you know it was sponsorship…I mean it was an interview where…it was a thorough interview, there was no cheating.

As we can see here, there are quite distinct differences in the journeys that these women and men took into sociology and social studies disciplines. Whilst the majority of respondents felt they had been supported in some way to develop an academic career, sponsorship is a particularly important element of these men's experiences of entering the sociology and social studies disciplines. It could be argued that this model of sponsorship is related to the type of institution and the generation of the respondents. However, the men in this disciplinary area were from both pre-1992 (old) and post-1992 (new) universities and had not trained in the Oxbridge model – which we could argue is more likely to be supported by a traditional sponsorship system. Equally, they included both retiring and younger male academics, so it is a model that exists here for both older and younger generations. In the case of the women, they were trained and working in both old and new universities with, again, no experience of Oxbridge systems. I explore these issues a little further as part of the next theme.

Developing an academic career: Luck, support and sponsorship

There was a strong narrative among respondents of being ‘lucky’ in their progression through an academic career and this was seen across the different ‘generations’ of academics. Many talked about getting their first post in
HE due to a lucky break, and described themselves as lucky in the progress they had made. A particularly important aspect of this ‘luck’ was the support of others, including colleagues, mentors or former lecturers who encouraged them to progress within their academic career. Where the respondent would not necessarily put her/himself forward for a post or a promotion, others had encouraged them to do so. For example, Theresa, a mid-career academic, was surprised when managers suggested putting her up for promotion. As she reflected, she felt lucky in the support she had been given by a range of people along the way:

And there were other people as well like professors, both men and women, who supported me and opened up opportunities for me. I mean starting with my supervisor, my tutors when I did my MA but later on my colleagues and even my senior managers. So to be honest I feel a bit lucky, I haven’t felt that I was undermined.

However, the idea of being lucky was also associated by some respondents with being a “fraud.” The fear was that, somehow, through sheer luck, they had found themselves on a journey through an academic career, but were just waiting to be “found out” and told that they shouldn’t really be there. In many ways, these narratives reflect the classed and gendered narratives often heard among women academics and women learners entering HE. As Morley notes:

The academy, with its claims to authority and knowledge production, provides perfect preconditions for feelings of fraudulence. The hierarchical nature of its organization reinforces social class hierarchies to provide potent feelings of self-doubt (Morley 1997, p. 115).

Becky, for example, remained surprised to find herself in an academic career, and reflected that she had simply considered herself lucky throughout her journey, rather than recognizing any particular skill:

I think I always thought I really was just only there because I was lucky and playing at it and never really believed that I was there because I was becoming an academic, an academic career or anything like that. I was just lucky…it’s quite interesting, you know, I have to pinch myself sometimes to think “what am I really doing here.” I felt a bit of a fraud, I did…I always thought I was just doing it because I was lucky to do it and I’d have to get myself a proper job really, because no-one was really going to give me a job within HE because they’re not – somehow I never thought that was going to be the stepping stone to opening up my academic career… So I didn’t ever think it was on merit or anything like that, it was just that “right place at the right time” sort of syndrome.
Such feelings of fraudulence or self-doubt do not necessarily disappear as the academic journey progresses and could be seen in some other women’s and men’s accounts about their working-class background as well.

We have seen that the practice of sponsorship from a senior academic to a young, promising student is particularly evident in the above accounts of men entering the sociology and social studies disciplines. Academic sponsorship provides a great deal of social capital, giving the ‘trainee’ access to the right people, knowledge and opportunities. The sponsored career journey seems to reflect Bourdieu’s (1988) notion of academic reproduction, through which *homo academicus* ensures succession and the reproduction of current practices (and power relations) in the next generation of academics. Unlike Bagilhole and Goode’s (2000) research, male respondents were not reticent in talking about the support they received from others in developing their career. Rather, this support was recognized as one of the positive aspects of their career journey. Indeed, Daniel stressed that sponsorship is vital to the academic career journey, providing young academics with opportunities to expand their development. As he reflected, this was something that he had not fully appreciated until later on in his career.

But I mean sponsorship, mentorship, these are the things. And you have a kind of apprenticeship…I think I was lucky. That’s to say I was sponsored. They obviously saw something in me…at the time, I just thought “hey, bloody hell, this is interesting, I like this!”

In some senses, this also reflects Turner’s (1960, p. 858) notion of “sponsored mobility.” At as early a stage as possible, individuals with the desired attributes (*e.g.* ‘with some training they could be one of us’) are selected and initiated into the club:

Elite recruits are chosen by the established elite or their agents, and elite status is *given* on the basis of some criterion of supposed merit and cannot be *taken* by any amount of effort or strategy. Upward mobility is like entry into a private club where each candidate must be “sponsored” by one or more of the members. Ultimately the members grant or deny upward mobility on the basis of whether they judge the candidate to have those qualities they wish to see in fellow members…[favoring] a controlled selection process… Individuals do not win or seize elite status; mobility is rather a process of sponsored induction into the elite…sorting people into their proper niches (Turner 1960, p. 859).

This is distinguished from “contest mobility”, in which prizes or status are gained solely through the individual’s own efforts within an open competition (Turner 1960, p. 858); although as Turner notes, these ideal models often overlap in reality. For my respondents, there is a combination of these two
models of mobility, with traditional sponsorship being seen within the experiences of men in sociology and social studies disciplines, but also contest and individual effort for all academics, and more general support from colleagues and managers for most.

This kind of sponsorship to develop an academic career under the close and long-term tutelage of a specific person did not appear in quite the same way for the women respondents. Rather than overt sponsorship and initiation, for most women there tended to be a more general kind of support from colleagues and managers once in posts or during their time as students. Penny noted that, once she had secured her first post, she was lucky to be “very much sponsored by particular people then.” Above all, she felt that her first Head of Department provided a lot of support in ensuring her continued employment as a researcher, and a colleague “taught me how to write.” However, when another respondent, Clare, applied for her first academic post in the department she had studied with, some of her lecturers strongly discouraged her from applying. On reflection, she felt they probably considered it a better career move to work in a different institution after the academic ‘training’ of the PhD. Nevertheless, Clare found this a difficult and disheartening experience. Although Clare’s lecturers were encouraging her to compete in the wider academic labor market, recognizing her value more widely and seeing her future development outside the institution, this apparent lack of sponsorship into her first academic post was a blow for her confidence. This illustrates the importance of support from others when developing and moving through an academic career, and the personal and emotional impact that a lack of sponsorship can have.

It may be that the women academics in this disciplinary area did not experience the same kind of transitional sponsorship because they entered their careers as adults with experience in other fields. Equally, however, this kind of sponsorship is viewed as one of the ways in which the male-biased culture of HE has been preserved (Bagilhole and Goode 2001). Closed systems of sponsorship clearly require critical examination, nevertheless, sponsorship can also be a positive experience and a key element of a successful academic career and developing the confidence to ‘self-promote’ (Bagilhole and Goode 2001, p.168). The question remains as to whether women should more actively make use of the traditional systems of sponsorship to support young women students and academics. This may not sit comfortably with feminist ideals due to its emphasis on reproducing the elite through use of closed networks. Feminist and women’s academic networks provide some of this support in a potentially more open way. Nevertheless, in my own experience of participating in and running such networks there can be some resistance among women (particularly when networks are seen as feminist and, therefore, political) which also raises questions for the means through which women can access these essential forms of support as they move into and through their careers.

**Gendered tensions in the academic journey** We have already seen a number of ways in which gender has weaved through individual journeys into and through an academic career. I now consider some of the ways in which respondents talked – or did not talk – more directly about the ways in
which they felt gender had impacted upon or shaped their journey and some of the gendered tensions that were evident.

The impact of gender within the academic journey was directly commented on by the majority of women respondents, who reflected on the general environment or culture of academia and some of the difficulties of being a woman academic. However, male respondents made very few comments directly about gender and their career journey; although, as we have seen above, gender is as evident within men’s as within women’s stories. As mentioned, this research did not set out to ask direct questions about gender, and responses may have been different had it done so. However, in research where I have asked women and men directly about their views on the impact of gender in their lives, I have found a fairly similar response, with men commenting that gender probably would have been an issue ‘if I was a woman with kids.’ As Haydn embarrassedly commented when asked about any barriers he had experienced in his career, “Well I’m a white, middle class male so I haven’t got any grounds for complaint or anything.” The fact that gender relations are widely seen as being relevant to women and irrelevant to men makes it easier to overlook the centrality of gender within our everyday lives (Flax 1990), and easier to ignore the reasons why we should challenge the power relations around this. In effect, the gendered nature of men’s experience is perhaps best seen by its apparent silence within their accounts.

Reflecting Marchbank’s (2005) experience, many women commented that, although they were very aware of the gendered environment, it could be hard to pin down or clearly identify the exact ways in which gender had impacted on their careers. This reflects the subtle ways in which gender and other power relations are embedded in daily practices in HE. More common was a general feeling that decisions had been made, opportunities and perceptions of them as an academic shaped, by the fact that they were women in a male-dominated or male-biased environment. Rather than open sexism, it was a case of things “going on behind closed doors”, as Anna, an early-career academic, commented; noting that she felt this had been compounded by her ethnic minority background. Indeed, whilst I have focused here on gender relations, these can interact with a range of other social and power relations to shape academics’ career journeys.

Importantly, senior women academics remarked that one of the biggest changes that had occurred during their time working in HE was the shift from an almost all-male environment to having many more women colleagues and senior staff. Two of the senior male academics also pondered very briefly on the fact that, in their early days as academics, it had been a very different, primarily male environment. Several women emphasized that senior male colleagues had been important in supporting their career, however, there was also a strong feeling that the working environment was substantially improved with the growth in the number of women colleagues and managers.

Indeed, the growth of new managerialism within HEIs, and new audit measures such as the Research Assessment Exercise and Quality Assurance, have simultaneously opened up opportunities for women's careers in HE whilst creating new tensions and pressures (e.g. Deem 1998, 2003; Morley
As Morley’s (2005) research with 18 women academics in the UK found, the audit and quality culture is perceived by some as providing the legitimacy required to succeed in management positions, as well as supporting their work in positive ways, such as opening up spaces in which to openly raise and tackle equity issues that were sidelined in the past. Within my own research most women and men admitted that administrative roles were the least enjoyable part of their job, even when they felt they were “good at it.” Nevertheless, there was recognition amongst a number of the women that taking on these roles – sometimes under duress – had a positive impact on their career overall, appearing to help them to progress more quickly than they might have. Equally, however, they reflected on the demanding nature of these roles, and the negative impact they could have on their time and opportunities for research and publications activities. As Morley notes:

It is questionable whether the quality industry is providing a new organizational space for women’s influence in the academy, or whether it represents a form of exploitation of women’s socialized patterns of responsibility (2005, p. 420).

Interestingly, Barbara, a retired academic, reflected on both the very negative and potentially positive elements that she could see in the current environment of UK HE. On the one hand, she emphasized that managerialism was ‘the worst thing about higher education…the constant audit and putting people into boxes doesn’t do anybody any good at any level.’ On the other hand, she underlined that it was equally positive to move away from ‘individual choice and individual’s having power, indeed control, over other individual’s development and careers.’ In particular, she saw that the traditional approach to academic career development – with promotion and development decisions resting in a few people’s hands – had damaged the career opportunities of anyone that did not fit the white, male, able-bodied silhouette of the successful academic. As such, Barbara also emphasized that the audit and management systems could bring about positive changes, if the emphasis of the system was redirected towards learning from evaluation and transparency, rather than using it to restrict or control individuals:

I think that the trouble with the kind of evaluative culture that we are part of is that we construct it so that we only get strokes and we hide the critiques and I don’t think we can learn that way… So if you stopped putting such weight on the measurements I think people might be able to relax and listen and learn better. That’s the optimist speaking!

Theresa, however, reflected on women’s negative experience of management, expressing concern about the particularly “harsh” impact that working with an inadequate system could have on women managers when they were unable to meet demands. If things went wrong, she felt that men were judged in an objective way based on skills, whilst women were judged in a much more personal way based on being women. Notably, Theresa had worried about the same thing happening to her when
she took on a difficult administrative role, making these kinds of roles a very daunting prospect for women:

…this is where human relations become problematic because then somebody has to knock on people’s doors and ask them to do things and they don't want to do…And I can totally see that this system is inadequate and it is particularly destroying women…women, when they become bad managers, are judged on the basis of their gender not only on the basis of their management abilities as men are. So the way they are judged and the way they are treated touches very personal elements. And these processes can crack them down very easily because…you feel it happening, you feel it when there is a judgment about your inability as a woman to deliver and not just as a good or a bad manager.

Indeed, research shows that this kind of treatment occurs for women in leadership positions more widely. Ryan and Haslam (2005), for example, emphasize that whilst men in such positions are offered a ‘glass escalator’, women are often offered precarious posts in which success is likely to prove more challenging, providing women with a ‘glass cliff’ (p. 87). Moreover, as Penny reflected, getting a promotion within the academic career requires women to (re)present themselves in a way that is at odds with the way they are socialized. In essence, to be successful, women academics have to adopt what are seen as more masculine ways of being, knowing and working, creating tensions with what we are expected or feel we should be like as women:

…so you’re writing a sort of bullet-pointed thing about how incredibly clever you are. Well this is not what we are taught to be like! This is boasting…this is what you get expelled from the group for [at school]. So you’ve got to be able to deal with that in yourself to get anywhere as an academic. And you’ve also got to be very sure of your ideas.

Equally, Bagilhole and Goode (2001, p. 168) note that women are often more reluctant than men to engage in “the game” of selling themselves as academics, particularly since such behavior is seen as unfeminine or “pushy.” Indeed, this reluctance to claim knowledge contrasts quite strongly with Daniel’s stories of the academic “rivalry” and “heated discussions” that he enjoyed watching among senior male academics in his early days as an academic. He found these “debates…really kind of civilized”, and an exciting part of academic knowledge-building; although he later discovered there was “real animosity” underlying these debates.

As with other studies, a particular and highly gendered area of tension for women was between their roles as carers and partners on the one hand, and as academics on the other. Such tensions reflect
much of the research on women academics and the tensions with the linear career model, the ‘silhouette of success’ (Marchbank 2005) and the competing demands of home and work. These tensions are compounded by the fact that strong social expectations of what a ‘proper’ or ‘good’ mother or carer (or partner) should be doing often counteract with expectations of a successful academic (Raddon 2002), and the view that, with increasing pressure on departments to raise their Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) recognition, women with children are ‘a liability’ when it comes to research contribution (Bagilhole 2002, p. 48). The competing demands of academic career and family/caring may well impact on men, however this research found little evidence of these tensions occurring for men.

Two of the women respondents’ career journeys had been particularly shaped by their relationship with their husbands and their caring responsibilities. Essentially, when their husbands moved jobs and locations, they moved too. This pattern reflects fairly traditional gender roles and could have some impact on respondents’ careers. However, the way in which we individually experience and read such impacts is shaped by our context and our view of gender roles in the family. Thus, Irene considered that moving had worked for her, as she had never had a particular focus on developing an academic career, and family life came first. Deborah, on the other hand, felt that while there were important reasons for moving, and primarily for the family, on balance her career opportunities and promotions had probably been affected by the need to follow her husband’s career journey. Rather than moving institutions and countries for her own career development, she had moved to different institutions when her husband moved offices. More recently, Deborah had decided to place some emphasis on her career and had not moved jobs when her husband relocated again. An important factor in this decision was that the children had left home, meaning that Deborah’s caring responsibilities and her priorities had changed over time.

The tensions between women’s caring and academic roles can mean that many women academics decide against having a family in favor of their careers (Bagilhole 2002). Patricia, an early career academic, had thought long and hard before deciding there was actually “no right time” to start a family as an academic, and that she would simply have to find a way of having children and an academic career. Indeed, some women felt that, in some ways, academic work provided elements of flexibility not available in other jobs (e.g. term times, some ability to work at home), although these were not actually designed to enable work-life balance. Indeed, Lynette felt that (although not necessarily by choice) part of the reason she had been able to “catch up” in her career after entering HE as a mature student was because she did not have children or career breaks. Notably, whilst Lynette had a caring role for her partner, who suffered from a long-term illness, she found that focusing on her work helped her to deal with this:

…if anything I know lots of people say that their work life takes away from their family life, but because my family life has been a bit difficult at times, work sometimes brings a
bit of release from it. I would say though, I would say that I’m very guilty of letting work just take over every aspect of my life.

Indeed, investing time and energy in a career or paid work can be a temporary escape from the demands and pressures of caring and domestic roles, but it can also provide an important sense of identity beyond caring and domestic roles (Hochschild 1997; Raddon 2002). Nevertheless, these gendered expectations also extend into the academic workplace, and a number of women noted how gendered discourses of caring shaped the kinds of expectations that were also laid on them in providing pastoral care for students because women were viewed as being “good at” student support, again supporting the wider literature on division of labor in the academy.

**Conclusion**

This paper has drawn on interviews with UK academics to explore some of the ways in which gender can be seen to have shaped these academics’ journeys toward and through their career. Within these individuals’ stories a range of issues were raised, highlighting both areas of similarity between women’s and men’s career journeys, as well as what appear to be quite strongly gendered pathways into higher education, and tensions experienced within HE.

The third theme of gendered tensions particularly highlights that, whilst there are aspects of these gendered journeys which can be examined on an institutional basis, such as biased views of women managers or how sponsorship operates, some aspects require a much wider transformation of gendered expectations and relations. This includes experiences, views and expectations of parenting, caregiving, motherhood and work-life balance practices. Nevertheless, although there were strong criticisms of the current environment of HE (e.g. increased pressures for researching, growing student numbers), and the gendered nature of HE culture, the majority of women respondents – like men – felt that they enjoyed their jobs overall, and would not want to work in another area. As Theresa commented:

> There are horrors...But of course there are nice things in it as well and I would never have been here if there weren’t these things that I really love. And one thing I really love is that universities, bad as they are, still create space for intellectual thinking and they do support you when you want to do things.

A range of feminist research has highlighted gendered experiences of HE and women’s experiences in particular. This kind of in-depth research on the individual journeys that women and men have made as academics can add further to this discussion. Exploring such stories does not, in itself, bring about change. However, it does provide a basis for critical reflection on the kinds of practices that underpin
our profession, how we can draw on or reshape these in our own environment, and some of the shared
and differentiated experiences that women and men have of working in higher education.

Acknowledgements

The research on which this paper draws was funded by the Society for Research in Higher
Education’s (SRHE) ‘Newer Researcher Award’ and by a Centre for Labour Market Studies’ (CLMS)
‘Small Research Grant.’ I would like to thank SRHE and CLMS for their support and encouragement
to develop this research. Many thanks must also go to my respondents for sharing their stories with
me.

References

Within. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Association of University Teachers (AUT) (2005). The Diverse Academy: The Pay and Employment of
Academic and Professional Staff in UK Higher Education by Gender and Ethnicity. London:
AUT Research.

Bagilhole, B. (2002). ‘Against the odds? Reflections on women’s research opportunities’, in Howie, G.
and Tauchert, A. (eds.), Gender, Teaching and Research in Higher Education: Challenges for the

of a patriarchal support system in academic careers: A feminist investigation’, The European
Journal of Women’s Studies 8(2), 161-180.

Education 23(3), 281-295.


Bryson, C. (2004). ‘The consequences for women in the academic profession of the widespread use of

Chamberlayne, P., Bornat, J. and Wengraf, T. (eds.), The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social

Deem, R. (1998). ‘New managerialism’ and higher education: The management of performances and
cultures in universities in the United Kingdom’, International Studies in Sociology of Education
8(1), 47-70.


