GENDER AND CAREER IN ACADEMIA

Öhrn, Elisabet*, Angervall Petra*, Gustafsson, Jan*, Lundahl, Lisbeth**, & Nyström, Eva***

In this roundtable we wish to discuss a new Swedish project, *Gender and Career in Academia*. The project starts in 2009, involving researchers from University of Gothenburg and Umeå University, and takes as a starting point the proposed changes of contemporary gender relations within the academia. These are suggesting on the one hand that traditional masculinities are losing ground as growing numbers of women position themselves in research, and on the other hand that present pressures from a performative culture strengthen structures working to the disadvantage of women and other groups not traditionally in power. In the roundtable we wish to discuss the project and in particular its design with fellow colleagues and to learn about adjacent projects, problems and findings within Nordic research on higher education, and also to invite to and prepare for future research exchange.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

It is concluded throughout the Western world that the majority of students in higher education are women and that the majority of the senior researchers are men (see Kurtz-Costes, Helmke & Ülkü-Steiner, 2006). This is sometimes taken to mirror an underlying power relation that allows for women to enter junior positions but not to reach the more prestigious ones. An alternative assumption is that the rise of women students will be followed by a corresponding rise of women in senior research. Seemingly in support of the latter are statistics showing that the proportion of female professors in Sweden has risen with 9 percent in the years 1995-2006, meaning that women now make up 17 percent of the professors (SOU, 2007:108). Also, there are various measures presently taken to further women’s

* Department of Education, University of Gothenburg, PO Box 300, SE – 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden. E-mail: Elisabet.Ohrn@ped.gu.se
** Department of Child & Youth Education, Special Education and Counselling, Umeå University, SE - 901 87 Umeå, Sweden.
*** Department of Mathematics, Technology and Science Education, Umeå University, SE - 901 87 Umeå, Sweden.
acquisition of qualifications for professorship (see Universitetsläraren, 2008). However, history might be said to speak against a near change as women have made up a majority of the university students for a long time (see Jonsson, 2007) without reaching any corresponding representation in senior research. Women are also less likely than men to move from a PhD to a position as professor. A longitudinal study of the careers of 29,000 individuals that earned their PhD 1980-2001 in Sweden concludes that men became professors more often than women irrespective of subject and whether one considered the development over 12 or 18 years (HSV, 2006:2R).

When considering the future development of gender relations in academia, we also need to heed the present pressures promoting competition, international publishing, excellency and international networks. Such demands are already strong within medicine, technology and natural sciences but have only recently been fully adopted within the humanities and social sciences, i.e. the parts of the universities with larger representation of women researchers and doctoral students. There is little research to predict what these changes might mean for the recruitment and careers of men and women within universities. Acker and Armenti (2004) even suggest that contemporary research in this respect is largely “de-gendered” (2004, p 7). However, we would assume that the pressures from a performative culture might strengthen structures working to the disadvantage of groups not traditionally in power.

Previous research on academic careers points to various conditions as important for the positioning of individuals and groups. In this short text, we want to mention especially the importance of social relations and networks as vital for our study. Social networks are vital for individual positioning as well as for learning the tacit rules of the academia (Schoug, 2004). Their importance is mirrored in the fact that persons in leading positions within the academia, irrespective of individual sex and social background, usually report that they have been offered their positions or been encouraged to apply for them (Jonsson, 2007). Vertical relations pose as particularly important for individual positioning, which might be detrimental to women within the academia who often lack superiors of their own sex to relate to and thus have to act “heterosocially” (Jordansson, 2007 p 196). They cannot draw on homosociality which pose as important for men’s positions (Ekstrand, 2005; Lindgren, 1996) and also, for their sense of belonging in research settings (Schoug, 2004). Relations to one’s supervisor are vital not only to doctoral students, but also to junior researchers whose future positions relate to that of the supervisor and her/his networks (Schoug, 2004). Previous Swedish research within education suggests that male doctoral students usually have male supervisors, seldom female, (Öhrn, 2001) which might strengthen homosocial relations. However, there is need for more research on these relations and their implications.
Judging from earlier studies horizontal relations cannot compensate for lacking vertical networks. Still, the former are deemed more important among women in the academia than elsewhere (Jordansson, 2007) and it might be that they can pave the way for individual positioning. Research on young women and girls in other educational settings propose that horizontal networking might provide them more space and help to support their actions (Berggren, 2001; Gordon, Holland & Lahelma, 2000; Öhrn, 1998). Also, there are indications that successful young people might develop cross-gender relations that work in favour of their mutual positioning in school (Holm & Öhrn, 2007).

We find it important to study various kinds of vertical networks in the project and also, to explore the possible importance of horizontal networks for groups within the academia. This is done by taking as a starting point theories and previous research that emphasise the need to study the gendered nature of institutional life and its implications for the positions of various groups (Connell, 1996; Connell and Messersmidt, 2005). The chosen theories call for sensitivity to the intersections of gender and categories as ethnicity, class and generation. Furthermore, they imply a focus on variation between settings and their (gendered) relations rather than on general gender differences. This is in line with suggestions in contemporary research pointing to the need to “move from charting underrepresentation and exploring aspects of women’s lives/careers that explain it; to a stronger focus on the gendered nature of organizational life…” (Ducklin & Ozga 2007 p 635; see also Hojgaard & Søndergaard, 2003).

The study

We aim to study sex–nine departments, which will all be chosen from the field of education/educational sciences. This field is considered interesting both because it is presently in a stage of active positioning, and prevailing gender regimes could be challenged or – alternatively - strengthened through stronger pressures from a performative culture. Also, some general conflicts within universities – as those between theory and practice – are particularly obvious within the educational sciences (Murray & Maguire, 2007).

The researched departments will be chosen to include different subjects within the educational sciences, different research traditions and to vary with respect to externally funded research (cf Haake, 2007). In all departments, relations and positions in research will be explored by focussing on research groups and doctoral programmes, as well as the experiences and views of doctoral students and junior researchers (including some that have left research after having earned their PhD). The latter are chosen for interviews because they are in the process of establishing themselves within the research community and thus assumed to be well suited for reflecting on power/gender relations within universities.
The research questions are concerned with
- doctoral students’ and junior researchers’ experiences of power- and gender relations in the academia locally and globally
- their interest in research and research careers, the perceived options and hindrances to succeed and their actions to position themselves within the academia
- the relative importance of gender to positions in research settings, networks and formal assignments
- how to understand the above in light of a growing emphasis on competition and performativity within universities.

The empirical study is planned to start in the autumn of 2009.

REFERENCES