

Chapter 12

The Career Challenge of the Gendered Academic Research Culture: Can Internet Technologies Make a Difference?

Anne Manuel
University of Bristol, UK

ABSTRACT

It is clear from many of the contributions to this volume that there are career advancement challenges that are specific to women in the science, engineering and technology (SET) disciplines. In this chapter I will be looking at one of the career challenges that face not just women in those disciplines (although the problem here is particularly acute) but women seeking an academic career in any discipline, and that is the gendered nature of its predominant research culture. I go on to consider how the use of Internet technologies (ITs) by academics in their research might be enabling women to meet this particular challenge and whether women in a scientific academic setting have a different experience in this respect from colleagues in social sciences and humanities. Findings are presented from 25 in-depth interviews and content analysis of 750 academic web profiles. Results would suggest that although there are areas where the gendered research culture is being circumvented by the use of ITs for women in all disciplines, yet there are areas where women are not taking full advantage of the potential of the web to increase their visibility and research profile. Moreover, the opportunities presented by ITs are not necessarily tied to discipline and women in SET disciplines appear to be no more or less likely to take advantage of them. Finally in some important respects, the gendered cultures and structures that exist in 'real' society are continued into the 'virtual' one, rendering the gendered research culture little changed by increasing use of ITs.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-657-5.ch012

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is set within the context of the academic environment of UK higher education and in particular explores the barriers experienced by many women in their careers as academics, owing to the operation of a gendered research culture. In this chapter, Acker's model of a gendered organisation (1990, 1998, 2006) is employed to show the extent to which the UK academic research culture can be seen as a gendered organisation and, drawing on empirical research, goes on to investigate whether and to what extent, this culture is being disrupted through the increasing and widespread use of Internet technologies for research activities. The study also considers the effects of discipline to determine whether women in SET have different experiences in this respect from colleagues in other disciplines.

Women in academia have long suffered from the 'glass ceiling' effect, finding it difficult to progress beyond a certain point in their career or gaining promotion more slowly than male counterparts (Brooks, 1997; Knights & Richards, 2003). This is particularly so in SET disciplines. In 2006/7, statistics show that 92% of professors and 81% of senior lecturers in the physical and biological sciences were men (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2008) compared to figures for the sector overall at 83% and 64% respectively. Theories for the persistence of gender inequality in academia in recent years have tended to revolve around the gendered nature of the academy with its male dominated history and patriarchal structures and systems which put women at a disadvantage when it comes to career progression (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; Benschop & Brouns, 2003; Deem, 2003). In SET disciplines, the persistent association of all things technical with men is of course a problem (Clegg, 2001; Faulkner, 2001; Wajcman, 2004) but the sub-text or organisational culture of male dominated workplaces has also been identified as being a major barrier for women looking for careers in SET disciplines

(Sapleton & Takruri-Rizk, 2008). In particular, the academic research culture has been shown to be problematic for women in SET and indeed in all academic disciplines (Fletcher, Boden, Kent, & Tinson, 2007; Harley, 2003; Katila & Meriläinen, 1999; Knights & Richards, 2003; Smith, 2008).

The research culture can be defined as the circumstances and values surrounding the production of research within a department or institution (Deem & Lucas, 2007) but is also used by commentators to describe the wider context of research generally (Fletcher, Boden, Kent, & Tinson, 2007; Knights & Richards, 2003). The primary focus of the analysis in this study is organisational research culture as experienced by individual academics within their institutions as will be seen later. However, reference is also made by interviewees and in the commentary to the more general sense of how research is perceived by the academic community and thus in this chapter the term will be used in both senses, with its meaning clarified through the context in which it is used.

Research has traditionally been vital for a high-flying academic career, with 'publish or perish' being the mantra of academic staff for more than a century (Lucas, 2006). But over the past twenty years, research productivity has become increasingly important to both departments and individual academic's careers in the UK, with the introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) (currently being replaced by the Research Excellence Framework). This determines to a large extent, the amount of government research funding that university departments attract, based on the quality of individuals' research output. Research is therefore vital to the continued financial health of a department, and individuals who are not seen to be pulling their weight in terms of research output, face career stagnation, early retirement, even redundancy (Court, 1999) - a situation which is exacerbated by the current recession.

Given the importance of research publication to the academy (Lucas, 2006), it is fundamental to the careers of academic women that they are seen

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