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Power and gender: analysing the experiences of women for transformed practices in higher education in South Africa (0224)

Programme number: J4

Research Domain: Academic Practice, Work and Cultures

INTRODUCTION

Social structure can have implications for how gender is constructed and reveal social forces, such as power. Bourdieu's (1990) regards gender as a powerful principle of social differentiation. It is, however, in terms of the division of labour in higher education institutions, that it is necessary to make sense of the experiences of women in the sector.

The latest report on combating inequality and the promotion of social cohesion in South African (SA) higher education (DoE, 2009) revealed that racism and sexism remain pervasive in South African higher education institutions. The existing gender inequalities in the SA higher education sector also need to be placed within the context of the global proliferation of research on gender and the prevalent influence of power on the careers of women in this sector.

FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

In analysing the experiences of women in higher education, it is sensible to apply a social theory of gender that can contribute to transformation. For the purpose of this paper Connell's (1987) systematic framework for the analysis of gender and power is used to analyse the data from the interviews with 11 women from five institutions. By challenging the prevailing male hegemony in higher education, agents of change can emerge and current structures, practices and policies can be transformed. Connell (1987) identifies three major structures for analysis:

- ◆ The sexual division of labour
- ◆ The sexual division of power
- ◆ The structure of cathexis

THE SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

This structure refers to the different social structures conditioning the relations between men and women, such as the division of labour, the organization of housework and childcare, the creation of "men's" and "women's jobs", discrimination in training and promotion (Connell, 1987, 96).

The expectations of women and men vary throughout the world, which influence the way in which gender is organized in societies and institutions. Women are mostly seen as the “other,” meaning that women exist only in terms of their similarity or dissimilarity to men, not being defined in terms of their own significance.

Inequality in South African higher education can be viewed in terms of tangible figures, such as that 58% of students in the South African public higher education system are women, while only 42% of the academic staff members have been women in 2010 (CHE, 2011). These figures show an apparent discrepancy between the majority of students being women while they make up the minority of the teaching academy.

At institutional and interpersonal level, women who succeed in getting into management are confronted with a number of challenges. A participant from senior management remarked that, “*People had doubts about my ability to do the job. It was only when they saw that I could deal with complex issues in a firm, yet compassionate way that I earned their respect*”. These hegemonic experiences are not limited to top structures, but are found at all levels where women take the lead. One of the participants also said, “*A male colleague told me that God had not intended women to be leading men*”.

Closely related to the above challenges, is *gate keeping* as mechanism of exclusion, particularly in science, engineering and technology courses. A woman in this field of study reflected as follows: “*I found it difficult to get a permanent position, although I was the best performer in my class. I was married and was told that I am not permanently employed, because that would give me the opportunity to have children*”. Some participants admitted that they found the university as being a shock, requiring from them to be away from home often and that there was little sensitivity for the child bearing phase, but also acknowledged that they had to play this game by its rules if they wanted to get to the top.

Gate keeping has the dual function of exclusion as well as controlling the distribution of resources and opportunities in that particular field (Husu, 2004). Underrepresentation implies a lack of voice in decision-making structures and increases the risk of being excluded, as men in those areas will not easily relinquishing their privileged positions willingly or voluntarily (Noble & Meers, 2000, 408).

THE SEXUAL DIVISION OF POWER

Focusing on authority, control and coercion in relation to gender in the hierarchies of the organization, women are virtually (Connell, 1987, 96) viewed through the conceptual lens of society's configuration of social structures.

There seems to be a complex set of sub-texts of power in institutional cultures that excludes women from certain positions. A deputy vice-chancellor at one of the larger South African universities said that: *"I was constantly 'taught' by men how to do things, while the same hegemonic style was not followed with my male counterpart with less experience"*.

Having clear career routes is necessary as women form the minority and may not have sufficient access to informal networks and talent management opportunities. Misplaced perceptions of women's ability slow down their career progression, resulting in limited tailor-made development opportunities for women.

Hearn (2004, 47) emphasises that "universities remain incredibly hierarchical gendered institutions". The "power and prestige" that seem to have been part of higher education for many years (Husu, 2004, 39) are associated with a masculine institutional culture. This in itself poses challenges to women entering this domain, as women tend to exhibit a different leadership style (Eveline, 2004, 100) than men. Noble and Meers (2000, 408) indicates that male leaders at universities would not easily relinquish the power they have held in these traditionally male-dominated sector for so many years. The participants agreed that it was not necessarily the case that men intentionally imposed these conditions on them, but rather that universities are highly competitive environments and structured according to male standards and criteria and those keep the power of men intact.

THE STRUCTURE OF CATHEXIS

"Cathexis," in Connell's terms, refers to the constraints in people's emotional attachments to each other. At institutional level social norms and affective attachments are maintained by social mechanisms such as the biases. One of the participants mentioned that when a colleague suggested that she take over as chair of the research committee, the dean asked: *"Do you think she'll be able to do it? Remember she's a woman!"*

Universities have always played an important role in the cultural, intellectual, and scientific leadership of the country. In Bourdieu's (1994, 127) words, universities form the "core of the scholarly field". Within this context one needs to question whether knowledge production should be associated with maleness, or whether that is not a narrow lens on knowledge generation. Wyn (2000) indicates that even research has a hidden curriculum, with certain areas being stereotypically perceived as being outside the mainstream of maleness. Qualitative inquiries, feminist research and research on women are paradoxically referred to as unscientific research practices. One participant mentioned that when she applied for funding to deliver a paper at an international conference on gender equity, her application was declined, because *"feminist research was regarded to be trivial"*.

CONCLUSION

Connell's theory opened up new possibilities for the gendered ordering of societies. Patterns placing women in subordinate positions need to be revealed (Connell, 1987, 159) as it becomes necessary to transform traditional ways into new patterns for future social and institutional practice.

The experiences of the participating women clearly relied on the tacit assumption that men are the human type and women are subordinates. By perpetuating the presumed bimodal character of women's lives and responsibilities, their marginalization in a male-dominated field, such as higher education institutions, is guaranteed. The irony is that the generation of knowledge and scholarship is then blurred by stereotypical assumptions.

According to Epstein (2007, 2), this gender-specific divide is the one most resistant to social transformation, therefore higher education managers and policy makers have to seriously engage in bringing about transformation by

- ◆ increasing the *voices of women* through practices and policies;
- ◆ acknowledging that people can have multiple identities without derailing them from their goals;
- ◆ developing strategies that include the funding of and awards to women on a scale that is comparable with men's, but not necessarily the same;
- ◆ delineating women's career paths;
- ◆ by establishing an inviting culture for both man and women;
- ◆ acknowledging women's unique styles of researching and leading and that they should not merely be replicating male practice;
- ◆ ensuring significant representation and decision-making at all levels, otherwise the struggle to transform the structures and gain power will continue;
- ◆ ensuring that the generation of knowledge and leadership in the higher education arena becomes gender-blind.

These insights into the experiences of women generated theory that can equip institutions to acknowledge the role of discursive power and allow women to claim their agency in transforming the institution.

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