

An autoethnographic conversation between colleagues across three different universities. An invitation to reflect on women in academia. (0274)

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The experiences of women academics continue to be much discussed with the issues being described even quite recently as “complex and fraught with myths, gross generalisations and mixed emotions” (Barakat, 2014,p1)

According to the latest available HESA data (Dec 2012) 45% of academic staff were female with 36% being employed on fixed-term contracts - but a far smaller percentage are in top roles in HE.

Writing of the work that led to Bostock’s 2014 book *The Meaning of Success: Insights from women at Cambridge* Barakat states that there is “rich evidence that women are not all the same - their experiences are not the same, the value they bring to the university is not the same and their paths to success are very different” (op cit, 2014).

Bostock’s study, which initially uses questionnaires with 126 women, presents interviews with 26 who reflect a “range of perspectives, ages, backgrounds, levels of seniority and views on their working lives” but are also “viewed by their colleagues as being successful women”. It also speaks of “the university” (op cit, 2014).

One of the ways our new work builds on the above is by offering perspectives from what we will argue are three different forms of “the university”. Thus by offering a lens on three different HE institutions, we will offer a further range of experiences. One of us works in a Russell group institution, one in a well-established Post ’92 - and the third in a university that had college status until two years ago. Between us we have experience of being involved with a professional women’s group for over fifteen years and one of us is in at the start of a new women’s forum at one university that attracted over sixty participants at its inaugural meeting in June this year. There is indeed still a keen interest in ‘women in academia’.

Rather than using interviews, we explore our experiences as women in HE using autoethnography and collective biography. In presenting our work at the conference, we propose to share our autoethnographic conversation and invite those present to reveal any resonances with their own experiences.

Our reasons for this are several. Autoethnography is a methodological approach that connects ‘self with others, self with the social, and self with the context’ (Njunjuri et al. 2010: 3), an approach with much potential for investigating women’s experiences in academia, yet one that is rarely used in higher education research.

This may be because of a reluctance, for legitimate reasons, to 'lay bare our innermost thoughts and concerns' (Armstrong, 2008, no page number) or it may be because many academics share Delamont's (2009) contention that the responsibility of an academic researcher is to investigate others' lives.

Yet autoethnography can challenge or trouble established ways of thinking about academic identities, illuminating how those individual identities are connected, inextricably, with the social, cultural and historical landscapes of higher education thus, in investigating our own lives, we are, inevitably, connecting with the lives of others.

In addition, separating the personal from the professional is no longer useful in academic life; we need to be aware of our own values and beliefs and where they might be challenged by alternative ones, if we are to function effectively in our complex, multi-layered environments (see, for example, Author 2, 2015).

Scrutinising and rendering visible to others how we construct our identities as university academics is risky, not only because it is not that common, but also because it renders us vulnerable and susceptible to being disparaged for being self-indulgent – another common criticism of autoethnography. Yet, by engaging in autoethnographic conversations about our experiences as female academics, we contend that, rather than being self-indulgent, we are being 'self-luminous'. Thus through connecting our 'selves' with the context and connecting our 'selves' with the 'social' and with 'others' we offer a transparent articulation (Sparkes, 2002, p.214). 'The portraitist's reference to her own life story does not reduce the reader's trust- it enhances it. It does not distort the responsibility of the researcher and the authenticity of the work; it gives them clarity' (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p.96, cited Feuerverger, 2012, p.363), thus 'others' may be moved to reflect critically on their own similar experiences.

Our experiences of autoethnography echo the words of Hayler (2011) that 'valuable insights into the work and identity... can be gained by examining our own memories and beliefs and [that] the narrative discourses through which we understand ourselves and our work are a source of rich description and insight' (p.1).

We also acknowledge the influences of collective biography on our conversations and writing. Collective biography is a form of research methodology – and a method of collaborative writing - that encompasses collaborative data collection and analysis. Collective biography can 'make visible, palpable and hearable the constitutive effect of dominant discourses...and open both ourselves and discourse to the possibility of change' (Davies & Gannon, 2006, 5).

The 2014 study of the women in Cambridge is both fascinating and illuminating. Our work, arguably not predicated on such a clear notion of success, but a topic that nonetheless features in our conversation will, we hope develop some aspects of the discussion further. By recognising more fully the 'constitutive effects of dominant discourses' we want to offer something around 'the possibility of change'. This is the aim for us certainly – but also our hope for those that listen to our conversation. By providing our audience with an opportunity to consider what may resonate with them, not only may we provide further evidence that indeed we "are not all the same" (Barakat, 2014, p1), but by sharing together we may better appreciate the differences and be strengthened and motivated to action by a deeper understanding of the rich variety of experiences of women in academia.

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