

The Doctorate: A Gendered Experience? (0012)

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This paper examines women doctoral students' perceptions of academia, and reflects on how the doctorate may be viewed as a gendered experience. It is situated within literature highlighting the persistence of gender inequality in academia and the gendered nature of doctoral study. Studies note that women experience discrimination within the academy (Knights and Richards, 2003), and may have less positive experiences of doctoral study than men (White 2004). Yet, data from a qualitative, longitudinal study reveals that though some participants acknowledged the existence of gendered barriers for women in academia, they did not perceive that gender affected their experience of doctoral study, or expect these barriers to impact on them in the future, should they decide to pursue an academic career. This paper explores this gap between their perceptions of academia as a somewhat negative environment for women, and their reflections on their own experiences in the present, and expectations for the future.

Usually conceived of as the start of an academic career, the doctorate has traditionally been viewed as an apprenticeship with students as apprentices (Park, 2005). However, studies such as the Wellcome Trust (2012) and the Royal Society of Chemistry (2008) found a significant gender difference in the post-doctoral career choices of scientists; the Wellcome Trust (2012: 6) observed that 'most of the women in this group who left academia did so straight after their PhD; suggesting that their experience during the PhD, and/or their perception of what post-doctoral academic work might be like, influenced their decision'. Despite evidence of the gendered nature of academic careers and the implications of this for women doctoral students and their potential careers in academia, there has been little investigation into the career aspirations of women doctoral students and whether or not they perceive gender to be a barrier to pursuing an academic career.

Carter et al. (2013: 342) frame the doctorate as an innately gendered experience, arguing that the process of studying a doctorate is affected by 'a candidate's ability to...step into an authority symbolically and historically gendered masculine'. Research in Australia has highlighted gendered aspects of doctoral study, particularly in relation to support for career development. Dever et al. (2008: 26) conducted a longitudinal study examining gender differences in post-PhD employment in Australian universities, and found that 'female graduates reported significantly less encouragement than males in those areas relevant to building academic careers: to publish their own work; to prepare funding proposals; to give conference papers; and to develop professional relationships'.

van Anders (2004) has highlighted the various barriers women may face to pursuing a career in academia, including discrimination in recruitment, the need for geographical mobility to pursue jobs and the perception that combining an academic career and childcare would be difficult. These barriers are noted by nearly all of the participants in a study which focuses on the career aspirations of women doctoral students. Yet despite acknowledging the existence of these gendered barriers for women in academia, they did not perceive that gender affected their experience of doctoral study, or expect these barriers to impact on them in the future, should they decide to pursue an academic career.

Data gathered through interviews and research diaries indicates that participants were generally aware of gender-specific barriers facing women in academia. Most participants

noted the lack of women in particular disciplines or in senior roles, though they didn't all attribute this to gender discrimination. Many noted the difficulties they saw women academics around them experience in relation to balancing childcare with their work. A small number of participants highlighted their concerns about experiencing discrimination in the future, when they began applying for academic jobs. Perceptions of academia were largely negative, even amongst those who expressed a desire to pursue an academic career after their doctorate. Those who were considering academic careers acknowledged their concerns about potentially combining family life with their work, and expected to encounter other barriers such as having to relocate to find work. However, few participants felt that their experiences of studying for a doctorate had been directly affected by their gender. However, many discussed incidents where gender had clearly been a factor; whether this was feeling that they had been treated differently to a male peer, being questioned about their decision to return to study at their age, or experiencing sexual harassment.

Significantly, three participants- all of whom were younger doctoral students (those who had begun their PhD immediately or very shortly after graduation from their undergraduate or Masters degree), though they acknowledged the existence of gendered barriers for women in academia, did not perceive that gender affected their experience of doctoral study, or expect these barriers to impact on them in the future. They had been academically successful in the previous stages of their education and therefore expected to go on to be successful in their future career. This conflict between participants' negative perceptions of academia as a workplace for women, and their expectations of future success is explored in relation to Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) theory of individual agency and career development.

This paper reflects on the extent to which the doctorate can be viewed as gendered. Examining existing research and drawing on emerging findings from my research, it highlights the gendered experiences of women during the doctorate, and the extent to which participants acknowledge gender as influencing their experience of doctoral study. It explores how some of the participants in this study constructed themselves as successful future academics whilst simultaneously acknowledging the gendered barriers which exist for women in academia. It concludes by arguing that though the doctorate may be a gendered experience, it may not always be perceived as such by some women doctoral students, or necessarily affect their aspirations of an academic career.

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