Imagining Our Futures: Exploring how women doctoral students negotiate academic career-possible selves (0196)

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Using possible selves theory (Markus and Nurius, 1986), this paper explores how women doctoral students perceived the prospect of becoming an academic. It draws on qualitative data from my doctoral research with 13 participants at two institutions, and presents the analysis of data from multiple interviews and from participants' letters to their future selves. This paper shows how participants negotiated traditional notions of academic identity in considering an academic future, often constructing career-possible selves which positioned them as 'other' within the academy. I explore the barriers participants envisaged to pursuing an academic career, and the impact of disciplinary, departmental and institutional cultures. This paper contributes to literature on post-PhD career trajectories, academic cultures, and women's experiences of academia, drawing on discourses of belonging and identity to illuminate how women doctoral students negotiated the possibility of taking on an academic identity.

The context of this paper is the gendered nature of UK higher education (Knights and Richards, 2003). Literature illuminates the persistence of gender inequalities in higher education; women continue to be under-represented in senior roles as well as in STEMM disciplines (Equality Challenge Unit, 2016). Previous studies have identified gender inequalities within the process of studying for a doctorate, finding that women may have less positive experiences than men due to gender discrimination and marginalisation within masculinised academic cultures (de Welde and Laursen, 2011; White, 2013). The experience of doctoral study can discourage women students from pursuing an academic career (Guest *et al*., 2013; Hatchell and Aveling, 2008). Research has identified gendered patterns in the post-PhD career aspirations of doctoral students in the sciences, with women being far less likely than their male peers to want an academic career after completing their studies (Royal Society of Chemistry, 2008; Wellcome Trust, 2013). There are potentially damaging consequences for higher education institutions; 'universities…will not survive, because we have no reason to believe we are attracting the best and the brightest' (Rice, 2012: 1). Thus, how women doctoral students perceive academic careers has implications for the future of the sector.

This paper is grounded in literature which illuminates the gendered nature of disciplinary and departmental cultures (Becher and Trowler, 2001), and feminist work which argues that the culture of academic institutions is inherently masculine (Parsons and Priola, 2013). Research shows how doctoral students form identities in relation to their discipline and its culture (Delamont, Atkinson and Parry, 2000). I extend this argument, maintaining that women doctoral students also construct future identities - or possible selves - in relation to their experiences of academic cultures, and whether or not they were able to envisage themselves belonging to these cultures in the future, after the doctorate.

Possible selves theory is drawn on to highlight the plurality of potential futures that participants imagined, and illuminate how these different possible futures were perceived. This theory has been little utilised in higher education research in the UK, with the exception of Stevenson (2012). Possible selves are 'conceptions of the self in future states' (Leondari *et al*., 1998: 154), and some selves may be more developed, or elaborated, than others. Significantly, 'the more elaborate and vivid a possible self is, the more it organizes and motivates a person' (Chalk *et al*., 2005: 189). Yet, an individuals' repertoire of possible selves can 'only include those selves that it is possible to perceive' (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011: 233). Participants' possible selves were shaped by their experiences during the doctorate, wherein they learned what becoming an academic would involve. Structural issues relating to academic careers, such as the pressure to publish and the expectation of geographic mobility particularly during the early career stage, often meant that academic career-possible selves were not elaborated or desired.

Though most participants did aspire to, or at least consider, an academic career at some stage during their PhD, their academic career-possible selves were constructed in a way which positioned these future selves as 'outsiders' in the academy (White, 2013). A number of participants envisaged academic career-possible selves who would face gender discrimination and struggle to progress. Structural factors which made it difficult for participants to construct positive academic-career possible selves included those relating to academic working practices, such as the expectation of total dedication to work (Lynch, 2010). Participants envisaged academic career-possible selves who would find gaining employment difficult, and often struggled to envisage academic selves at all when they considered the challenge of balancing an academic career with family life. The factors which shaped participants' career-possible selves were visibly gendered; those who started their PhD later in life were particularly concerned about the precarious structures of academic

labour and the possibility of being employed on insecure contracts whilst trying to start a family.

These issues were compounded by participants' experiences of disciplinary, departmental and institutional cultures. Those who witnessed women academics face discrimination and struggle with caring responsibilities with little support from their department were discouraged by these experiences, and thus found it more difficult to envisage positive, elaborated academic career-possible selves. These issues of belonging and otherness significantly influenced career aspirations; participants who experienced marginalisation and discrimination during their doctorate were less likely to elaborate positive academic career-possible selves. Interactions with peers, supervisors and academic staff were key to shaping the possible selves that participants were able to envisage.

This paper makes a valuable contribution to discussions about gender and the academy. It addresses a gap in knowledge about how women's experiences of doctoral study affect career aspirations across disciplines. It makes a theoretical contribution to possible selves literature through utilising this theory in a new context. Further, its examination of academic cultures in relation to women doctoral students' career aspirations has implications for literature on belonging in higher education, and academic identities. Finally, the findings uncover the ways in which exclusionary practices within academia persist and operate along gendered lines, often at the micro-level and under the radar. This paper has implications for the higher education sector, current and future doctoral students, and those involved in doctoral education and support.

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