

### **N3.5 Beaumaris 2 Thursday 6 December 16.00 - 18.00**

#### ***Project research, children, and securing the next contract - navigating the traps on a precarious career trajectory (0404)***

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In this paper, I highlight the limitations of the feminine-masculine dichotomy, when aiming to address the conditions of career-making. Consequently, I propose a shift in perspective when addressing the conditions of academic career-making. Rather than academic activities in gendered terms, I maintain that attention should be on career agency; how and whether the locally shared practical understanding of femininity and masculinity shapes engagement with academic practices and the subsequent career agency. In the context of a Finnish business school, femininity is prescribed as an active stance rather than rejected one. While this stance furthers the understanding of research being a suitable line of work for women with young families, engagement with research is not necessarily enough to secure career continuity. As the current recruitment tend to favor those with long publication lists, engagement with project research can be detrimental for career progression, as well.

#### **Keywords:**

Academic careers, academic women, gender practices, practice-based study, career agency

The question of excellence and inclusion is a pressing one when it comes to gender equality. While academia wants to present itself as gender neutral and truly meritocratic, there are indications that the very notion of excellence is inherently gendered (van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). Along these lines, policies that aim to enhance productivity and accountability of academic work could be seen be in contradiction with the demands of inclusivity; as the requirements are based on characteristics and qualities often associated with masculinity. In this context, Finland is an interesting case owing to the perception of being advanced in the questions of gender equality and the increase in women's engagement with research activities. The existing research draws attention to the individualistic interpretations promoting post-feminist understanding in which the personal characteristics are considered irrelevant at the same time that there are indications of increasing polarization amongst Finnish academics (Nikunen, 2012; Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). Consequently, the question of how women make their careers becomes a point of interest.

To address the careers of academic women, I draw on the notion of career agency. Starting from a definition of career agency a process of work-related social engagements 'through which an individual invests in his or her career' (Tams & Arthur, 2010: 630), I propose an approach which explores how the locally shared practical understanding of femininity and masculinity shapes engagement with academic practices, and how this, in return, furthers academic career-making. This concurs with on the principles of practice-based studies (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011), which in this context is understood as an ontological stance that frames social as emergent from intertwined and mutually constitutive practices. Thus, I understand gender as a social practice amongst others and I emphasize the intertwinement of gender practices with other ongoing practices. Consequently, while my conceptualization retains the reference to gender categories, these gender categories are used as exploratory rather than explanatory frames. Along these lines, my empirical analysis draws attention to on how the locally shared practical understanding of femininity furthers engagement with academic work, and subsequently, contributes to career agency.

The empirical data utilized in this paper is initially collected in the context of a holistic multi-case study, in which the focus is on the career of academic women in two business school, one located in Finland another in England. That said, I focus in this paper solely on my Finnish interviews, in total 15, which

were conducted in early 2015. The data analysis draws on the methods of grounded theory, in vivo coding followed by focused coding. The rationale for relying on grounded theory was to identify the local ways of saying and seeing that result in the local practical understanding of femininity and masculinity and how these intertwine with the organization of academic work and the subsequent conditions of career agency.

Based on the analysis, there can be identified three areas that on one hand furthers women's engagement with academic career-making, on the other hand, accumulates into career barriers. These are the understanding of femininity as an active stance rather than a rejected one, the understanding of academic research as flexible work, and thus, suitable for women with young families, and the precarious conditions of academic career-making in which engagement with project research might further employment but not necessarily career-making. While two first areas give an impression of a positive career context for academic women, there are references to feelings of exhaustion when attempting to manage it all. That said, the third area draws attention to the influence of wider field on conditions of career agency. As universities rely increasingly on externally funded project research to fund their activities, externally funded projects often provide short-term employment for those, who do not have a permanent contract. In practical terms, the tight project cycle seldom leaves any time for academic writing, which consequently, results in shorter publications lists. In a context where securing a permanent contract is one of the major career moves, the open-call recruitments for permanent positions form a point, in which the engagement with project research or staying home with children can result in a career barrier that is hard to overcome.

To conclude, the case of Finnish business school highlights how the inequalities in career agency is not necessarily captured along the lines of feminine-masculine division in all cases, and moreover, how the inequalities in career agency accumulate over the time. While research is considered as a suitable line of work for academic women because of its flexibility in comparison of other lines of work, it is only the engagement with right kind of research activities that furthers academic career-making. Along these lines, while project research might provide a short term solution in a form of employed, being a project researcher for an extensive period of time results in a career trap, which cannot be escaped easily owing to the tight project cycles. Thus, while active framing of femininity might address the issues around gender, there are other forms of inequalities, which might go undetected when the focus is solely on gender presentations.

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**Biography:** Katja Jönsas has an undergraduate degree in anthropology from University of Helsinki, a research master in social sciences from VU University, Amsterdam, whereas her PhD is in the field of management and is going to from University of Roehampton. In her research, she draws on the principles of practice-based studies and explores how the organization of academic work in conjunction with a locally shared understanding of femininity and masculinity shape the conditions of

career agency. She has previously worked in UNIKE (Universities in the Knowledge Economy) (ITN) European Union-funded research project that run from 2012 to 2017.