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Where is diversity? On work-life balance in German universities (0559)

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Extended abstract

Objectives and background

Current discussions on career paths of (junior) scholars focus on horizontal and vertical segregation in German universities, underrepresentation of women in academic leadership positions and family obligations of scholars pursuing professorship. While current research has reached a consensus that all three issues exert a cumulative effect on the unbalanced representation of women at the professorial level, there is still lack of theorisation on the cultural dimension pertinent to division of labour in partnerships as well as the perception of gender roles in this process.

If one disaggregates scholars from other highly skilled population groups, one will get an interesting picture. Data from the German Federal Statistical Office demonstrate that early stage researcher are more likely to be childless than other highly educated who work in other sectors of the economy. According to estimations, 70% to 75% of all female and 62% to 71% of all male scientific staff have no children, about 60% of female professors and 34% of male professors are childless (Federal Statistical Office 2016). Postponement or late catching-up processes with regard to family formation can be identified among women scholars after they reach the age of 35, or significantly later (Metz-Göckel et al. 2014).

There is a clear research gap in investigation of social roles scholars internalise, what effect these have on scholars' family formation patterns, and how the distribution of roles in private life contributes to the underrepresentation of women in academia (Gewinner 2017). Conceptualisation of gender roles in (junior) researchers represents a fresh research avenue that can provide important information on reconciliation of work and private life and gender equality within academia. Our presentation aims at taking up the current debate on the compatibility of the academic profession with family and analysing family formation and distribution of childcare responsibilities in German scientific staff at universities.

Methodology

Our approach is based on the micro-theoretical considerations on gender-specific roles in partnerships, and seeks to conceptualise family formation and subsequent gender inequalities in German universities. To demonstrate plausibility, recent data from qualitative interviews and quantitative survey data are used. Thus, our paper provides a comprehensive study which not only allows a detailed analysis of culturally rooted processes of family formation, but also offers first generalisations.

In the context of triangulation, this study aims to contrast the findings from two research projects that have collected data using different methods – qualitative interviews and an empirical questionnaire survey. We collected data on work volume, family formation as well as provision of child care among academic workers and their partners. This goal represented an attempt to secure the results to compensate for the respective disadvantages of each survey method.

Thirty semi-structured, problem-centred telephone interviews with junior researchers working at the various German universities form the data base for further theorising and conclusions. Early career stage was defined as the one in which the interviewees were either in the final phase of their doctoral project (19 PhD students) or who already obtained their doctorate in the last 4 years prior to the study (11 Postdocs). Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes, and all participants explicitly agreed to record interviews and use data for the subsequent analysis. The data were collected in the summer and autumn 2016 as part of an ongoing, prospectively designed project investigating career paths of scholars in social sciences and humanities working on gender related issues. 74 respondents were randomly selected and invited to participate in the study, based on the internet screening of all German universities. About 40% of the respondents have agreed to take part in the investigation.

Independently from the qualitative study, a standardized online survey of the academic staff at the University of the Saarland (UdS) was conducted in spring 2015 to record the situation around working and employment conditions of the scientific staff (see Gassmann 2018, p. 186ff). Common for employee surveys, the questionnaire contained questions on employment and working conditions, i. e. on contract duration, the number of jobs, the type of employment and the location (chair, institute, faculty, administration). In addition, questions were asked about workaholism, work-life balance and family situation. Of the then 1,694 employed scientific staff, 1,390 could be contacted. Of these, 676 started and 539 individuals

completed the survey, which reflects a gross response rate of 32% and a net response rate of 39% (compare to the data set Gassmann 2018, pp. 194ff).

Results

The first study, based on qualitative methodology, found that perceptions of junior scholars largely reflect existing literature on the situation of early career researchers in Germany. Institutional conditions within academia are communicated as the key to success, which favour or obstruct individual career paths depending on individual starting conditions. A profound analysis of the patterns of behaviour in German junior scholars revealed a number of generally accepted cultural norms pertinent to life course, which have a striking effect on career advancement. On the one hand, we revealed a maxim of job-related maturity, or academic independence. Personal maturity is equated by interviewees with the attainment of a tenured position. On the other hand, we discovered idealisation of parenting roles in junior scholars, particularly of childless ones.

According to quantitative survey data, there were significant gender differences in provision of childcare: women scholars reported caring for their children to a greater extent than their partners, also to a greater extent their male colleagues did – the latter were considerably supported by their partners, i.e. children's mothers. Involvement of female and male scholars in childcare also mirrored the extent of employment: while childless women worked comparatively similar number of hours as their male counterparts, this did not apply to female scholars with children. This indicated that women reduce their scope of work as soon as they get children.

Summing up, both data sources confirmed ideal and actual traditional role distribution in German universities. We assume, therefore, that unequal time expenditure due to imbalanced child care provision leads to unequal chances for professorship between women and men.

References

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