

350 Gender Equality Policy in the Neoliberal University: a Relational Analysis utilising Bourdieu's Field and Capital

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Research Domains

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Abstract

This paper reports on fieldwork exploring gender equality (GE) policy within UK universities arising from the UK Equality Act 2010, utilizing Bourdieu's notion of field and capital. The research offers theoretical and practical insights on both the application of Bourdieu's theoretical constructs to organizational studies and the institutional-wide implementation of GE policy within universities.

The findings highlight the importance and centrality of HR and senior management afforded symbolic capital as the 'owners' of GE policy within UK universities, and the movement away from social justice rationales to legal compliance and strategic 'wins' serving to dilute, neutralise and depoliticize the equality agenda.

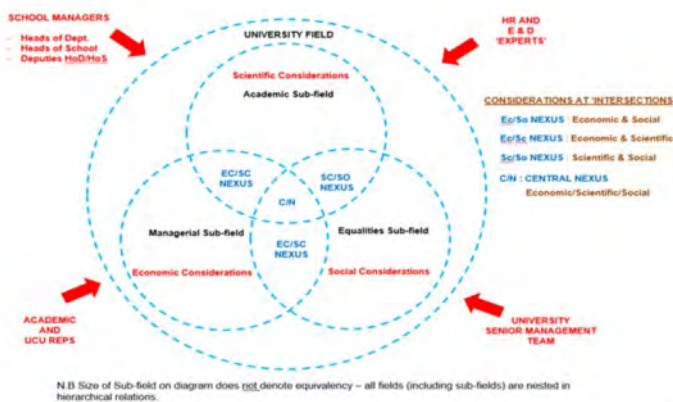
Hence the fieldwork reveals an integrationist model of GM predicated upon the neoliberal agenda. This reduces the likelihood of an alternative, transformative strategy being articulated and serves to constrain the beneficial outcomes of GE policy for women academics as well as overall policy on equality and inclusion.

Full paper

This paper reports on fieldwork exploring gender equality (GE) policy implementation in UK universities to evaluate the outcomes of policy arising from the UK Equality Act 2010 (EA 2010). It forms part of a wider study which utilizes Bourdieu's theoretical constructs of field, capital and habitus (1977; 1990) to carry out a fully relational analysis of GE policy from the perspective of women academics. Thematic analysis of data was based upon an ethnographic case study incorporating 44 multi-level participant interviews within five schools across three UK universities, supported by participant observation and documentary analysis. The research offers both theoretical and practical insights, adding to the relatively limited application of Bourdieu's theoretical constructs to organizational studies (Townley 2014) and addressing the 'dearth of attention' on how GE policy is implemented at institutional level (Tzanakou and Pearce 2019: 1192)

The fieldwork reveals the existence of three 'sub-fields' within the university field: the managerial, equalities and scientific fields respectively (figure 1). Crucially the findings highlight the importance and centrality of human resources (HR) and senior management within the managerial field as the 'owners' of GE policy. Specialist appointments and roles were created at all three universities, with symbolic capital afforded to equalities 'experts' positioned in the field as representatives of senior management. Their recognized expertise on equality matters formed the institutional cultural capital (Townley 2014: 44) and GE policy was used to strengthen the objective positions of agents in the managerial sub-field. Furthermore, centralized and standardized HR policy enabled and facilitated non-critical and neutral GE policy making.

Figure 1: University Field - Sub-Fields and Key Agents

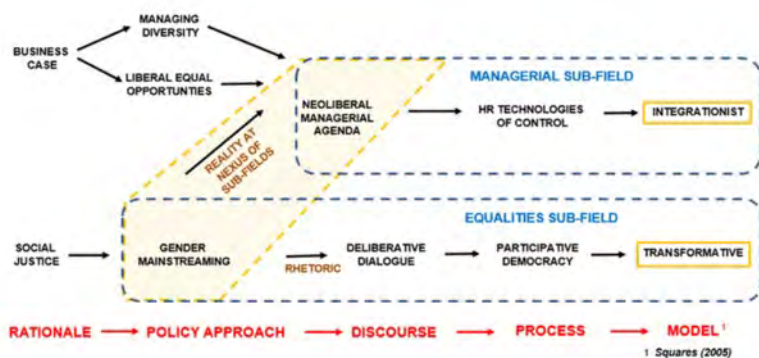


Concomitantly, academics and managers at school level, although relatively autonomous in their scientific sub-field, were repositioned at the periphery of the university field, with perceived 'tokenistic' consultations on GE policy masking the reality that agents at school level were constrained by the dictat from the centre. Furthermore, communications from HR were perceived to be too outward-facing, serving to undermine grassroots activism and 'buy in' of policy amongst school managers and academics. At school level, GE policy initiatives were largely perceived as surface level attitudinal interventions devised to devolve responsibility and avoid litigation, supported by an over-reliance on HR technocratic tools and 'tick-box' exercises.

These findings also reveal the relationship between the university field and its wider field of power. The external legislative requirements of EA 2010 and associated duties intensified the competition for capital and distinction in the field, and the outcome of this struggle was policy firmly embedded in legal compliance and transfer of risk from managerial to academic fields. The rationale for equality in the universities had moved away from social justice notions towards business case rationales, serving to dilute, sanitize and depoliticize the equality agenda. Thus the fieldwork reveals the tensions that exist at the nexus of university sub-fields, with notions of fairness and equity arising from the equalities field subsumed within economic considerations and pursuit of strategic 'wins' arising from the managerial sub-field.

This relational analysis can be related to the three models of GM as proposed by Squire's position paper (2005). Squires suggests that the integrationist model of GM, in its reliance on "experts within existing bureaucracies to pursue neutral policy-making" (ibid: 373), is more aligned with neoliberal managerial discourses, so that "mainstreaming becomes entrapped within a liberal egalitarian approach to equality" (ibid: 384). She posits that in order to reach its transformative potential, GM must adopt policies that facilitate deliberate dialogue and democratic processes, thus displacing the current systems and practices that perpetuate inequality (2005). The fieldwork in this study reveals an integrationist model of GM operated across all three universities as opposed to the transformative model. GE policy was firmly positioned in the managerial sub-field and operationalized in a manner aligned to neoliberal principles (figure 2).

Figure 2: Trajectory of GE Policy in University Field



These findings not only add to the arguments for a shift in power relationships within universities towards management hierarchies and HR experts pursuing neutral policy-making (Waitere, Wright, Tremaine, Brown and Pause 2011), but crucially also supports the position that “equality language is being hijacked, evacuated and put into the service of neoliberalism” (Archer 2007: 649). GE policy arising from HR practice as predicated upon the neoliberal agenda reduces the likelihood of an alternative, transformative strategy being articulated. This has significant implications with regard to constraining the beneficial outcomes of GE policy for women academics as well as overall policy on equality, diversity and inclusion within the neoliberal university.

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