

107 Research funding, gender and academic career building: two stories from Finland

Oili-Helena Ylijoki

Tampere university, Tampere, Finland

Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

In the current higher education context, attracting external research funding has become a key requirement for academic career building. Success in securing research funds has turned into an indicator of research excellence as competition per se is believed to ensure that the best get selected, an ideology which Naidoo (2018) calls competition fetish. In the literature, the imperative of grant-funding success is typically seen to work to women's disadvantage and impede their career progress. In this paper, I offer a more nuanced view using two career stories drawn from interviews with women academics working in the field of health technology in Finland. In these stories, acquiring external research funding is not so much a problem but a solution that enables surviving financially, socially and emotionally under particularly strained local working conditions. The paper shows the complexity and multi-layeredness of the relationships among research funding, gender and academic career building.

Full paper

Introduction

In the current higher education context, attracting external research funding has become a key requirement for academic career building. The centrality of external funding is particularly relevant in Finland where most academics are employed on fixed-term contracts that are renewed only when funding is secured. Across nations, success in securing research funds has turned into an indicator of research excellence as competition per se is believed to ensure that the best get selected, an ideology which Naidoo (2018) calls competition fetish. The imperative of grant-funding success is typically seen to work to women's disadvantage and impede their career progress. In this paper, I offer a more nuanced view by presenting two career stories that illuminate the diversity of women's experiences of research funding. In these stories, acquiring external research funding is not so much a problem but a solution enabling surviving financially, socially and emotionally in particularly strained local work environments. The paper shows the context-dependency, complexity and multi-layeredness of the relationships among gender, research funding and academic career building.

Literature

Previous studies have found that the imperative of grant-funding success can work against women academics for several reasons. Women tend to favour disciplines and research areas that do not belong to the core in the current science policy prioritising male-dominated fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Thus, there are fewer funding opportunities available, already making the starting points for competition gender biased (Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2020). It has also been suggested that many women feel uncomfortable with the current masculinist culture of competitive individualism (Morley & Crossouard, 2016) and may struggle to build or maintain the self-confidence needed to apply for funding and cope with rejections (Leberman et al., 2017). In addition, women tend to be less mobile than men and lack wide collaborative networks that would advance their research productivity and chances of being funded (Uhly et al., 2017). Moreover, compared to men, women carry more caring and service duties at home and at work, which take time and energy away from research (Gaudet et al., 2021). Additionally, subtle but systematic biases in funding bodies' decision making may operate to women's disadvantage (Sato et al., 2021).

Data and method

The paper is informed by a set of 30 career interviews with women scholars in the broad interdisciplinary field of health technology in Finland. For this paper, two interviews are selected for close scrutiny because they involve strikingly different experiences compared to the dominant accounts of difficulties related to grant-seeking. From this angle, the two interviews are success stories as these fixed-term academics have been particularly successful in securing funding for years for themselves and their research groups. At the same time, the interviews include gloomy accounts of harsh working conditions, bullying and discrimination, turning the career paths into misery stories. By analysing this curious mixture of success and misery, the aim of the paper is to shed new light on gendered structures and processes in research funding and academic career building.

I adopt narrative analysis to trace the ways the interviewees experience and attach meaning to their career trajectories. Instead of attempting a factual account of 'what happened', the aim of the analysis is to capture how the interviewees understand their career histories, what cultural resources they rely upon, and what episodes have been meaningful for them, why and with what implications.

Findings

The cases demonstrate that attracting research funding can act as a solution to workplace issues. Beyond necessary financial resources, funding success is highly influential socially and emotionally by opening access to new networks and collegial relationships and giving visibility and recognition for one's work, thereby strengthening a sense of self-worth, self-reliance and empowerment even under harsh and unstable working conditions. The results also point to the importance of collegial feedback and mentoring in learning the rules of the game in grant writing. Thus, success in research funding is not purely individual achievement but facilitated by formal and informal support structures, necessary for these women to keep themselves motivated to continue in academic careers.

Conclusion

Although funding success has become a necessary requirement for career progress in academia, it is not a sufficient condition. The paper's findings highlight gendered structures and gendering processes in research work, closely connected to subtle hierarchies within and between disciplinary fields. The disciplinary elite, comprising men professors, still has much power to define what funding sources are most valued and what counts as core scientific credit in recruitment and promotion decisions.

References

- Gaudet, S., Marchand, I., Bujaki, M. & Bourgeault, I.L. (2022). Women and gender equity in academia through the conceptual lens of care. *Journal of Gender Studies* 31(1), 74-86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1944848>
- Leberman, S. I., Eames, B., & Barnett, S. (2016). 'Unless you are collaborating with a big name successful professor, you are unlikely to receive funding'. *Gender and Education*, 28(5), 644–661. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2015.1093102>
- Morley, L. & Crossouard B. (2016). Gender in the neoliberalised global academy: the affective economy of women and leadership in South Asia. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 37(1), 149–168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1100529>

Naidoo, R. (2018). The competition fetish in higher education: Shamans, mind snares and consequences. *European Educational Research Journal*, 17(5), 605-620. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904118784839>

Sato, S., Gygax, P. M., Randall, J., & Schmid Mast, M. (2021). The leaky pipeline in research grant peer review and funding decisions: Challenges and future directions. *Higher Education*, 82(1), 145-162. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00626-y>

Steinþórsdóttir, F. S., Einarsdóttir, Þ., Pétursdóttir, G. M., & Himmelweit, S. (2020). Gendered inequalities in competitive grant funding: An overlooked dimension of gendered power relations in academia. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(2), 362-375. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1666257>

Uhly, K., Visser, L., & Zippel, K. (2017). Gendered patterns in international research collaboration in academia. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(4), 760-782. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1072151>