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The influence of gender on the UK professoriate. (0269)

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According to Reay (2000:14), British academia is “a territory ruled by men where the vast majority of women, if they count at all, count for less”. Whatever the truth of Reay's polemic, it is an undeniable fact that women make up nearly half (46.8%) of the non-professorial academic staff at UK universities but less than a fifth (19.8%) of the professoriate (HESA Staff Record, 2010/11). These figures are broadly in line with data from the 27 countries that comprise the European Union, where women make up 44% of Grade C staff (lecturer level), 37% of Grade B staff (senior lecturer level) but only 20% of Grade A staff (professor) (European Commission, 2012). They are in contrast, however, to the USA (where women comprise 28% of the professoriate) and to Australia (where women comprise only 5% of the professoriate) (Morley, 2013).

Moreover, a UK female professor earns, on average, 6.3% (£4,828) less than her male counterpart (UCU, 2013:1). This paper seeks to uncover the reasons behind these “quite shocking” figures (UCU, 2013:1) and to ascertain the extent to which being a professor is a gendered experience.

Drawing upon data from a recently completed funded study of the UK professoriate, the paper addresses the following research questions:

To what extent, if at all:

- a) do the ambitions and career trajectories of male and female professors differ?
- b) do male and female professors have different understandings of academic leadership and of the purpose of professors?
- c) do male and female professors perform the role differently?
- d) is sexism experienced within the professoriate?

Data were collected via a questionnaire completed by 1,282 UK professors (911 men, 350 women, and 21 'not given'). The questionnaire contained a range of different question types, including yes/no items, Likert-type scales, and open text boxes. We also conducted 43 semi-structured interviews (17 with female professors and 26 with male professors). In both cases, the sample was opportunistic rather than representative, and this obviously limits the strength of the conclusions that can be drawn. The survey data were analysed using SPSS, and any statistically significant differences relating to gender were noted. Likewise, the responses of male and female interviewees were explicitly compared.

With regard to the first research question, interviewees revealed a range of career trajectories, though most described themselves as highly ambitious. A small number of women spoke of becoming a professor almost by chance. Rosie [a pseudonym],

for example, "just fell into academia and it was not a strategic choice". She describes applying for internal promotion on the spur of the moment:

"I was having a bit of a grump day and I thought, 'I hate this place, I hate this place. What can I do to make myself happier about it? Well, I have got two options. I either look for another job or I go for promotion'. And I thought, 'Well, I am grumpy enough that I want to go for promotion'."

Such spontaneity was not reported by any of the male interviewees.

With regard to the second and third research questions, a small number of questionnaire items were answered differently by male and female professors. Women were considerably more likely than men to include "being a role model" in their descriptions of academic leadership¹. They also claimed to "advise non-professorial colleagues and help them develop professionally" more frequently than men².

Women were also more likely than men to claim that academic leadership should include "holding an important role in the wider discipline"³. Correspondingly, they described themselves, more often than men, as "active citizens in the wider discipline (outside the institution)"⁴. In terms of impediments to the exercise of academic leadership, women were more likely than men to cite "insufficient secretarial and/or administrative support"⁵, "competing demands of supervision of students"⁶ and "competing demands of pastoral responsibilities"⁷.

1 The chi-square test of association showed a significant difference in the proportion of males (75.0%) and females (88.9%) answering 'role model' (chi-square=29.21, df=1, p<0.001, Phi=0.152).

2 The chi-square test of association showed a significant difference in the proportion of males (53.4%) and females (60.9%) answering 'definitely/all the time' (chi-square=11.758, df=5, p<0.038, Phi=0.098).

3 The chi-square test of association showed a significant difference in the proportion of males (73.2%) and females (82.9%) answering 'holding an important role in wider discipline' (chi-square=12.845, df=1, p<0.001, Phi=0.101).

4 The chi-square test of association showed a significant difference in the proportion of males (33.7%) and females (42.0%) answering 'definitely/all the time' (chi-square=18.846, df=5, p<0.002, Phi=0.123).

With regard to the final research question, opinion was understandably divided. Some female interviewees said they had neither experienced nor observed any form of sexism. Others claimed to have suffered discriminated on the basis of their gender, although the very fact that they had all secured a chair indicates a degree of success albeit against the odds. Finally, some who had not experienced sexism themselves were aware of its existence in the academy. As Amy put it:

“I don't think it [my gender] has held me back. I think for me, personally, no it hasn't. Which does not mean that I don't think there are structural problems because I think that there are. There are major structural problems. There is a lot of bias against women.”

Some interviewees also pointed to bias on the basis of age and ethnicity. It is anticipated that by the time of the SRHE conference, data analysis will have been completed, and that a fuller and more nuanced exposition will be presented.

Acknowledgement

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References

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Morley, L. (2013) *Women and Higher Education Leadership: absences and aspirations*. Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, London.

5 The chi-square test of association showed a significant difference in the proportion of males (45.7%) and females (58.2%) answering 'frequently' or 'all the time' (chi-square=19.364, df=5, p<0.002, Phi=0.124).

6 The chi-square test of association showed a significant difference in the proportion of males (20.1%) and females (29.9%) answering 'frequently' or 'all the time' (chi-square=16.279, df=5, p<0.006, Phi=0.114).

7 The chi-square test of association showed a significant difference in the proportion of males (8.7%) and females (17.7%) answering 'frequently' or 'all the time' (chi-square=31.097, df=5, p<0.001, Phi=0.158).

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