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Revisiting 'No woman is like a man in academia': a comparative analysis of marginalisation in UK higher education (0272)

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**Background and introduction**

In a paper published very recently in *Organization Studies*, Marianna Fotaki (2013) employs a feminist psychoanalytical post-structuralist theoretical framework in which to locate her examination of the under-representation of women in senior positions in universities. Focused specifically on women in business schools, she draws upon empirical findings that uncover the experiences of nine UK-based management and business school academics. Her study 'demonstrates how male norms and woman's absence from symbolic representations disables their participation in equivalent terms in the institutions studied, and how women often both collude with and resist their own marginalization in academia' (Fokati, 2013, p. 1).

This SRHE conference paper represents a loose and partial replication of Fotaki's analysis. It draws upon data gathered in three separate, but related, funded research projects that used questionnaires and interviews to focus on academics at work [*titles and details of projects withheld for reasons of anonymity*]. None of the projects had the same objectives as Fotaki's study; they were not specifically directed at uncovering gender-related issues, and they involved samples of both men and women. Moreover, they did not adopt her feminist theoretical framework. Nevertheless, the richness of the data collected allows a diluted and partial version of Fotaki's analysis. She used 'In-depth narrative biographic interviews', whereas I used interviews that had another purpose, but which nonetheless raised biographic issues, and it is upon these that I draw.

This paper accordingly examines, with limitations, the extent to which my data corroborate Fotaki's findings. Her study was focused on women academics in business schools within and outside the UK; the three studies whose data are the basis of this SRHE conference paper are focused on UK-based academics representing a wide range of disciplines, and it is their accounts of specific relevant work-related experiences and circumstances that are analysed. Essentially, this represents secondary data analysis, since the selected data are extrapolated from the primary dataset and reanalysed against Fotaki's framework. Fotaki uncovered evidence of, inter alia, women's marginalisation and devaluation within the various academic contexts within which they function. The questions addressed in this SRHE conference paper are:
1. To what extent, and in what ways, is the evidence of marginalisation and devaluation uncovered by Fotaki corroborated by data from my three studies?
2. What are the implications of the answer(s) to 1., above, for consideration of gender issues in the academic workforce in the UK.

**The findings: addressing the questions**

In order to examine 'the persisting inequalities that women experience in university settings', one of Fotaki's (2013) empirical objectives was to uncover 'interviewees' sense of professional self and to capture how participants responded to what was going on in their

environments'. One of three themes that she identifies as having emerged from her data and which she illustrates with 'key story lines' provided by individual interviewees, is 'misrepresentation and misrecognition in the symbolic order of academe'. This is evidenced by interviewees' reports of 'feeling like an "outsider" in their institutional environments either because of an unfair allocation of work, lack of progression, exclusion from pre-existing networks, or because they often felt unwelcome and undermined, silenced or objectified in such settings'. My research yielded parallel, corroboratory data.

Two of my interviewees, for example, focused on their self-perceived marginalisation within their departments as teaching fellows at their respective research-intensive Russell Group universities. Both had doctorates, and both emphasised that research was an element of their work, but they nevertheless complained that their research was not recognised by their departmental colleagues, and neither of them was being entered for the 2014 REF. Indeed, their reported situations may be considered representative of what Fotaki identifies as 'exclusion from pre-existing networks' – departmental research networks – or even *abjection*: a term that Fotkai borrows from the psychoanalytical perspectives of Julia Kristeva (1982). Asked what would make for a more ideal job, one of these interviewees responded:

> "Well, probably being treated more seriously … er … by my immediate colleagues in the department. Er … they tend usually to be perfectly civil, although there's a lot of bullying that goes on. Er … but it's a very hierarchical department, and I'm not regarded as being someone who is important within the department. I've basically been told … by my head of department … 'well, we didn't appoint you; you were just brought in, and, you know, we're not interested in the research that you're doing'. … I feel it's a department where I'm at the bottom even though I have responsibilities, and I have more research students than virtually any other member … . I don't feel that I'm treated … particularly well – at least, *I* wouldn't treat a member of staff in that way."

The other commented:

> "We all have to do our bit of admin, but I think my admin load is really, really heavy, and I just feel more and more, kind of, tired – you know, just doing it all, really. So by the time you've done all that you don't really want to be, kind of, sitting down and writing. … I also feel that if you're not, kind of, on an academic contract or a research contract, you … you know, you're not considered to be in quite the same kind of bracket, really. You know, I think there's a sort of hierarchy – I mean, it's not explicitly stated, but it's implicit in the way we work."

The comment above about administrative overload correlates with Fotaki's identification of 'working so much harder' as one of the common themes to emerge from the working life interviews that she undertook with her research participants to illuminate their 'stories', which in turn supports Mercer's (2013, p. 126) observation that 'women are given heavier service and teaching loads, and that they are assigned less prestigious tasks'. Another of my interviewees, about to take early retirement from a post-1992 university, similarly complained of being overloaded with administrative work, which has considerably lower status and carries much less kudos and recognition than research activity:

> "It's just admin! – admin, admin, admin! It's partly my own fault for taking a PL [principal lecturer] job, but I didn't anticipate just how much that would take over my life in terms of administration. … I was our curriculum manager … I was *effectively* responsible for all the pastoral care in the department … I was responsible for almost all the documentation produced in the department. Er … I was responsible for several committees that I had to organise … chair, etc. etc. …

all curriculum innovation was my responsibility, which involved endless meetings … just incredibly time-consuming. It ate into my research. I mean, the truth is, towards the end I started to feel rather bitter about the fact that I was being asked to do research! Because the rest of it was eating into my time so much that I was finding *that* [research] a burden … instead of something I actually took pleasure in."

This SRHE conference paper will present other vignettes that illustrate bullying, exclusion and marginalisation, highlighting the negative experiences recounted by around five of my research participants. Is it, in fact, the case that:

Woman "as a situation" in academia offers particular possibilities in understanding and deconstructing the mind/body dualism through theoretical work on embodiment; and our visceral presence presents counter-hegemonic possibilities in challenging the still ideologically dominant masculinity of the academy'(Clegg, 2008)?

The full implications of the degree of corroboration between my findings, derived from reanalysis of data, and Fotaki's findings will be discussed, but a key implication is that the issues that she identifies (Fotaki, 2013) are by no means confined to English business schools; they are much more widely spread. This, I suggest, poses important challenges for research into gender issues in academia; this sub-field of study would benefit from greater clarification of purpose, focus, and the bases upon which its principles and rationale are established.

**References**

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