The Prestige Economy and Mid-career Academic Women: Strategies, Choices and Motivation (0002)

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Abstract

Why do women succeed in higher education—but only to a certain point? Rather than look at senior women who have made it to the top, this research focuses on those at a mid-career stage. It develops earlier research on the role that prestige plays in academic careers, and aims to explore the extent to which prestige is a gendered concept in academia.

Drawing on 30 semi-structured concept map-mediated interviews this project explored the gendered nature of the prestige economy in academia and subsequently how mid-career academic women strategise their career development, and what barriers they perceive. In terms of of prestige, women generally feel that men access 'indicators of esteem' more easily. Many women also had ambivalent feelings about gaining recognition through prestige: they understood the importance of status and knew the 'rules of the game', but were critical of these rules and reluctant to pursue prestige.

Introduction

Why do women continue to be under-represented in senior positions in higher education?[i] Higher education institutions can often be complacent having a majority of female undergraduates and a few female professors[ii]. Why do women succeed in higher education—but only to a certain point?

Academic prestige as a gendered concept

Previous research on motivation have highlighted the role of prestige in hiring and promotion decisions. We use the term 'prestige economy'[iii] to describe the collection of beliefs, values and behaviours that characterise and express what a group of people prizes highly. Evidence collected on publication rates, first author status and workload balance indicates that academic women find it harder to access the types of 'currency' that advance their career; we therefore consider prestige to be a gendered concept[iv].

The research aims to share the strategies that women have found useful in developing their careers, while also arguing for institutional change. While focusing primarily on gender, it draws on feminist theories of intersectionality to consider multiple forms of identity[v]. This conceptualisation reflects a perspective of universities as highly complex sites where multiple and intersecting spheres of 'difference', including culture, ethnicity, gender, disability, socio-economic status and language interact.

Methodology

Thirty women from nine different London universities interviewed were from a variety of disciplines with a concentration on natural sciences. Research has tended to focus on academic women who are early-career researchers[vi] or those who are in senior and leadership positions[vii]. Valuable as this research is, it is also important to explore the experiences and perspectives of women who see themselves as being mid-career, particularly as this stage probably encompasses the longest period of most women's working lives. Participants were allowed to self-select as being mid-career, and included a variety of job titles: lecturer, senior lecturer, reader, research associate, senior research fellow, senior investigator and school director, reflecting disciplinary norms, women's non-standard career pathways and institutional differences.

The interviews started with a concept-mapping exercise whereby the interviewees produced visual representations of their 5-10 year career plans. We then discussed these maps with them, asking questions about obstacles and opportunities they perceived in terms of their career development, about the role of prestige in promotion and progression, and about other forms of recognition and reward.

Prestige: Setting indicators of esteem and rewarding what matters

Women perceive high-status publications and substantial grant income to constitute prestige in the university. Other indicators of prestige included being invited to give keynote speeches at international conferences, editing journals and supervising PhD students. However, prestige is a gendered concept, and this research contributes to evidence that women find it harder to access the types of currency that advance their reputations

What motivated many women were traditional academic values such as the love of science, learning and the pursuit of knowledge, alongside other aspects such as good working environments, flexibility, autonomy and making a wider contribution to society. Women regularly mentioned 'game-playing' to meet key performance indicators (KPIs) set by the institution, which often did not map onto outcomes related to disciplinary success or fulfilment of job duties (particularly teaching, managing labs and research teams and building collective success).

Many interviewees told us that their institutions valued monetary income above all else. For some, this meant a lack of confidence in their likelihood of future success as academics. High profile publications were considered both prestigious and necessary for a successful academic career, as well as being understood as a route to funding. However, not all income-related activity was considered prestigious. Research-related income was clearly more prestigious than income from students, and working with undergraduates – who may be seen as the most lucrative group – was widely considered the least prestigious form of teaching.

So-called 'serious academics' were seen to focus on research and other work that would be recognised as prestigious. This seemed to mirror the gendered division of labour in the home, where necessary and under-rewarded labour (childcare and housework in the home, teaching and repetitive lab work or data entry in the university) is done more often by women, 'freeing up' others (mostly men) for 'successful' and prestigious forms of work.

In this way, the prestige economy operates to reward certain forms of labour while ignoring or undervaluing others. In addition, the currency carried by different indicators of esteem was not

always equal when possessed by men and women. When women attempted to play the prestige game, they did not always feel they were as readily recognised as men.

It is often assumed that the lack of value given to the achievements of women and people from ethnic minorities relates to a lack of self-promotion. Our research confirmed other research that suggests a cultural and gendered reluctance to engage in self-promotional activities

It was clear that a number of women found it frustrating that the types of things that motivated them in their work were the least likely to be the things that receive recognition and reward. Women sometimes had very ambivalent feelings about prestige and reward, especially if they were able to accrue it while wanting to downplay its importance.

Conclusion

This research raised many of the challenges that women face in advancing their academic careers, particularly negotiating disciplinary prestige, institutional structures and unbalanced workload allocations and managing caring responsibilities. At a time when more women are entering academia and finding mid-career success—but failing to advance to senior positions—we believe this project makes a very useful contribution to understanding what leaders and managers need to be thinking about to manage challenges, remove barriers and support the success of women in higher education.

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