

Convergence and dissimilarity: Centralisation of power, but variation in practices in STEM in academia cross-nationally (0018)

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In this paper the focus is on the centralization of decision making power in higher education and research institutions; the local practices used to obscure that centralization, and local variation in the perceived legitimacy of power in general and the visibility of gendered power in particular using case studies of three higher education and research institutes in Ireland, Italy and Turkey. The advantage of case studies is the opportunity they offer to understand a phenomenon in depth. In Turkey and Ireland, the organizations are universities while in Italy it is a research institute. The disadvantage of case studies is that it is difficult to generalise findings beyond specific organizational contexts. This research was conducted as part of a wider cross-national study exploring the position of women in STEM in such organizations.

A wide ranging documentary analysis was conducted, as well as in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of men and women who participate in committees or have decision making power outside the committee structure. Broadly similar processes and organisational decision makers were chosen from each context. Overall the sample included twenty-five positional power holders: nine women and sixteen men. Key concepts included power, decision making processes, consensus, influence and gender. These concepts were reflected in a common interview guide. Ethical approval was received as appropriate. Each partner conducted, recorded and transcribed interviews locally. Each unit of analysis was a word or piece of text from the interview transcripts (Weber, 1990). Each partner agreed codes and code descriptors (i.e. descriptive statements) and coded transcripts in line with these. Codes were then sorted into categories and ultimately into clusters and themes.

Results

This paper is concerned with providing an analytical understanding of the way power is enacted by positional decision makers in higher level education and research institutes. It draws on data from both documentary research and interviews with 25 people (n=16 men and nine women) involved in power structures in such organizations in Ireland, Turkey and Italy.

The dominant pattern that emerges is one of similarity in terms of the centralization of power across all three of these contexts: with power in key areas concentrated at the top - and to a large extent in the most senior decision maker. The impact of managerialism on the centralization of power has been widely recognised. However academic organizations are unusual, in that this centralization of power sits uneasily with assumptions about the existence and importance of collegial representation and processes. Drawing on Lukes' (2005, 1974) work this paper also identifies the local practices which obscure that centralization. Three main practices were identified: 'talking shops', loyalty to positional power holders and the absence of alternatives. In contrast to the similarities existing in terms of the centralization of power, there was some evidence of local variation in these practices. Thus in the Italian organization, centralised power was obscured through 'talking shops' which 'cooled out' opposition (Clark, 1960); Turkish respondents stressed ties to power holders (reflected in personal and political loyalties and the expectation of future rewards from in-group membership); and the perceived absence of alternatives; while Irish respondents referred to all three of these practices.

There was little evidence of challenges to the perceived legitimacy of the enactment of power by power holders. Those that did exist occurred in the Turkish and Irish organizations. Although positional power is male dominated, the practices that obscured it

were, for the most part, not seen as gendered. Gender was largely invisible other than to a minority of Irish women. Cross-nationally, it is apparent that convergence is occurring in the centralization of power but that local variation exists in the practices that obscure this. There is also a suggestion that the relative similarity of the political empowerment scores of men and women in Irish society (as reflected in the GGGI) and women's underrepresentation in STEM in the case study organization is associated with greater power instability in the Irish organization, as reflected both in the greater visibility of gender and in the use of a wider range of practices to obscure the centralization of power. In the Turkish organizational context, two practices are used to obscure centralization and there is some problematising of the legitimacy of the enactment of power by the positional power holders. However unlike the Irish organization, Turkish women do not make gender visible. The latter pattern (which has also emerged in other studies) may not be unrelated to Turkish academic women's relatively better position as compared with the national position of women (as reflected in the national scores on the GGGI) as well as the relative thinness of the glass ceiling in academia nationally and the high proportion of women in STEM in that organisation. Because of the dissimilarity between the Italian higher educational system and the case study organization, it is unclear what conclusions can be drawn, although the apparent effectiveness of 'talking shops' as a way of obscuring centralization and generating legitimacy is impressive.

Overall this paper raises questions about the extent and nature of cross-cultural similarities and differences in the enactment of power in academic organizations and the perceived legitimacy of that enactment in general, and of the visibility of gendered power in particular.

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