

Reviewing the reviewers: The social construction of evaluation criteria in professorship appointments in Swedish academia. (0225)

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Part 2 Outline

Reviewing the reviewers: The social construction of evaluation criteria in professorship appointments in Swedish academia.

Gender equality in Higher Education is high on the political agenda in Sweden, and has been extensively researched in relation to differences in academic careers (Danell & Hjerm, 2013), workplace cultures (Mählck, 2003) and the distribution of research grants (e.g., Sandström et al., 2010; Wennerås & Wold, 1997). However, no other equality dimensions (e.g., race, class, disability) have been addressed in these studies. More recently, the impact on gender equality of the restructuring of academic work in the direction of New Public Management principles has been under scrutiny (Öhrn, 2014). Women in Swedish academia face more obstacles on their way to a professor position as compared to the European average (e.g., She Figures, 2012; SOU, 2011). In addition, despite the fact that one third of all PhD students have a foreign background, research on the number, position or career possibilities for researchers with a non-Swedish background is sparse and unsystematic (Mählck, 2012). With few important exceptions (de los Reyes, 2009; Mählck & Thaver, 2010; Sawyer & Saxonberg, 2006; Thaver & Mählck, 2008), studies examining the situation for researchers with a non-Swedish background are lacking. Research from other countries indicates that international researchers from the global south have slower career development, fewer career opportunities and experience more discrimination based on their ethnicity as compared to the majority population. These obstacles are amplified for women (Mirza, 2009; Muhs et al., 2012).

Previous research in Sweden and elsewhere has shown that academic recruitment processes as well as the distribution of research grants include gendered aspects obstructing women from reaching the same levels of accomplishment as men (e.g., Benschop & Brouns, 2003; Montgomery, 1996; Sandström et al., 2010; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2011). However, research from an intersectional perspective, and more precisely a focus on the social processes involved in the recruitment of non-Swedes, is an area that is particularly under researched. This further underlines the importance of the present study.

A relatively recent Swedish research overview about peer review (Gemzö, 2010) highlights the importance of exploring *what* criteria are mentioned and *how* these criteria are being used in evaluation processes. The current study deals directly with this important issue in the recruitment processes and appointments of professors at one of Sweden's leading universities. We aim to explore what criteria are being used, and how they are used, in the peer reviews and recruitment committees' evaluations of applicants to these positions. Of particular interest is to investigate whether there are biased patterns related to constructions of gender and ethnicity (e.g., Swedish, non-Swedish). Differences across academic disciplines are also investigated. Whether the notion of research excellence forms an integral part of these evaluations – directly or indirectly – is at the heart of our research endeavour. Nevertheless, the social constructions of evaluative features such as research quality, strength, independence and cooperation, depth and scope of research publications are equally important to consider.

Specific research questions:

a) What evaluation criteria are mentioned in peer reviews and records from the recruitment committees of applications to professor positions?

b) How are these criteria constructed and applied in the evaluations?

Can patterns of a) and b) be observed in relation to the applicant's gender, ethnicity and academic discipline?

Theoretical framework

Departing from a general framework on how intersecting power relations in organisations mutually constitute possibilities for work and career advancement (Acker, 2006), the present study will draw on intersectional gender theory on recruitment processes. We will apply the theoretical framework developed by Philomena Essed and Theo Goldberg (2002). Their concept 'cloning cultures' capture processes whereby perceived similarity between recruitment officers and applicants construct disadvantage or privilege, and ultimately differing conditions for being selected as a winning candidate. In the present study, 'cloning cultures' will be used to analyse how the evaluation criteria, including strive for research excellence, are constructed for privileged categories (e.g., Swedish men) as well as disadvantaged categories (e.g., women with a foreign background).

Method and materials

The material consists of all written evaluations of applicants to announced professorship positions at one of Sweden's leading universities between 2010 and 2014 (52 appointments, each with 1-20 applicants). Accordingly, the advertisement for the position, individual peer reviews for each applicant, rankings and comparisons between applicants, and records from the recruitment committees were collected. Some were joint descriptions and/or evaluations of the applicants from two or more reviewers. Typically, all applications had been reviewed independently by two or three professors in the field.

In a first step, we familiarized ourselves with the materials and possible selection criteria, and started building coding schemes. Aspects such as academic discipline, number of applicants, gender and ethnicity of applicants and reviewers, and disagreements or anomalies were noted. Secondly, we searched out the evaluation criteria mentioned in these advertisements and/or peer reviews, as well as other criteria generally held as important qualities for a researcher (e.g., scope and depth of publications, independence, cooperation). A further step will be a more thorough analysis of the social constructions of these criteria, and how they are applied in relation to gender and ethnicity of the applicant.

Preliminary results

A preliminary analysis, including a smaller proportion of the materials, reveals large inter- and intradisciplinary differences pertaining to if and how certain evaluation criteria are applied. Apparent interdisciplinary differences, such as the wide disparities in the number and type of publications, pedagogical merits, and emphasis (or lack thereof) on the formation of an independent research group, are also found within similar disciplines and by reviewers of the same appointment. In several cases, evaluations relating to how applicants' merits reflect the core contents of a particular position – which often is noted as a selection criterion in the advertisements – appear to be sources of disagreement.

Following a systematic categorisation of all appointments and applicants, it will be possible to discern whether these preliminary findings hold for the entire material, and a broad view on how the evaluation criteria are constructed and applied will be given. More importantly, patterns relating to applicants' gender and ethnicity will be analysed, and implications for policy and practice discussed.