

Serial number 0325

Title Gender discourses and ideology in higher education-from institutional documents to the lived experience and back.

Submitter Prof. Charikleia Tzanakou, Dr. Jo Angouri, Ms. Polina Mesiniot

Gender discourses and ideology in higher education-from institutional documents to the lived experience and back.

Introduction

Many efforts have been undertaken to address gender inequalities in UK higher education institutions, most notably in the context of the Athena SWAN Charter. Athena SWAN aims to address the persistent problem of gender inequality in UK academia, where despite the continued success of female students in HE, more work is needed to improve women's career progression and retention in academic employment (while around 56% of all students are women, only around 20% of all professors are women, see (<http://www.ecu.ac.uk/about-us/he-equality-challenges/>)). As part of Athena SWAN, actions and initiatives have been introduced to review university structures and policies and develop mechanisms to address gender inequality.

However, the progress has been slow because of the many challenges involved in implementing and sustaining change of culture at organizational (University) and systemic level (academic). Research has shown that organisational structures are not gender neutral and assumptions about the gender order underlie (sometimes in visible, but more often in tacit, taken-for-granted ways) everyday practices in professional settings such as Higher Education (HE) (Acker, 1990; van den Brink and Benschop, 2011; van den Brink et al, 2010). Everyday practices often both reflect and reinforce dominant ideologies, which in their turn contribute to an organisation's ways of doing and ways of being. Investigating social practices within organisations can then contribute to a better understanding of the organisation as a gendered workplace and industry.

Research objectives

This paper focus on an institutional case study to enhance our understanding of the dominant discourses and ideologies that circulate in one HE setting through 2 different lenses a) an analysis of institutional documents and texts related to gender and 2) lived experiences of individuals (to whom these documents are addressed).

Thus, this paper contributes to current research on gender in higher education in two ways. Firstly, while making the invisible visible has been on critical discourse analysts' agenda (Wodak, 2015) for decades, gender ideologies in the academic context remain under-explored. Secondly, it brings together critical discourse analysis of institutional documents and lived experiences of institutional practices in relation to gender to investigate gender ideologies. Our project addresses the following research questions: (a) how do institutions construct gendered or gender-neutral ideologies, practices and policies? (b) what are the lived experiences of those policies/practices? (c) to what extent there is a (in) congruence between institutional policies and lived experiences and d) what consequences this (in) congruence might have on institutional change for gender equality? In this paper we focus on the first two and report on our preliminary findings. We pay particular attention to the importance of a multimethod approach and seek to provide a frame for future research in the area.

Methodology

We use one university as a case study. We have reviewed institutional documents and texts to identify (and address) gender-(in) sensitive language and gendered ideologies. Documents included:

- a) Mission/vision/strategy of the university (website).
- b) Recruitment/appraisal and promotion policies including flexible working policies.
- c) University and departmental documents about promotion and career development
- d) Job advertisements

Furthermore, we completed interviews with academics in the institution at different levels of seniority. The data are analysed following a critical discourse analysis tradition. Discourse analysis (DA) provides the tools for exploring how organisations talk themselves into their image and how good and bad practice is reinforced and can be challenged (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003).

Different lenses

Our analysis shows that the institutional corpus is not in congruence with the lived experiences of the academic staff. The ambiguity and different use of concepts in various institutional texts seems to be reflected in the multiple interpretations that individuals attach to those. As an illustration, we find that institutional text is more oriented towards teamwork but individual accounts construct teamwork behaviors as not appreciated and rewarded in the institutional domain. Furthermore, notions like excellence and leadership are variably interpreted thus preventing the clarity of recruitment and promotion criteria.

The neoliberal context in which this institutional language has been developed seems to be reflected in individual accounts who often use neoliberal language with emphasis on quantifying and measuring output. We envisage that the lack of congruence between institutional discourse and lived experiences leads to limiting the potential of efforts towards institutional change in relation to gender equality.

References

- Acker, J. 1990. Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations. *Gender and Society* 4(2): 139-158.
- Holmes, J. & Stubbe, M. 2003. *Power and Politeness in the Workplace: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Talk at Work*. London: Longman.
- van den Brink, M. & Benschop, Y. 2011. Gender practices in the construction of academic excellence: Sheep with five legs. *Organization* 19(4): 507-524.
- van den Brink, M., Benschop, Y. & Jansen, W. 2010. Transparency in Academic Recruitment: A Problematic Tool for Gender Equality? *Organization Studies* 31(11): 1459-1483.
- Wodak, R. 2015. *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. London: Sage