

S3 Beaumaris 2 Friday 7 December 9.45 - 10.15

MY BRILLIANT CAREER? A GRAPHIC ESSAY (0152)

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This poster presents findings from an institutional research project (Carruthers Thomas 2016-2018) investigating gendered experiences of work and career in higher education (HE). Data analysis is underpinned by Massey's concept of space as 'the product of social relations shaped by power' (2005). In what ways does gender operate as a geography of power within HE to shape experiences of work and career for individuals of all genders? What are the implications for ostensibly inclusive, gender-neutral and linear career metaphors, which, 'aligned to male-defined constructions of work and career success ... continue to dominate organisational research and practice' (Bilimoria *et al.* 2010, p.727)?

The existing literature on careers and gender in HE is weighted towards female academics and disadvantage (Acker 2006; Bagilhole 2007, 2002; Coate *et al.* 2015; Morley 2014 *inter alia*). Tate and Bagguley (2017), Gabriel and Tate (2017), Bhopal (2016), Bhopal *et al* (2016) have recently extended the focus to experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) academic staff, particularly BAME female academics. This research aims to contribute to this literature, firstly by engaging with interactions of ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation and faith with gender and secondly by reflecting the extended (post-May 2015) framework of the UK HE sector's charter mark for gender equality, Athena SWAN (ECU 2017). The Athena SWAN Charter, having previously focused exclusively on barriers to career progression for female academic staff in STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine) disciplines, now has a gender equality remit across all academic disciplines and for all staff: female, male, transgender; academic, professional and support.

The qualitative character of the research complements the quantitative, policy-oriented orientation of Athena SWAN. Data was collected using narrative inquiry, an approach to understanding and researching the way people create meaning of their lives as [narratives](#); it relates to the singular and particular; 'it begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals' (Creswell, 2012). The focus is not so much what happened, as the meaning people make of what happened. The researcher interviewed 50 self-selecting participants at one post-1992 university, participants identifying as female, male and gender non-binary; occupying academic and professional service roles across the organisational hierarchy. Each participant gave a potted history of their employment and career to date and reflected on their experiences of working within the university and the academy more generally. As an academic employed by the university, the

researcher encountered the strengths and challenges of 'insider research' (Greene, 2014; Morgan, 2006; Acker, 2000).

The project goes beyond conventional boundaries of institutional research. While aiming to enhance institutional intelligence about gender equality within the research site, this research is not seeking a quick turnaround and clear simple answers (Brown & Jones 2015). It is open to complexity, is informed by wider theoretical perspectives and, as this poster proposal demonstrates, its findings are being disseminated for use by the broader community (ibid). Data analysis is underpinned by Massey's understanding of 'space as social relations shaped by power ... always under construction, never finished, closed' (2005, p.11). Massey imagines the HE sector as part of a 'violently unequal, 21st century geography of knowledge' (2005, p.143) and universities as part of a 'network of specialised places of knowledge production (elite; historically largely male) which ...continues to gain at least part of its prestige from the cachet and exclusivity of its spatiality' (ibid, p.7). Massey's heuristic device of activity space: 'the spatial network of links and activities, of spatial connections and of locations, within which a particular agent operates' (ibid. p.55) is employed to frame the university as a diverse and complex space, itself positioned within the wider activity space of a stratified sector.

This poster presentation interprets and presents the data in the form of a graphic essay. The latter format is influenced by the developing practice of graphic social science (Carrigan 2017, Priego 2016, Vigurs *et al.* 2016, Kara 2015) as a means of transforming attitudes and awareness around social issues. 'The graphic essay uses text and image to explore a specific topic. Graphic essays often look like graphic novels, magazines, or artist books but ... generally convey non-fictional histories, cases and/or arguments' (Designlab.wisc.edu, 2018). This graphic essay combines structural conventions of the academic essay or article with those of the cartoon strip. The narrative emphasis is aligned with the enquiry method and Massey's description of space as 'a simultaneity of stories-so-far ...and ... place as a collection of those stories' (2005, p9), while the title highlights the process of research and the intention of troubling the normative notion of 'career'.

There are several advantages in presenting research findings in this performative format. Visual metaphors have capacity to operate on multiple levels within discussion and analysis. For example, *My Brilliant Career?* engages with the tropes of glass ceiling, glass escalator (Budig 2002) and glass cliff (Bruckmüller *et al* 2014; Ryan and Haslam 2005) which characterise academic and popular discussion of career obstacles, risks, constraints and privileges. In the essay, these feature as physical features of the workplace environment and literally shape the representation of participants' accounts and thus become integrated into the analysis of gender as a 'geography of power' in HE.

Secondly, the format represents the embodiment of the researcher in the process of research: as insider, observer, narrator and interpreter. Thirdly, the lengthy creative process provides repeated opportunities to make and represent thematic and theoretical connections across the data, reinforcing the argument that 'comics creation is a way of thinking' (Sousanis, 2018).

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