

G1.2 Beaumaris Lounge Thursday 6 December 9.00-11.00

The Silence/ing of Academic Women (0499)

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Abstract

The underrepresentation of women in the most senior ranks, and senior leadership positions in the academy, is a global phenomenon. How and why women academics experience the higher education profession differently to their male colleagues has been the subject of extensive research. This paper brings a new, original conceptual dimension to our understanding of this complex and enduring issue. Based on the rigorous analysis of 35 interviews with women academics from three world leading research-intensive universities, the paper introduces the concept of the silence, and silencing, of academic women. The theoretical frame of 'micro-inequities' – that is 'small events' which are hard to prove and covert – is used to analysis why academic women remain silent and how academic women are silenced.

Introduction

The underrepresentation of women academics in the most senior ranks and leadership positions in higher education is an enduring social justice issue. We would like to think that universities are at the forefront of demonstrating a commitment to social justice and inclusivity, but they remain 'bastions of male power and prestige' almost 30 years after the Hansard Society Commission (1990).

Understanding and acknowledging the barriers women face in progressing within the profession continues to be an important area of study. We are fortunate to have extensive research – albeit geographically variable – that considers the position, status and experience of women in the academy.

The aim of this paper is to present a new conceptual dimension to our understanding of how and why women academics experience the higher education profession differently to their male colleagues and the factors, or forces that prevent women academics from leading in the academy. Based on interviews with women academics from three world-leading universities in Hong Kong, this article will present a two-part conceptual framework – the silence of, and the silencing of academic women.

The literature does provide some insight into the issue of silence and gender in higher education, for example, Luke's work on the 'politics of silence' (Luke, 1994; see also Ozkanli, et. al., 2009; Fotaki, 2013; Heijstra, et. al., 2016). The conceptual framework of the silence/ing of academic women takes forward this evidence base, drawing on the study described in the following section.

Research Approach

Funded by the Research Grants Council, Hong Kong, a semi-structured interview approach was taken to understand the experience of women academics (Author, 2015). Previous studies suggest that a qualitative approach is particularly advantageous in the study of engendered organisational and management practices and culture (Deem, 2002). Stratified sampling was used to select the interviewees and a total of 35 interviews were conducted. The analysis adopted a three-stage coding approach as set out in the research grant application (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). NVivo was used to aid the analysis of the data.

Theoretical Framing

On exploring the concept of silence/ing, 'micro-inequities' became relevant as a theoretical framework. Micro-inequities are defined as small, unjust inequalities that play an important role as part of the larger story of inequality in the workplace. Such inequalities might include small events, which are hard-to-prove, covert and often unintentional (Rowe, 1990; Brennan, 2013). Extensive research indicates that much of the discrimination women experience in the academy is subtle and almost intangible (Aiston, 2011). It is 'hidden', thereby making the case for the study of micro-inequities as a mechanism to uncover that which is hidden. In addition to micro-inequities, the study of 'micropolitics' is relatedly important in analysing the silence and silencing of academic women (Morley, 2006).

Findings

The presentation of this conceptual framework will be structured as follows.

The first section, entitled 'The Silence of Socialisation: Constructing the Feminine' will present the concept of *internal* silencing in two parts. Part I will explore how interviewees' identified gender stereotypes as having an 'inner' internal silencing function, which then in turn acts as barrier to women considering themselves as academic leaders. Part II considers how silence and gender conformity functions as an 'inner' strategy to secure career advancement.

The next section entitled 'The Silencing of Academic Women' will present the concept of *external* silencing, again in two parts. Part I will consider the consequences for academic women when they do not remain silent, including how women who try to be heard are in turn silenced. Part II explores how academic women are externally silenced by exclusion.

The final section of the article will consider the issue of silence/ing in relation to cultural context, in this instance traditional Chinese culture.

A series of illustrative quotations will guide the narrative and presentation of the overall conceptual framework.

Conclusion

The notion of academic women being silent, and of being silenced, set within the theoretical framework of micro-inequities and micro-politics, suggests that the organisational cultural of higher education continues to expect women to 'fit in'. Normative expectations of how women should act in turn opens up the 'space' for micro-inequities to be let in, with women struggling to negotiate how they *should* act. Paradoxically, women's silence is both an enabler and a barrier to their career progression. There is a strong case to be made for taking micro-inequities far more seriously as advocates for greater equity in the academy. The paper offers a number of ways forward to begin to deal with micro-inequities.