

Christian Poulsen

Prestige In Academia –
A Glance At The Gender Distribution

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ibidem-Verlag
Stuttgart

Bibliografische Information Der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

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Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem, säurefreiem Papier
Printed on acid-free paper

ISBN: 3-89821-512-1

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Printed in Germany

Prestige in academia – a glance at the gender distribution

Christian Poulsen

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Foreword

Since about the end of the 1990s gender mainstreaming and equal opportunities for women in the higher education sector have been very much in focus in Europe as a whole. There have been investigations of these issues in the various member states and several regional and national initiatives have come about. The present dissertation, concerned with prestige within academia has partially been sponsored by the European Union.

Women in European Universities (WEU) is a cross-national research and doctoral training programme organised as a training and research network, one to which the following seven European universities belong: Muenster University, Germany; Complutense University of Madrid; Royal Holloway University of London; Innsbruck University, Austria; Lund University, Sweden; University of Toulouse-Le Mirail, France and University of Warsaw, Poland. WEU emerged as an attempt to gain a better understanding of gender differences in universities throughout Europe. It has been financed in its fifth frame programme by The European Union. WEU's research "aims at assessing the professional status of women in academia and analysing the reasons for the underrepresentation in positions of authority in European universities"¹. It has resulted in some 28 reports, four of them which I have authored or co-authored. In the thesis I will take up how these reports have come about and what they deal with, as well as their background. Although the material will be presented with references whenever possible, these will sometimes be lacking in cases in which the work in question is my own.

Network Situation

WEU presented various of its findings at a conference in Brussels September 2003. These findings can be accessed on WEU's homepage www.women-eu.de either as downloads or as mail orders.

Countries involved in the study

Sweden was chosen as the principal country and Spain as a reference country for this investigation. Pure convenience sampling resulted in Sweden being selected as the principal country. Considerations of Spain as a reference country to which Sweden is compared facilitates an understanding of the Swedish case. Sweden has a long democratic tradition and for almost a century has officially encouraged women to enter universities, yet Spain has similar or even better figures than Sweden in regard to the number of women who are full university professors. In addition, despite Sweden being a leader in paroles on gender equality, it is one of the most gender-divided academic labour markets in Europe, whereas Spain has a rather high participation of women in some traditionally male disciplines, such as in the natural sciences. Thus, Spain represents in this sense quite an interesting comparative instrument.

The countries were compared in the material as a whole which is dealt with in the text, although the results of such comparisons will only be taken up specifically if they appear to be of particular relevance in helping to explain the situation in Sweden, which is of major concern here.

Acknowledgements

I am thankful to have shared discussions relevant for this thesis with Susana Vázquez, Marcus Persson, Daniel Melén and Daniél Bjerstedt. I would like to thank Juan Martín, Anett Schenk, Johan Lindgren and Jenny Bergsten very much for their help and I am specially gratefull to my supervisor Antoinette Hetzler.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Prestige and the underrepresentation of women

Intellectuals are highly influential even if they have no formal power in terms of legal statutes. This is a conclusion I draw in the paper “De intellektuelles felt – tilfældet Spanien” (Poulsen 1997).

For example, when Emile Zola wrote his famous “J’accuse” his arguments influenced a great many persons who read it, despite Zola’s not being a part of either the judicial or the political arm of the state. At the same time, although not all of the persons were won over simply on the strength of his arguments, many were also strongly influenced by his awe-inspiring reputation.

In a similar vein, prestigious academics are often able to influence their colleagues during a decision making process. When I began this study, I was interested in examining how prestige is bestowed and to what extent it is influenced by gender. It occurred to me that if prestige is not distributed fairly and evenly between women and men this might help explain the low participation of women in the higher strata of academia.

1.2 An alternative way at looking at gender attrition

Existing research on the underrepresentation of women in academia has essentially focused on two types of explanations: individual-related explanations and institutional-related explanations. Individual-related explanations are concerned with the commonly stated notion that it is more difficult for women to integrate the pressures and demands of family and of work, whereas institutional-related explanations refer more to such structural factors as that of “old boys’ networks” promoting and giving advantages to insiders or to people of similar affinities (Sonnert/Holten 1995). The first explanation supports the hypothesis that women have a double work burden: work in academia and

the traditional burdens of domestic duties. Although there is much evidence giving credence to this explanation, it fails to explain all underrepresentation of women at the top of the academic hierarchy (Tancred 2001), and it fails to explain why women with children tend to have just as successful careers as women without (Catalyst and Boston College Centre for Work and Family 2003, Wennerås/Wold 2000 p. 648, Wold 2003, p. 8). For example, Becker's much acclaimed human capital theory fails to explain why women with children do better in their careers where according to that theory they should have a basis for greater success in the sphere of the home than of a career (von Engelhardt/Jann 2004).

Von Engelhardt and Jann (2004) tested a thesis of Becker's on the results of the Swiss labour market panel survey. Becker's says that if one invests more human capital in household work for example, one will invest less in work of the market type. Considered together with the argument of women's having a double burden, this would mean that when women are highly committed to the home they are less intensive in their market work, however many hours they put into it, and that when a family invests in areas in which a given family member who is an economic agent has a comparative advantage (where, because women enter the labour market later they are discriminated against) negative patterns become stabilized and labour market segregation and wage gaps persist (ibid p. 207). Von Engelhardt's and Jann's regression models suggest that the percentage of women in an occupation has no influence on the work commitment women there have (ibid p. 213). Their findings do *not* show, as Becker would expect, that women with a double burden have less commitment and motivation to work in the labour market. In Switzerland, just as in Sweden, women are heavily overrepresented among halftime workers. In this sense, Becker is right that women give priority to working at home. Yet von Engelhardt's and Jann's findings indicate Becker to be wrong in believing women to have a less intensive work commitment *tout court*. If one controls for halftime work, then household duties are found to have no significant effect on marketwork commitment (ibid p. 221).

The "double-life-perspective" does not explain either why in the Netherlands female undergraduates have a lower completion rate than males. Wolffensperger in her critique of this perspective argues that the theory tends to encourage one to blame the victim (p. 88 Joan Wolffensperger in Davis 1995). The theory also fails to explain why in Finland,

the United States and Norway female researchers who have children are more productive than their female colleagues who have none (Wennerås/Wold 2000). The argument also presupposes that women are the principal child carers in the home. However, recent research reveals that in Denmark many men state that flexible work conditions are a major reason for their choosing to take a PhD. This finding calls into question whether the responsibility of bringing up children in the Scandinavian countries today tends to be exclusively performed by women (Nexø Jensen 2002).

The second type of explanation is difficult to document empirically due to the informality of many institutional patterns. The “threshold” explanation is an example of this type of explanation. It argues that women as yet do not form a “critical mass” in many faculties, which Kullis/Sicotte/Collins note in some 15% of the population (p. 661, 2002), their thus being underrepresented in decision-making processes.

Structural explanations are also weak in explaining how women would be able to hold ranks equal to those of men as professors *without* this negatively affecting the status of professors vis-à-vis other professions in society. For example, some research indicates that the status of an occupation could fall if women entered it (Touhey 1974, Davis 1991, Herman 2004, p. 226, Schoug 2004, p. 173) or that men tend to leave fields with low status (Harding 1998, p. 98).ⁱⁱ The acquiring of prestige is essential for succeeding at a career in academia. This makes it of utmost importance to better understand the mechanisms of prestige distribution here.

The thesis is an attempt to fill this explanatory gap by investigating the importance men and women place on prestige and whether this facilitates the advancement of their careers. It is hypothesised that the differences between men and women in the ways in which they manage prestige explains in part the low representation of women in full professor positions. As a consequence of the institutional logic implicitly embedded within the assumptions behind this hypothesis, the dissertation sets out to disprove the widely accepted notion that universities are based on a pure meritocratic system. My claim is that although a large majority of those who are professors have attained these posts on the basis of their academic merits, in many cases their merits alone do not explain the choice of one candidate over another. Instead, some professors have received their chair because of the prestige assigned to them, without adequate attention being paid to whether the prestige is really based on the merits.

The following scheme (Cole and Cole in Jense 1979, p. 16) summarises various factors that tend to influence paths to academic careers, see Scheme 1.

SCHEME 1 TYPE OF STUDY

<i>Type of influence</i>	<i>Source of influence on science</i>		
		Internal	External
	Intellectual	Type I	Type II
Social	Type III	Type IV	

In line with Jense this dissertation places mechanisms categorised as being type III, which influence factors found within the internal social structure of science under the microscope. It does not deal with the question of what science is and also does not address the question of how science and people in science are influenced by external social and intellectual developments. For example, I am not concerned with why policy makers introduce sex quotas, but am concerned with how quotas of this sort are perceived socially by academics within academia.

For the non-Swedish reader it could be useful to be provided a description of how rewards are considered within Swedish academia as compared with how it is considered within the academia of other countries. Øyen (1990, pp. 138-139) considered the two US and the British to be extreme systems regarding them as being related to one another in the following manner: “under the contest system [US] it is assumed that the general reader wants to know what the successful person accomplished, while in a sponsorship system [British] it is enough for the general reader to know that the person’s success has been recognised by the highest authority”. Swedish academia places itself closer to the latter since motivation for why a prize or someother reward should be given tends to be lacking.

1.3 Prestige

My aim is to describe the relationship between prestige and female representation (at the professorial level) in Swedish universities.

I have previously (Poulsen 1997) used the term *konsakrale øjeblikke*/consecrating moments as both a methodological tool and a descriptive label in the attempt to identify and describe the stepping-stones a person must traverse in endeavouring to be accepted as an intellectual. The problem of becoming an intellectual can be interpreted without a direct parallel being drawn to prestige as being the process of rewarding prestige. It is assumed that there are consecrating moments that provide the actors involved with prestige. The outline of the theory of consecrating moments presented in Poulsen 1997 will be developed further here and used both as a methodological tool and as theory or assumption. Combining this assumption with the Bourdieuan idea of the importance of having an appropriate habitus in a given field one can then hypothesise that soft values such as prestige play an important role in the process of becoming a professor and that the theory of consecrating moments can contribute significantly to explaining female underrepresentation, or in other words that the managing of prestige can contribute to an understanding of women's degree of representation at the highest level in universities.

This research reported here aims in an exploratory way to help bridge the gap between a number of explanatory models that exists. Previous research on prestige can be understood as having been conducted in two major directions: The one line of investigation is that found in the work of Robert K. Merton and his followers (Zuckerman and Merton 1973, Zuckerman 1977, Merton 1977, Keith/Babchuk 1998). Merton and others use the concepts of "esteem" and "recognition" to demonstrate how cutting-edge positions in science are passed on from scientists to their followers and how a particular university or laboratory is capable of maintaining its status from one generation of scientists to the next.

A second line of investigation sets out to classify different types of "professional prestige", the statuses of different occupations being examined in terms of their current standing and changes in it over time (Rockwood/Strodtbeck 1961, Alestalo/Uusitalo 1980, Kulik 1998). This approach was developed over 40 years ago and is still used in a wide range of fieldsⁱⁱⁱ. It should be noted, however, that this second line of investigation speaks of status as opposed to prestige. Status is the social esteem of a position *an sich*

whitin a system, whereas prestige is attached to the person. The present investigation does not speak of “professional prestige”, since what is involved is the inter-relational prestige of concrete agents whitin particular systems. The following methodological tools were developed and utilised to facilitate this.

1.3.1 Consecrating moments

Prestige can be explored by investigating what I term “consecrating moments”. These represent the attempt to conceptualise the actions necessary for an aspiring academic to perform in such a way as to be perceived by her audience as a person of prestige. The etymological root of the term is the Latin word *consecrare*, which means to set apart as sacred, as well as its denoting the process of elevating a priest to the rank of bishop.

I use it in the sense of its referring to the concrete actions that give someone esteem as a reward for acting in a manner that the group (e.g. the members of academia) finds appropriate and consistent with its values. The last part of the concept, “moment”, has a double function. First it refers to a given action only being consecrating when it is performed at a *given* moment in time; performed at another point in time, it would perhaps not be consecrating. Secondly, whereas “action” refers to a “process” involving different time sequences that elapse, “moment” refers to the final event of the action being consecrated. A working definition of consecrate would be the following: to bless, to transfer power or prestige from one person or group to another. Consecrating moments here are thus those actions carried out by individuals inside and outside academia that elicit prestige from those inside academia. Cooley, Park and Hughes can be, if one accepts the idea of the authors’ equating status with prestige (for a clarification of the relationship between “status” and prestige see chapter 2) understood as supporting the idea of consecrating moments: “One of the dynamic features of this theory of social action, in fact, is the idea that *each action is a status*, and each status an action: therefore an actor reveals how he defines the situation in the way he behaves, and thus provides others with cues to their own statuses in the situation”^{iv} (Rockwood/Strodtbeck 1961, compare Cooley 1992. p. 324).

The point is that consecrating moments, such as signing a protest list against an injustice, working with a distinguished scholar, publishing books or articles, getting a dis-

tinguished grant or collaborating with prestigious universities accumulate, leading to an actor's being able to accrue sufficient prestige to enter a privileged network. Evidently one can be part of a privileged network simply on the basis of the status of the position one possesses. Thus, status is to be understood as a position in a social system and prestige as the dynamic personal features of status (Rockwood/Strodtbeck 1961, Kuper /Kuper 1996)^v. A network of this sort provides an opportunity structure, one which improves the individual's opportunities for promotion. The following questions arise then. Is gender a factor in the process of obtaining consecrating moments? Do the strategies that women and that men employ in the process of accruing prestige differ?

A subordinate goal of the dissertation is to identify and evaluate such consecrating moments as those described above. Special efforts will be made to detect to what extent a consecrating moment affects prestige and whether the influence it has is of more than a brief and temporary duration, that is, whether it is limited to the situation immediately at hand at the moment of consecration, exerting in this case influence outside this particular sphere. Although prestige is contingent on its specific temporal and spatial context, what I am interested in identifying and describing is the prestige that helps the scholar to advance his career.

One can also ask to what extent actions are cumulative in the sense of a given action not simply neutralising actions previous to it. Specifically, the question is whether actions can be conceived of here as involving a mathematical summing that results in a larger value, that is, whether actions can be added to one another to advance a person's career. Ultimately I hope to be able to determine whether male professorial candidates accrue consecrating moments more readily than women do owing to the way in which professorial duties tend to be distributed between men and women.

Are there other methodological tools that can be used as consecrating elements as well? It is evident that if an academic has a high productivity of scientific work of high standard over a long period of time then he is very likely to advance in his university career. There are those who maintain that meritocracy and longevity tend generally to suffice for achieving top positions in academia. Harriet Zuckerman states that "practically all scientists and scholars who remain in academic life can count on eventually attaining the rank of full professor" (1977, p. 157). Some claim that this also applies to female scientists (Kulis/Sicotte/Collins 2002, p. 673)^{vi}. Although it may indeed, there are indi-

vidual differences in rates of advancement for a given level of merit. Consecrating moments may describe a quality *in addition* to meritocracy and longevity that helps explain time differences in advancements.

The term “consecrating moments” is one of various concepts that can be used to describe how the broader concept of “prestige” can explain the positioning of people within academia. The concept refutes the widely accepted idea that a career is made up of a long and continuous flow of good performance. This common way of looking at academic careers does not allow one adequately understand particularly difficult moments, such as one’s grant application being rejected for. The idea of a general career flow that differs in rate for various individuals thus does not explain how the precise mix of career components found may be decisive for the career chances a person has.

1.3.2 Prestige and the audience

Whereas consecrating momenta refer to the specific moments in which actors within academia are rewarded with prestige bestowed upon them by an audience, prestige as such can be awarded in a more fluid time sequence. Consecrating moments are actions or behaviour at concrete moments in time and space that are rewarded by an audience. Thus, it is not the behaviour as such that is the consecrating moment, but the awarding of prestige by the source and the audience at a specific moment in time.

How do actions become valued in terms of prestige? An actor who performs an action is dependent upon the evaluation of it by her source. An audience will in turn evaluate the action independently and subsequently evaluate the source’s evaluation of the action. It may sometimes occur that the evaluation of the source (of a specific action) is of such importance as to deem the audience’s evaluation negligible. Zuckerman (1977, p. 184) states for example, that convincing a pair of Nobel winners of the importance of one’s discovery can be just as important, if not more, than convincing the rest of the scientific community of it.

Prestige and consecrating moments are not devoid of cultural influences. A given set of actions (such as the providing of funds) could serve as a consecrating moment in one intellectual community but not in another. Of central concern in the thesis is to compare

men and women in terms of the type of actions that provides particular prestige within a given setting.

1.4 Merit – the complement to prestige

Merit can be understood as being Ying, and prestige as being Yang. Merit is thus what prestige is not. Merit refers to achievements and results instantly accepted as worthy of reward, such as high productivity and the having a long publication list. I contend that the two concepts, when utilised in conjunction with each other, help to answer the following questions: To what extent do the merits that women possess lead to prestige? To what extent do the merits that men possess lead to prestige? If the two sexes differ in this respect, does this help to explain how the glass roof is constructed?

1.5 Hypothesis and anti-hypothesis

The central concept in the thesis is that of prestige. My tentative view is that consecrated moments should be regarded as essential to being assigned prestige within academia and to the resulting career advancement there, and also that high prestige can sometimes be achieved by an academic who has relatively few merits. The central hypothesis I consider is that actions valued as being prestigious by those within academia at large are valued differently in the case of men than in the case of women. The hypothesis can be seen as supported if it is shown that men and women differ in their perceptions of what leads to prestige and in the priority they give to the same actions. The hypothesis can also be supported by its being shown that a higher proportion of male than of female professors have a high level of prestige and a low level of merits and that a higher proportion of female than male professors have a low level of prestige and a high level of merits. The anti-hypothesis is that women and men professors with the same level of merits also have about the same level of prestige. The anti-hypothesis is supported if it can be shown that men and women professors essentially perceive actions related to prestige and give priority to them in the same way.

1.6 Disposition

In the chapter that follows the theoretical framework employed and theoretical problems considered relating to prestige within academia are presented and discussed and are examined in the light of the existing research within the field.

In the methodological discussion in chapter 3, methodologies other authors have used to investigate similar problems are presented and discussed. I identify three theoretical concepts, here that I regard as essential for a correct and meaningful interpretation of the data. Since I am working with grounded theory, it has been essential that during the gathering of data I remain sensitive to the development of new theoretical concepts. Some matters proved to be of central importance to the investigation, such as the conception of what is valued by the academic community and how professors speak of prestige. In this chapter certain emphasis will also be placed on the opt-out problem. For example, when young people start a career in academia they still have the possibility of choosing other professions. Therefore, it is important to examine the status university professors have in comparison with other occupations of about the same level in other respects. The principal data collection methodologies employed in the dissertation – questionnaire, focus group and document analysis – are presented here and discussed in detail.

In chapter 4 the quantitative data obtained by questionnaire is presented and is contextualised in relation to the aforementioned questions of what is valued by the academic community and how professors speak of prestige.

In chapter 5 the qualitative material which emerged from the focus groups and from the analysis of documents, is presented and is contextualised. For cases in which similarities are evident in the material obtained from the three different sources of qualitative data, the results in question are presented in relation to themes or questions common to the three data gathering procedures, such themes and questions being illustrated by citations and quotes from the material that was collected. The results are also presented in relation to the concepts referred to earlier and to new theoretical concepts that emerge during the analysis.

In chapter 6 the results are analysed, discussed and streamlined in relation to the main question of how the findings can throw light on the question of gender discrimination in academia. The chapter also provides indications of the extent to which recommendations

that should be made vary across national borders. Various implications for meso-level decisions are also examined. The measures that university departments might take to make the importance of “consecrating moments” and prestige more explicit are also described.

In addition the following questions are addressed: Why is it important to make the gendered structures at the university readily visible? Will efforts in this direction have negative effects on other aspects of academic life? The implications of the findings for policy decisions will be analysed. What can be done at the regional level to counter the gender-linked uncertainties regarding “consecrating moments”? What values does this study have for macro-level recommendations?

Furthermore in chapter 6 final comments are presented and the interpretation of the data is reset in a theoretical framework. A comparison with other countries is undertaken and indications of future research are outlined. The attempt is also made in the thesis to provide an answer to the question of as whether the concept of “consecrating moments” could be integrated in a usefull way with sociology of prestige. Furthermore the question of the extent to which the findings presented in the thesis suggest new areas of research is also considered. Diagram 1 presents an overview of the dissertation.

DIAGRAM 1 **STRUCTURE OF DISSERTATION**

