

## GENDER AND ATYPICAL ACADEMIC CAREERS

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### **Abstract**

This article explores gender and atypical academic careers, and analyses two case histories, one in Australia and one in Portugal. While national and organisational contexts impacted on the career trajectories of these academics, the main themes of the case studies were sponsorship/mentoring, resilience and being an outsider. The analysis indicates there is a strong link between sponsorship/mentoring and resilience. Sponsorship/mentoring provides women with guidance, advice and access to job opportunities, and helps them develop resilience in the often challenging higher education (HE) organisational culture. But lack of sponsorship/mentoring can engender a sense of being excluded and cause some academic women to become ambivalent about their careers as a mechanism for survival in HE.

**Keywords:** gender, academic careers, career paths, higher education.

### **Resumo**

#### **Género e carreiras académicas atípicas**

O presente artigo explora as carreiras académicas por sexo e atípicas, e analisa dois estudos de caso, um na Austrália e outro em Portugal. Sendo certo que os contextos nacionais e organizacionais tiveram impacto nas trajetórias profissionais destas académicas, os principais temas dos estudos de caso foram o patrocínio/tutoria, a resiliência e ser-se um estranho. A análise revela a existência de uma forte ligação entre patrocínio/tutoria e resiliência. O patrocínio/tutoria proporciona às mulheres orientação, aconselhamento e acesso a oportunidades de emprego, e ajuda-as a desenvolverem resiliência na, muitas vezes, desafiadora cultura organizacional do ensino superior (ES). Todavia, a exclusão das mulheres académicas pode fazer com que algumas delas sejam ambivalentes relativamente às suas carreiras e pode constituir um mecanismo necessário para a sua sobrevivência no ES.

**Palavras-chave:** género, carreiras académicas, percursos profissionais, ensino superior.

### **Resumen**

#### **Género y carreras académicas atípicas**

Este artículo explora las carreras académicas por género y atípicas, y examina dos estudios de caso, uno en Australia y otro en Portugal. Mientras los contextos nacionales y organizacionales han tenido un impacto en las trayectorias profesionales de estas académicas, los temas principales de los estudios de casos fueron el patrocinio/tutoría, la resiliencia y ser-se un extraño. El análisis revela la existencia de un fuerte vínculo entre patrocinio/tutoría y resiliencia. El patrocinio/tutoría proporciona a las mujeres orientación, asesoramiento y acceso a oportunidades de empleo, y les ayuda a desarrollar la resiliencia en la, a menudo, desafiante cultura organizacional de la educación superior (ES). Sin embargo, la exclusión de las mujeres académicas puede hacer que algunas de ellas sean

ambivalentes con respecto a sus carreras y puede ser un mecanismo necesario para su supervivencia en el ES.

**Palabras-clave:** género, carreras académicas, trayectorias profesionales, educación superior.

## Introduction

This article explores gender and atypical academic careers and the organisational context in which women build careers in universities. While the prevailing view is that academic careers are based on the male career model, women may not follow this typical academic career path. It then analyses two case histories of women's atypical careers, one in Australia and the other in Portugal.

The reason for choosing these two countries is that the development of higher education and the management context in each is quite different. Australia is a former English colony where higher education developed on the British model. Portugal is a southern European country. There is a marked difference in equal opportunity legislative frameworks and affirmative action programs between the two countries that can impact on women's academic careers. Australia has strong gender equity frameworks at both national and state level (Carvalho *et al.*, 2013). Since the early 1990s Australian universities have had equity policies to remove sex discrimination, and they have also put in place a range of initiatives to increase women's representation in academia (Winchester, 2014). But Portugal has no tradition of equal opportunity and affirmative action at either the national level or in higher education (Carvalho *et al.*, 2013), although its membership of the EU since 1986 has had an impact on gender equity in the workplace.

## Gender and academic careers

The model of the ideal academic career is based on the «myth» of the successful male scientist whose life is totally dedicated to science (Moir, 2006). However, this model is «a social, highly contextualized construction, and therefore vulnerable to many kinds of biases – especially to a gender bias» (Wolffram and Aye, 2013). The concept of scientific excellence has therefore been undergoing change; Helen Gunter (2012) argues that intellectual work in universities is in decline as knowledge workers are performance-managed and at the same time are required to be entrepreneurs, indicating that managerialism is impacting on academic careers (White *et al.*, 2011).

What then is a typical academic career? It has been argued that the male career model «assumes absolute dedication to a career that is supposed to be uninterrupted» (Santos, 2002, quoted in Caprile, 2012) and involves incremental

progression from lecturer, to senior lecturer, associate professor and full professor on the basis of performance, especially research productivity.

Women may not follow a typical academic career (Bagilhole and White, 2013). They often enter academia later than men, especially in disciplines such as social work, education and nursing, or have atypical academic careers with little support in career planning (Dever *et al.*, 2008). Joanne Pyke (2009) found that of 24 women she interviewed at senior lecturer level, only one had followed a traditional academic career path and most had started academic careers in fields which did not necessarily require a PhD. Similarly, a 2006 Athena survey of 70 universities found that 40 per cent of female respondents had taken career breaks, while the percentage of men who had done so was almost negligible (Caprile, 2012: 90). Such career breaks may impact on the rate of career advancement. For example, Karin Backman (2012) found that women academics in Sweden were older when they were awarded their PhDs, and when they were appointed associate professors and full professors. Similarly, in Australia women were on average two years older than men at the age they were appointed professors (Diezmann and Grieshaber, 2009). Academic women may therefore be building academic careers in their thirties and forties, and are always catching up with male colleagues who by mid-career may have reached career plateauing (Riordan, 2011).

Backman (2012) hints that informal gender patterns in universities shape the different career outcomes of men and women in academia. The problem is often the perception among senior colleagues that women must choose between a career and family, as it is not possible to have both, what is called the 'motherhood myth' (Etzkowitz *et al.*, 2000), rather than the career aspirations of the women themselves (Cox, 2008; Moir, 2006). Philipp Dubach *et al.* (2012) found that academics who were mothers were four times more likely than fathers to feel they were no longer taken as seriously or supported as well in the workplace since having children.

Another reason why women do not reach senior academic positions is because of other responsibilities. Nicholas Wolfinger *et al.* (2009: 1613) assert that 'more than most vocations, academia does not really offer any good time to have children'. The solution for some women is not to have children. But others try to balance family and work which often has a negative impact on career progression. However, Prozesky (2008: 61) found that the effects of cumulative disadvantage can be «countered to a certain extent by women accelerating their publication productivity rate at a later stage in their lives, particularly when their children reach school-going age».

Academic women are encouraged to focus on teaching/pastoral care (Neale and White, 2004). Lucinda and Jim Barrett (2011) argued that a lack of transparency can allow discrimination to go undetected through the skewed allocation of types of work for academic women that are not strongly associated with promotion.

Jim Barry *et al.* (2006) argued that these negative impacts on women's academic careers were a product of increasing managerialism in higher education. This is not to suggest that collegial models benefitted women (Bagilhole and White, 2013). Recent reforms in Portugal have led to increased participation of external stakeholders in the government and management of universities, consistent with new public management (Bruckmann and Carvalho, 2014) and there is evidence in both countries of managerialism impacting on academic careers (White *et al.*, 2011).

Women may possibly be ambivalent about career development because of homosociability experienced in the workplace (O'Connor, 2011) and the continuing entrenched gendered leadership cultures (Burkinshaw, 2015). For example, they can be ambivalent about seeking promotion (Pyke, 2012; White, 2005; Kloot; 2004), and can lack the necessary information about the qualifications and skills required (Bagilhole and White, 2008; also Diezmann and Grieshaber, 2009).

Not surprisingly, White and Bagilhole (2013) found that even younger academic women may still not be able to aspire to a traditional male academic career model, despite their expectation that they should have academic careers on the same basis as their male colleagues. There was less encouragement to plan their careers and they tended to experience discrimination early on.

### **Case histories of atypical academic careers**

What follows are case histories of Maria, a Portuguese academic and Kate, an Australian academic, that illustrate the divergent paths that women's academic careers can take. Each has careers in higher education that do not reflect the stereotypical male academic career model. Neither had a substantial academic teaching career and both came to academic research later. The case histories analyse the main themes emerging from their careers and discuss what these indicate about gender and atypical academic careers.

Maria, an only child, was born in a small village in northern Portugal. Her parents moved to a nearby city, close to the Spanish border, to ensure that she received a good education. She then went to the University of Porto where she studied economics, and later did a post-graduate degree. She juggled teaching – and later management – with marriage and family and by her 30s was head of administration at a regional polytechnic. After her marriage ended she enrolled in a PhD. She took leave in 1999 to go to the US where she re-married; her husband was then Vice-President of an east coast university. In 2002 they decided to relocate to Portugal and took up research positions at a research centre. Since her husband's death in 2007 Maria has continued research on higher education, and works with a government agency. Support from influential men (and her mother), plus resilience have characterised her career. Maria belonged to a generation in Portugal where she had to face a large cultural gap because professional

women were judged differently, and more harshly, than their male colleagues. While she experienced discrimination as a woman in public life, nevertheless she managed to balance work and family responsibilities.

Kate was born in a regional city in south eastern Australia, the fifth of seven children. Her father's poor health was a constant theme of her childhood. Nevertheless, both parents believed in the importance of education. She enrolled at a newer university in Melbourne and graduated with a B.A. (Hons), and an M.A. She then undertook a PhD in the social sciences at a research intensive university. By the time she completed her PhD she was married and had a small child, and another on the way. She spent the next decade working in a research consultancy with her husband. When they separated, she worked as director of research of a state parliamentary committee, and then gradually moved back to employment in higher education. Most of her roles were either management of small teams or project management. She has maintained a profile in academic research, focussing on gender in higher education.

### **Sponsorship and academic careers**

Sponsorship/mentoring – or lack of it – was a strong theme in these two case histories. While mentorship has been considered important for women's career development, it has been argued that women also require sponsorship – guidance and advice, access to key projects and assignments – in order to succeed (Morley 2012: 14). In other words sponsorship is more directed than mentoring. Sponsors are those people «who will recommend younger colleagues, open doors for them (metaphorically), praise and encourage them, position them in terms of experiences and contacts, and help them know how to move to the next career step» (White and Bagilhole, 2013: 184). Sponsors also introduce younger academics to scholarly networks, providing mentoring and ensuring that they make strategic career moves. However, van den Brink (2014) cautions against the expectation that sponsorship will necessarily lead to transformational change for women in organisations; it may not challenge the status quo but instead lead to those being sponsored mirroring the characteristics of their sponsors and reproducing privilege. Without sponsorship and mentoring women can struggle in their postgraduate studies and early academic careers and even decide to leave academia (Birch, 2011).

One of the strongest themes in Maria's career was sponsorship and mentoring. The separate and gendered spheres in Portuguese society – men in the workforce and women in the home – have historically been a dominant narrative (Amâncio, 1995). Given the traditional cultural values in Portuguese society when Maria started her career, it was important to build alliances and find support from influential males; so one of the central themes in her professional career was mentoring and strong support and sponsorship from male figures.

The first important person was her father. He wanted the best for her and pushed her to go to university and to have a career, in a cultural context where women in her era were not necessarily expected to have both a family and a career. The second supporter was the first president of the polytechnic. He continually mentored and strongly encouraged her to pursue post graduate training. The next male supporter was the second president of the polytechnic. They worked well together. Maria described their working relationship as like a professional «marriage». He believed that she had the capacity to do a PhD and encouraged her to take that path, years before she eventually enrolled in a doctorate. The fourth influential male figure was the director of the research centre, who provided opportunities and support, facilitating her career as a higher education researcher. And finally, her late husband was both a mentor and research collaborator and this led to a much broader research focus, and a range of international collaborations. Having such strong supporters and role models helped to sustain her confidence, especially when she experienced discrimination both within higher education institutions and externally (Machado-Taylor, 2013).

In contrast, Kate experienced a complete lack of mentoring or introduction to networks at strategic stages in her career trajectory. She received no support or advice from supervisors or her department when she needed to plan a future career towards the end of her PhD. This lack of mentoring and sponsorship had a negative impact on her confidence, consistent with Lesley Birch's (2011) findings. Kate's experience reflected that of Maryanne Dever *et al.*'s (2008) survey of PhD graduates from research intensive universities in Australia that found more male than female PhD candidates were likely to receive assistance from principal supervisors in gaining employment. It reinforced the strong sense of different treatment experienced as a PhD student. It was clear to her at the time that the only female peers who seemed to do well either had no children or had husbands who were academics.

While Kate was not offered sponsorship or mentoring Maria, who was older when she started her PhD and already confident in a senior administrative position, actively sought sponsorship/mentoring mostly from her direct supervisors with whom she had a close working relationship and her career benefitted from their support and advice. These case histories therefore suggest that early career academic women need to be strategic about building a career, and ask their supervisors/managers and department to provide mentoring.

## Resilience

Another strong theme in Maria's career is physical and emotional resilience, defined as an acceptance of reality, a sense of meaning, and an ability to improvise (Coutu, 2002), and the capacity to face adversity with hope and not be crushed by the challenges and stresses of life (Deveson, 2003). Factors that impact on

resilience include: finding or creating a supportive environment (including role models); the ability to create realistic plans and follow through; knowing your own strengths; communication skills (the ability to communicate with others, be assertive and problem solve); and emotional balance (Goldstein, 2009).

Maria had strong physical resilience. She had the capacity when required to survive on very little sleep despite the multiple demands on her time – work, children and wider family obligations. She had to be very organised and strategic. She described her work hours as «crazy». She would often put her children to bed and then work for several more hours at home. She was also emotionally resilient, despite experiencing both overt and covert discrimination in the workplace as a young female manager, and later political interference when she worked at the Institute, and when the academic managers would not respect her position. As Felice Schwartz (1989) asserts: ‘we need to address the issues that arise when female socialisation meets the male corporate culture and masculine rules of career development’. Nevertheless there was an underlying resilience that made her never give up. She managed to develop a career within these masculine rules through sheer determination. Veronica Castro and others’ (2011) findings of resilience among doctoral and post-doctoral women resonated with Maria’s experience. They talk about how characteristics such as intrinsic motivation, independence, internal locus of control, resolve, perseverance, and motivating self plus the use of negative external factors as positive motivation play an important role in the academic achievement. Certainly she was able in most instances to turn negative external influences into positive motivation to try that bit harder.

But this resilience at times took its toll on Maria. She placed heavy demands on herself because she was often a trail blazer as a woman in public life in Portugal. She had a sense that she needed to work that much harder and better because she was a woman. She was also a perfectionist. She believed she got that from her father, but realised she was also demanding a lot from herself; it was partly her personality. So gender and ambition became inextricably intertwined in her working life. She believed she needed to prove herself just that little bit more.

Kate often considered herself a survivor in a career that included a decade as a research consultant and 15 years working in higher education. But the increasingly managerial direction of her university eventually had a negative impact on her resilience. Working as a project manager to senior management at a newer Australian university was initially a fascinating insight into how power was exercised. It was evident that the university had embraced managerialism as a response to external factors such as government quality audits and funding imperatives, and that in the managerial university the positional power of the Vice-Chancellor was strong and unquestioned. But it was an increasingly uncomfortable environment with resignations, evidence of extreme stress among senior managers, and a rippling effect throughout the organisation that did not necessarily produce the high productivity and accountability managerialism requires. There were times when she craved a less demanding role where one did not con-

tinually run the gauntlet of managers under huge pressure, and observe many academics paralysed by what they saw as the organisation's assault on their autonomy and professionalism. As Richard Bolden *et al.* (2012: 37) so rightly observe, managerialism leads to «diminishing opportunities for academics to self-determine their own sense of direction and in so doing undermining their commitment to the institution and the profession».

In the later years of Kate's career, change became continuous and job security a thing of the past. Her experience was that, as organisational change is now a given, it may mean that you lose your job or that it is largely changed, similar to the extreme work pressure women in Judi Marshall's (1995) study experienced.

Kate's resilience diminished further as she experienced a continual juggling of a sense of authenticity against the demands of the managerial university. Alice Eagly and Linda Carli (2007) emphasise the importance of maintaining a sense of authenticity as a leader. But in the managerial university in Kate's view there is no celebration of achievements, only an inexorable juggernaut demanding ever higher performance and output. This, plus the sense that one can navigate through or survive a restructure and then settle is often unrealistic. And there may be a point at which women need to change institutions or even stop working in order to re-energise and think strategically about the next career move, which was Kate's response to an increasingly destabilised work environment as she stepped out of the workforce for over a year. This was also a theme for some of Marshall's (1995: 251) women managers who left employment to let the sense of exhaustion «work its way through, and recover a sense of vitality and life interest».

These case histories demonstrate that resilience is dependent on characteristics such as motivation, independence and perseverance (Castro *et al.*, 2011). Maria has enormous self-motivation which was nurtured by strong male sponsors/mentors and has enabled her to take on challenging roles and to persevere even when she experienced obstacles and workplace discrimination. In contrast, Kate did not display such strong resilience in her career. A lack of sponsors at the outset and an increasingly difficult work environment left her dispirited and ambivalent about higher education, as discussed below. There appears to be a strong link here between resilience and sponsorship and mentoring from male supervisors in women building academic careers, which concurs with Kuo-Yang Kao *et al.* (2014) finding that the relation of career mentoring to resilience was stronger for cross-gender relationships than for same-gender relationships.

### **Being an outsider**

Maria's career was characterised by strong support from influential men who were crucial in the male dominated professional world in which she built her academic career. As Judy Wajcman (1998) emphasises, it is often not possible to influence the male dominated organisational culture. For much of her early



career she was one of the few women in management positions. In this context, management structures and practices were therefore 'particularly important sites for the reproduction of masculine discourses and practices' (Kerfoot and Knights 1996:97). Maria did not challenge this homosociability; instead she sought and accepted support from male sponsors. There was little sense of being an outsider, except when there was political pressure to remove her from her position as head of administration at the polytechnic after her divorce from her first husband.

In contrast, probably the most enduring theme in Kate's working life is that of being an outsider. It began early at the Catholic primary school where being poor was tolerated but condemned her to being on the periphery of school life. In a sense that set her up for being comfortable in the role and the expectation of always being on the outside. Experience in secondary school largely reinforced that. As Val Walsh (2007: 78) explains: «On its own, education does not necessarily improve the self-esteem and life chances of working-class women. On its own, it appears to be insufficient to our needs to survive and thrive, for example as academics». Kate came to embrace the status of being an outsider, in a similar way to the women in Blackmore and Sachs' (2001: 50) study who saw benefits in positioning themselves on the margins. But there is no sense in Maria's case history of class being an issue. While she was not from a middle class background she did not experience being excluded in her schooling or university education.

Being comfortable with the role of outsider, and using it to advantage, can in fact be an asset in building an academic career. Kate's experience suggests that women academics need to be aware that at some stage – often a crucial time – they will realise male colleagues «never really considered her «one of them»» (Bagilhole, 2007). As an outsider she could often more easily tolerate the contradictions in and mixed messages from management, and developed a healthy scepticism about authority, as discussed below.

Kate's resilience diminished further in what she saw as a difficult working environment. Perhaps her response to the organisational culture reflected other research that suggests women can be uncomfortable with bureaucracies which institutionalise modes of domination (Ferguson, 1984; Cotterill, Hirsch, and Letherby, 2007). Colleagues would advise her to keep quiet and try not to be noticed so that her uneasiness with the organisational culture was not obvious. But at the end of the day, she observed there was always a sense of needing to live with one's self. At times she survived through a strategy of resistance (O'Connor 2001) but at other times she was left dispirited and was often ill. Not surprisingly, she became increasingly ambivalent about her position in the academy, which Breda Gray (1994) argues can be a necessary survival strategy. Therefore, Kate considers ambivalence can be a valid response for some academics to a difficult work environment, allowing them to challenge, push boundaries, always questioning, being on the margins and ultimately maintaining a degree of authenticity.

There is a marked difference in these case histories between inclusion and exclusion. Maria had strong confidence, strong networks and strong

sponsors/mentors. She mostly had positive experiences in the workplace. In contrast, Kate for much of her working life was an outsider on the inside (Gherardi, 1995). While she had learnt early on to be comfortable with the status of outsider, this was exacerbated in her later career by the increasing managerial climate at the university at which she worked and the impact this had on staff. Kate – and to a lesser extent Maria – therefore experienced a gap between career aspirations and the reality of a gendered and managerial organisational culture which negatively impacts on academic women, particularly in Australia (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010; Eveline, 2004). Managerialism leads to the social division of labour within academia becoming even more pronounced (White and Bagilhole, 2013) and perpetuates universities as «relentless sites of exclusion and elitism» (Fitzgerald 2012: 122). Kate's experience suggests that managerialism may leave academic women more, rather than less, excluded from opportunities and support in developing their careers.

## Conclusion

While the prevailing view is that academic careers are based on the typical male career model, these case histories demonstrate that academic careers can take many forms, and that an academic focus may come later for some women. Both women did not embark on academic research careers until they were in their 40s. The prevailing national context also had an impact on their career trajectories; there were no national maternity leave schemes in either country when Maria and Kate had their children, although paid maternity leave has been available in recent decades. This meant that they had no expectation of careers on the same terms as men in higher education. But the organisational context also had an impact: the rapid growth of managerialism tended to perpetuate the social division of labour within academia (Fitzgerald and Wilkinson, 2010). Kate challenged this managerial, masculinist culture and was ambivalent about building an academic career, but Maria developed strategies that enabled her to work within the existing culture by seeking male sponsors who could help her career progression.

The case histories of these two atypical academic careers may provide pointers for other women who are late entrants to academia and whose academic career does not follow the usual teaching/research model. The main themes were sponsorship/mentoring or lack of it, resilience and being an outsider. Sponsorship/mentoring clearly provides women with guidance and advice but also access to opportunities that otherwise would not be available. Strong sponsorship/mentoring from powerful leaders helps women to develop resilience that enables them to progress in their careers even if they enter academia later on, and despite the challenging organisational culture. Resilience, characterised by motivation, independence and perseverance, provides women academics with the stamina and focus to overcome workplace obstacles and both direct and indirect

discrimination. This research therefore confirms Kao *et al.* (2014) and Birch's (2011) findings that there can be a link between cross-gender sponsorship/mentoring and resilience, and suggests that if women are late entrants to academia male sponsorship/mentoring can be beneficial to career development, while a lack of sponsorship/mentoring can engender a sense of exclusion and lead academic women to become ambivalent about their position as a mechanism for their survival in HE.

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