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A gender perspective on local and cosmopolitan identities in academia

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Background

Research on gender differences in academic staff indicates that female academics display more international career orientations than their male counterparts (Halvorsen 2002, Archer 2008). Drawing on Gouldner's local and cosmopolitan identities (1957) this paper analyses gender differences in academic staff of Croatia, Poland and Romania.

Analytical framework

Locals are academic staff loyal to their institutions, where they remain throughout their careers and achieve leadership positions. They seek acknowledgement from local constituencies and do not specifically pursue international peers' recognition. *Cosmopolitans* are academic staff committed to the ideals of the academic profession, they constantly train to update their expertise and move between institutions and countries.

According to a *power perspective* women perceive themselves as cosmopolitan out of necessity, as they find difficult to progress in their career within the same university and where power relations have been traditionally male dominated. This would become even truer in those scientific disciplines where women are a minority, such as natural sciences or engineering.

A *logic of appropriateness* (March and Olsen 2011) see women pursue less instrumental career pathways favouring the development of knowledge and expertise instead of ascending organizational ranks (Nokkala et al 2017). Female academics consider appropriate the requirement for mobility and intellectual exposure to other higher education institutions and systems.

National and institutional characteristics: women move away from more traditional cultures towards more progressive countries where they can better develop their own ambitions.

Analysis

This study draws on around 170 interviews conducted with academics in Croatia, Poland and Romania. The respondents have been categorized according to gender (male, female), academic position (junior, senior), and disciplinary field (from Agriculture to Social and Behavioural sciences). All interviews followed the same guidelines, which included questions on career perspectives, mobility and internationalization (Fumasoli et al 2015).

Contrary to other European countries, Croatian, Polish and Romanian higher education systems are characterized by a formal, centrally organized system of academic careers, which in principle allows individuals to plan their progression from junior to professorial title in the same university. This said, the requirement for international publications, conference attendance and partnership in research with EU countries has become increasingly important in the definition of the criteria for promotion.

Croatia: female academics appear to be less concerned by formal and bureaucratic rules for career advancement, hence they stress individual effort to get and update professional training in the English

language, in teaching and research, as well as in leadership and team work (HR4/HR5/HR6/HR19). Male academics tend to highlight the key role of their university and its regulations in promotions (HR1/2/3/25) and are willing to comply with such demands even if they do not agree (HR19). While male academics acknowledge that EU membership is pushing Croatian higher education towards internationalization, they state it is irrelevant for their career, given that promotion mechanisms are locally implemented (HR32).

Poland is described as an inward-looking hierarchical system where bureaucratic criteria are misaligned with academic work. Criteria for career progression are defined centrally by the ministry, but local – departmental - adaptation plays a central role in promotions. The *habilitation*, mandatory degree for senior positions, is awarded by internal departmental committees. Female researchers do recognize that local embedding is key for progression: “good mentors are priceless” (PL6/26) “avoiding conflicts at all costs” in order to conduct one’s own research (PL9). However, different understandings of academic careers can be detected: men tend to be cynical, instrumental and willing to play the game without changing it, they describe international experiences as means to build social capital and “get respect” within one’s own university (PL23). Women display a more idealized vision of academia (“wisdom and scholarship” PL16) and use strategies to shield themselves from university power struggles.

Romanian female respondents from all disciplines display high dedication to the teaching profession and its ethics, along with a focus on training for the job. Self-development and self-determination in pursuing an international dimension of their academic activities has value in itself, as well as in order to progress to higher ranks (RO5/6/7/35). Equally, women already in senior positions push themselves to constant development in their teaching and research by benchmarking European prestigious universities and by using their private money to attend international conferences (RO18/35/37). As a female junior academic in engineering said: “academic career development is based on continuous access to information and scientific research” (RO53) thus showing commitment to the profession rather than to the university of affiliation.

Discussion

The findings show that in the three countries gender affects an idealistic/normative perspective towards the profession (observed in female academics) and an instrumental approach towards the employing university (detected in male academics). Several female respondents characterise mobility as a tool to “pursue one’s curiosity”, “to build further their expertise and knowledge base”, “to gain insights in one’s field”, “to become acquainted with different practices”. For male respondents, the instrumental angle is more explicit: they acknowledge mobility if required for career purposes and they see it as a necessary evil, which means it should be as limited as possible.

Gouldner’s conceptualization of local and cosmopolitan organizational roles is relevant to uncover differences in how the academic profession is understood by male and female academics. While these findings cannot be considered representative or conclusive, they point to a fruitful analytical framework to further our understanding of the academic profession, the social roles academic can play therein, and how differences in men and women academic identities can be investigated.

When it comes to shed light on how gender influences academic identities, we can see that women tend to perceive themselves more cosmopolitan than men, by displaying a professional orientation towards constant improvement and intrinsic satisfaction, as well as openness towards international experiences. This doesn’t mean that women overlook gender inequalities in academia, but they construct their discourse on successful academic careers with a more explicit reference to ideals of science and scholarship. On the other hand, men tend to rationalize more the pursuit of organizational power as a mean to achieve career success.

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