Ambition, Confidence and Entrepreneurial Skills:

Gendered Patterns in Academia

Maureen Baker
Professor of Sociology
University of Auckland
Auckland, New Zealand

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Abstract

Research suggests that a successful university career requires ambition, professional confidence and entrepreneurial skills, including the ability to initiate research projects, assemble research teams, locate funds and publishers, and gain job offers, promotions and awards. These skills are normally developed through early career mentoring, work experience and sustained interactions with colleagues. This paper examines the gendered patterns of career progression among full-time academic university staff, based on a survey of the international research from English-speaking countries and interviews with New Zealand academics. The paper argues that relationship patterns and perceptions of family responsibilities interact with institutional priorities and practices to dampen women’s career ambition and slow their progression through the ranks of academia.

Introduction

In academia, the social and human capital necessary to progress through the ranks includes academic qualifications, ambition, university teaching/research experience, and access to professional networks. Certain entrepreneurial skills are also important, such as the ability to develop research projects, assemble teams, acquire funds, obtain job offers and locate publishers. Finding jobs and getting promoted involve persuading peers and managers that one’s research is innovative, theoretically and methodologically sound, and worth funding or publishing. The confidence and ambition necessary to manage these tasks are often enhanced through professional mentoring, academic experience and collegial relations. However, men are still more likely than women to see themselves as entrepreneurs and experts (Fels 2004, Probert 2005).

In English-speaking countries, more women have been awarded doctorates, have become academics, and moved into senior academic positions over the past three decades (Brooks 1997, Carrington & Pratt 2003, Sussman & Yssaad 2005). In Australia
and New Zealand, women now occupy about 19-20% of senior academic positions in universities\(^1\) (Carrington & Pratt 2003, NZ Human Rights Commission 2008). This gender rebalancing in English-speaking countries has been influenced by struggles within universities and the women’s movement, by generational differences and socio-demographic changes in the larger society (Glazer-Raymo 1999). Yet some university departments remain remarkably segregated by gender, especially at higher ranks.

Indicators of the academic ‘gender gap’ include higher attrition rates for women doctorates and junior academics; a lower probability that women will gain a doctorate, work full-time and acquire permanent jobs; lower publication rates for women; women’s lower satisfaction with job security, teaching loads and advancement opportunities; and higher rank and salaries for male academics (Brooks 1997, Asmar 1999, White 2004, Curtis 2005, Probert 2005, Nakhaie 2007, Toutkoushian et al 2007, Boreham et al; 2008, Monroe et al 2008). Researchers also report a ‘chilly climate’ for academic women and an ‘unbreakable glass ceiling’ (Bracken et al 2006, Monroe et al 2008).

This brief paper combines findings from qualitative interviews with New Zealand-based academics and international research to help explain the gender gap by reference to academic practices, social and human capital, and differences in personal circumstances of academics. The paper argues that institutional priorities and practices both assist and curtail the progression of scholars through the ranks but differences in human capital and personal circumstances best explain the persistent gender gap.

The New Zealand interview study focuses on full-time academics with tenure-stream university positions. Although a greater gap exists between part-time and full-time academics (Brooks 1997), studying those with relatively permanent positions

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\(^1\) Defined as associate professors and professors.
permits an examination of the choices and constraints of those scholars considered to be
the most ambitious. New Zealand-based academics work in similar circumstances to
those in other English-speaking countries, as universities increasingly following the
same organizational pathways in terms of international recruitment, greater emphasis on
funded research and refereed publications for promotion, and institutional
benchmarking. However, I acknowledge that work expectations and experiences vary by
location and type of university.

To shed light on the persistence of the academic gender gap, I interviewed 30
full-time academics (18 women and 12 men) working at two New Zealand universities:
one more focused on research and the other on teaching. Participants were chosen from
university websites in the humanities and social sciences to include men and women
from lecturer to professor. Participants were restricted to these faculties to hold constant
work expectations and gain access to both females and males. The interviews, which
included questions about credentials, mentoring, domestic arrangements, perception of
promotional opportunities, and professional commitment, were taped and transcribed,
and the findings used to supplement international research.

Academic Practices

University hiring and promotion are said to be based on academic merit, with pre-
established universal and impersonal criteria (Jenks & Riesman 1977, Nakhaie 2007). In
most fields, peer committees recommend hiring and promotion decisions with oversight
by academic managers. Recently-hired academics are usually required to have a
doctorate and graduates from high-prestige universities are often preferred (Burris
Peer-reviewed publications, university-based teaching experience and service to the institution or profession are also central to hiring and promotion decisions.

Acquiring the first tenure-stream position often involves relocating to find a job with promotional possibilities, which often means a full-time position with a low teaching load, strong research culture and doctoral students to supervise. Graduates who perceive that they lack geographic mobility may search locally but more often find temporary jobs or positions with higher teaching loads (Bracken, Allen & Dean 2006). Securing permanent jobs and subsequent promotions involves peer assessment of research outputs, teaching evaluations, postgraduate supervision, and service to the university and profession. However, greater credibility is increasingly granted to research of international quality, often funded by competitive grants with overseas partners and quantitative methods (Nakhaie 2007). When teaching is ‘bought out’, classes are often taught by part-time lecturers, who are disproportionately doctoral students and women (Brooks 1997; Bracken, Allen & Dean 2006).

**Gender and Social/Human Capital**

Despite improvements in the academic gender balance in recent decades, women are still more likely than men to occupy temporary and part-time teaching positions while men acquire tenure-stream jobs. This division of labour partly relates to perceptions of family responsibilities and to job location. For example, Mason et al (2006) found that married women doctorates in United States often felt obligated to limit their academic job search to the location where their (older) partner was employed, which was also the same place where many received their doctorates. In contrast, partnered male doctoral students more often relocated to another place with their (younger) wives to accept tenure-stream
positions. Generally, women are more likely to work in universities closer to home, with lower status, higher teaching loads and fewer doctoral students (Brooks 1997). In my interviews, more participants from the research university had doctorates from prestigious overseas universities while those from the teaching university (which hired more women) tended to have local qualifications and reported higher teaching loads and more research constraints.

Male academics are also more likely to have a doctorate as their highest qualification (Brooks 1997, Nakhaie 2007). Academics with doctorates have already proven they can do research, are more likely to view themselves as researchers, and tend to publish more than academics with lower degrees. Research-focused universities typically insist that new staff have doctorates and pressure them to publish, but typically offer incentives such as lower teaching loads and internal research grants. However, women academics tend to be clustered in departments valuing ‘pastoral care’, such as social work and language teaching. These fields require more teaching and student-related meetings, leaving fewer opportunities to specialize and complete research projects (Leahy 2006). In addition, women academics report that their male colleagues focus on high-visibility and prestigious activities, leaving more student advising and undergraduate teaching to women (Brooks 1997, Boreham et al 2008). However, academic women also say that they gain pleasure from teaching.

Academic mentoring has been related to promotion and career satisfaction, and new mentoring programs now offer special programs for women. However, women seem to benefit less from informal mentoring, especially if they are mothers while completing their doctorate or have interrupted careers. Women are less likely to report that their doctoral experience was positive, that their supervisors were interested in their
research, or that they published with supervisors (Brooks 1997, Seagram, Gould & Pyke 1998, Carr et al 2000). Mentoring can also be tainted with harassment for women (Rosser 2004) and reports of gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment remain common. This is reported particularly by separated or divorced women, who are over-represented among academic women, and older women reporting about past experiences, which implies positive change (Carr et al 2000).

Publication rates are strongly correlated with promotion, salary increases and higher rank but numerous studies find that women academics publish less than men (Brooks 1997, Long 2001, Nakhaie 2007). When researchers control for structural variables influencing publications (such as subject, teaching loads and degree of specialisation) and if they include non-refereed publications, the gender differences in publication rates diminish (Xie and Shauman 1998, Leahy 2006). Yet academic women are more likely to work in departments with less publication pressure and consequently produce fewer refereed articles. Bellas and Toutkoushian (1999) argue that women publish less because they work more slowly and carefully due to heavier scrutiny of their research outputs and exclusion from academic networks.

Assessing the merit of publications remains somewhat subjective and is partly reliant on the researcher’s ability to ‘sell’ ideas to colleagues, editors and publishers. However, males are more likely to engage in career self-promotion and to portray themselves as innovative and expert (Probert 2005), which I also found in my interviews. Furthermore, women’s research projects often involve smaller-scale studies, qualitative research, feminist perspectives, and female participants and collaborators. These kinds of projects tend to receive less acknowledgment by men (Leahey 2006). At the same time, women receive less recognition when they publish with men, especially
their own partners (Loeb 2001) and publications produced by women tend to be awarded less value for promotion (Long 2001, Nakhaie 2007). However, women are also less likely than men to apply for promotion and when they do, they apply ‘less vigorously’ (Probert 2005).

Promotion often involves complex application procedures, confidence and entrepreneurial action. In my interviews, most of the 18 women discussed promotional setbacks or their belief that promotion requirements are too challenging. Most also said they never expect to be promoted to full professor - ever. One such woman had another twenty years before retirement but claimed that she was ‘not hungry enough’ to seek promotion. Others said they didn’t have ‘the energy’ or faith in the outcome. Several expressed their belief that ambitious academics (especially women) are viewed as ‘tall poppies’ to be cut down by colleagues, or that the onerous responsibilities of professors were not worth the bother of promotion application. In contrast, the men expressed much more confidence about promotional possibilities, although several reported that family responsibilities limited their research outputs or prevented them from accepting prestigious positions overseas.

Promotion systems also emphasize years of seniority as well as research productivity (Long 2001, Nakhaie 2007). In my study, many women entered academic careers after having children or working in other occupations (especially in the teaching university), which has been found in the other studies (Brooks 1997). Men typically have more years of full-time academic employment as well as more publications and citations, higher visibility and greater peer esteem (Leahey 2006, Nakhaie 2007). Despite women’s longer life spans, they retire earlier and retirement often coincides with
their (older) partner’s retirement or family/leisure pursuits. This means that academic men typically have longer careers, contributing to higher rank upon retirement.

Studies show that marriage (or long-term cohabitation) is considered a form of social capital for men, increasing academic networks that assist promotion (Toutkoushian et al 2007). Men’s marriage to a non-employed spouse is especially advantageous but marriage does not necessarily assist women’s career (Long & Fox 1995). These findings lead us into a more detailed discussion of family circumstances.

**Family ‘Choices’ and Responsibilities**

The literature suggests that the personal circumstances of male and female academics differ substantially, which I also found in my interviews, and that these differences lead to gendered perceptions, choices and opportunities. More academic men are married with children but married women with young children are more likely to work part-time and less likely to reach the top. Among tenure-stream academics, more women are single or divorced, and academic women are much more likely to become single parents (Fox 2005, O’Laughlin & Bishoff 2005).

Married academic women are more often in dual-career marriages, especially with both partners working overtime (O’Laughlin & Bishoff 2005). Women’s partners tend to be older and established professionals, while men’s are younger with lower attachment to paid work (Fox 2005, Bracken et al 2006). Women are more likely to marry other academics, which tends to provide support for their career but not for domestic duties. Furthermore, research suggests that wives need to maintain intellectual autonomy from academic partners in order to progress through the ranks (Creamer
Otherwise, their husbands receive disproportionate credit for joint publications (Loeb 2001, Nakhaie 2007).

Women academics are less likely than other professional women to become mothers while male academics are more likely to become fathers (Hewlett & Vite-Leon 2002). In my study, all the men were married or in long-term partnerships, compared to 56% of the women, and the senior women were less likely to be married or to have children. Academic women who have babies within five years of earning a doctorate have a lower probability of receiving tenure than childless women or men (Harper et al 2001, Mason & Goulden 2004). Tenure-track mothers with young children may be more motivated or ambitious than mothers working part-time, or they may have found better childcare services and/or domestic support from partners.

Most full-time academics work long hours but women also report larger amounts of childcare and unpaid domestic work (Bracken, Allen & Dean 2006). In Australian research, many more academic mothers than fathers are the primary caregiver of children, and more women report caring responsibilities for aging parents (Probert 2005). This was also the case in my study but sole parents and mothers with several children seemed particularly discouraged about their ability to produce sufficient publications to merit promotion. An American study found that academic mothers aged 30-50 reported working 100 hours per week when they combined university and domestic work, while their male counterparts reported 85 hours. Working hours did not converge until the age of sixty (Mason et al 2006).

Women academics more often change jobs for their partner’s career moves, which can become an employment setback, although highly qualified couples can sometimes negotiate two positions at the same university. Also, more husbands now
seem willing to follow their wife’s career moves. Several women in my study came to New Zealand from overseas, bringing their older but non-employed husband as the ‘trailing spouse’. However, even these wives reported that they did more housework and childcare than their male partners.

New Institutional Priorities

Considerable research has focused on new ‘neo-liberal’ practices and the ascent of ‘managerialism’ as universities become more influenced by the ‘audit culture’, cost-cutting, the enumeration of ‘research outputs’, externally-funded grants, merit pay and university rankings (Larner & LeHeron 2005, Taylor & Braddock 2007, Thomas & Davies 2002). Restructuring in the university sector has involved merging colleges with universities, downsizing departments and raising research productivity (Nakhaie 2007). Some of the merged departments formerly employed a disproportionate percentage of women staff, such as women’s studies. Especially at the teaching university, the participants complained about new bureaucratic expectations and rising workloads.

University ‘corporatization’ can create new obstacles for women, with the augmentation of dual labour markets between teaching and research, the retrenchment of feminized fields, and a backlash against affirmative action (Glazer-Raymo 1999, Curtis 2005). However, feminist lobbying and ‘managerialism’ have also encouraged written promotion criteria, women’s mentoring programs and work-life balance policies, although the effectiveness of these mentoring programs is yet unknown and the use of family-related policies remains gendered. Participating in international conferences, going on sabbatical or even gaining uninterrupted time for research and writing is complicated for academics with the daily care of children (Thomas & Davies 2002).
Conclusion

This project on the academic gender gap suggests that universities continue to reward those willing and able to devote long hours to the profession, to publish widely and remain fully employed throughout their working lives. Work-life balance programs, anti-discrimination policies and special mentoring programs for academic women may eventually make a difference but they cannot counteract gendered patterns of socialization, partnering and domestic labour. Women are still discouraged from professional self-promotion, still partner with older men who are more established in their careers, and women still perform more domestic labour. The gender gap in academia reflects different perceptions of institutional and family responsibility, and the decisions and actions of family members. These both influence what they believe is possible in their careers.

As universities restructure to accommodate rising costs and new government requirements, they often increase their commitment to external research funding and international ratings. These priorities may actually increase the gender gap if they augment the ‘dual labour market’ by hiring more research-only academics, leaving part-timers to teach larger classes. However, as more new doctorates accept as normal the competitive, international and research-focused academic market place, more women will seek full-time positions and progress through the ranks. When men and women enter the academic profession at the same age and work full-time throughout their lives, as more women are now doing, they increase their chances of reaching the professoriate. Furthermore, universities are now providing women’s mentoring programs, equity policies and on-site childcare services. As senior men retire, more women may fill the
new vacancies, although some permanent positions will be lost as universities
restructure.

Research continues to suggest, however, that academics with fewer work-family
conflicts are more likely to fulfil their ambitions and succeed in academia. Men still
enjoy more career mobility when they marry younger women, and academic men are
more likely to prioritize research rather than the pastoral care of students or family
responsibilities. Academic success continues to require years of study, long working
hours, and the building of confidence, expertise and networks over many years. Men are
still more likely to start their academic careers earlier or take little or no time off to raise
children. The competitive and entrepreneurial nature of the profession continues to
provide unique challenges for those who lack confidence, work time or geographic
mobility. Young women who anticipate motherhood or are raising young children are
especially challenged by these constraints, and tend to modify their ambitions
accordingly.

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