

# The Symbolic Order of Gender in Academic Workplace

## Ways of Reproducing Gender in Equality within the Discourse of Equality<sup>1</sup>

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Mählck, Paula 2004: The Symbolic Order of Gender in Academic Workplace. Ways of Reproducing Gender in Equality within the Discourse of Equality. – *Ethnologia Europaea* 34:1: 81–96.

It is well known that universities are male dominated both in history as well as in the dominant discourses. As knowledge producing organizations universities also carries the heritage of defending the scientific ethos of meritocracy and objectivity, these are rules that many researchers still are trained to believe in. This makes often studying of gender inequality in academia a difficult task since it not only reveals the gendered structures of academia but also violates the norms of science implying that science is socially biased. This article explores how gender inequality is produced within the discourse of equality at Swedish universities. The underlying assumption is that gender inequality on the level of the academic departments is produced within the broader discourses of gender, power, science and equality operating in everyday academic working lives and in society in general.

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### Introduction and Earlier Works

In 1995 the UN declared Sweden the best country in the world for women to live in according to a Gender and Development Index (GDI) (UNDP:1995). As a small Nordic welfare state Sweden offers a quite privileged setting when it comes to gender distribution in higher education. The total gender distribution within higher education was forty-eight percent women and fifty two percent men in 2000. However the gender distribution differs between different staff categories. Women represent a majority of the staff involved in administration and teaching. For positions that are more extensively designed for research such as research assistants and full professors, women are still in the minority. Thirty eight percent of the research assistant positions and thirteen percent of the full professorships are held by women (National Agency for Higher Education yearbook 2001). Thus, we can see that within the domain of

higher education Sweden follows the international pattern of "The leaking pipeline", the higher up in the academic hierarchy the fewer the women and the more the men. This has led to a wide range of efforts aimed at diminishing gender differences in academic career achievement. In some cases it has resulted in different equality positions such as, equal opportunities officers and equal opportunity committees. Nowadays, formal ways of excluding or diminishing women in academia are no longer accepted and it is highly unlikely that someone would openly declare that women are inferior to men when it comes to pursuing a research career. However, research has shown that gender differences in scientific careers still remain despite the introduction of equal opportunity policies. Gender marked inequalities are documented in the distribution of scholarships as well as in gender difference in career achievement (Winnifred and Hamilton 1988, Stolte Heiskanen 1991, Wold and Wennerås

1997). In order to increase our insight as to why gender differences in academic careers<sup>2</sup> persist, research about how the gender order<sup>3</sup> is produced and reproduced in everyday academic working life, needs to be elaborated.

This article explores the production and reproduction of the symbolic order of gender at different levels in the academic workplace. The underlying assumption is that gender relations exist within the broader discourses of gender, power, science and equality operating in the academic department and at a general level of society. The aim of this article is to explore “How gender inequality on the level of the academic department is reproduced within the discourse of equality operating at a general level of society”. The field of study is two academic departments in the same area of biology at two different Swedish universities.

Previous research about gender differences in scientific careers has produced numerous explanations. Very briefly these can be categorized into three main groups; “gender differences in publication productivity”, “impact of family situation on scientific careers” and “the social organization of science, The Old Boys Network” (Fox and Faver 1985, Luukonen-Gronow 1987, Davis and Astin 1990, Cole and Zuckerman 1991, Kyvik 1991, Long 1993, Sonnert and Holton 1995). The results have often been contradictory and cover a wide range of methodological and theoretical approaches. However, previous research has not gone without criticism and three main lines have emerged over the years. Firstly, the need for studying gender differences in scientific careers over a longer time perspective has been expressed, since women appear to have different career trajectories with more “winding tracks” than men (Elgquist-Saltzman 1994). Secondly, there is a risk that focusing on gender differences when studying scientific careers leads to an essentialist trap where differences are emphasized and reproduced. Thus, it is important to focus on the construction of femininity and masculinity and by which means differences are constructed, legitimized and reproduced. Thirdly, since a scientific career most probably depends on a cumulative effect of a multitude of factors interacting over time, further studies of

the complex interactions between and within individuals in their daily research milieu are called for. In the following discussion the theoretical framework of this study is further outlined.

## Theorizing Gender

Gender is often described as the social dimension of biological sex; this is particularly evident in the famous statement “you are not born a woman, rather you become one” (de Beauvoir 1949). Since these words were first written the social construction school has developed different theoretical lines and gained acceptance both within and outside of feminist readings<sup>4</sup>. The following offers one definition of gender:

“*Gender*, refers to patterned, socially produced, distinctions between female and male, feminine and masculine. Gender is not something people are, in some inherent sense, although we may consciously think of ourselves in this way. Rather, for the individual and the collective it is a daily accomplishment (West & Zimmerman 1987) that occurs in the course of participation in work organizations as well as in many other locations and relations” (Acker 1992: 250).

In this article the social construction perspective also includes the body and physical appearance as well as sexuality, which are all part of the ongoing production of gender. The notion of power is central when conceptualizing gender since patterned differences between women and men, femininity and masculinity usually involve various expressions of the subordination of women (Acker 1992). Thus, it is important to remember that these power relations are further complicated when factors such as race and class are intertwined with gender. The gender order can be challenged if the rigidity of the male/female dualism is challenged and the notion of difference is nuanced and contextualised (Gherardi 1995: 101–103).

Within the social construction school some have focused on the relational aspect of gender; this interpretation emphasizes the mutual inter-relational construction of femininity and masculinity as well as the importance of

contextual and processual aspects on the construction of gender (Gherardi 1995, Davies 1996). The relational aspect of gender focuses on the “doing of gender” and consequently on the meanings that spring from the “doing of gender”, as well as the conditions and contexts surrounding this process. This raises the question of how gender is *represented* in our daily lives or, more precisely, how we give meaning to gender through language, action and symbols. This has been elaborated in theories of representation which, very briefly, can be said to deal with the processes by which subjects of a specific culture and historical context use language, or any signifying system, to produce meaning (Hall 1997: 61).

## Representing Gender

Theories of representation include a wide range of approaches, from semiotics to discourse<sup>5</sup>. In this article the broader concept of *discourse* is used rather than a more narrow use of language that a linguistic approach would require. In this article discourse not only includes what one says (language) but also what one does (practice). In this sense discourses not only “defines” how we can talk about certain topics but also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others (Hall 1997: 44). Foucault was one of the first to introduce the notion of discourse instead of language in the production of meaning. Stuart Hall defines discourse as

“[...] a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (Hall 1992: 291 in Hall 1997: 44).

According to Foucault our perception of what constitutes the “truth” in certain historical moments and contexts contribute to the maintenance and internalization of dominant discourses in our everyday lives. This is what Foucault calls regime of truth. The regime of truth is constituted by a discursive formation<sup>6</sup> that legitimizes what is perceived as true or false, the means for doing so and the status of

persons who are in charge of this activity. Foucault’s puts it like this:

“Each Society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth, that is, the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned... the status of those who are in charge with saying what counts as true” (Foucault 1980: 131).

Applied to gender studies this theoretical approach implies that a regime of truth, that is sustained by discursive formations and consequently are relative to historical, situational and contextual aspects, makes it possible to internalized dominant discourses about gender. This influences how agents act and give meaning to gender in their everyday lives, in other words, how they discursively produce and reproduce gender in their everyday lives.

## The Dual Presence

In general the history of science has been male dominated in numbers as well as in the dominant discourses (Keller 1985). This is also reflected in the symbolic order of gender. One set of qualities such as reason and public presentation, qualities associated with science as well as with activities in the public sphere in general have been associated with masculinity. Qualities associated with emotions and private activities have been associated with femininity, reproduction and the private sphere. In this perspective women will always be “lacking” important qualities when entering the professional scene. Thus, women entering the professional arena are still symbolically connected to qualities associated with the domestic sphere, and the gender order from the private sphere has been transferred to the public sphere (Marshall and Wetherell 1989, Wager 1994, Katila and Meriläinen 1999). This phenomenon is often described as the “dual presence” of women which indicates a cross gender experience, more specifically the simultaneously presence of the private and the public, home and work, personal and political (Balbo 1979; in

Gherardi 1994: 598). Managing dual presence requires different discursive strategies.

Gherardi has identified two different types of strategies that are used for handling “dual presence”; she calls them ceremonial and remedial work. In ceremonial work, differences between sexes are recognized and celebrated which can be done in a number of ways, for example through gestures, tones or language. It is very difficult to avoid ceremonial work since gender is one of the major social categorizations that we use in our everyday life. It is also deeply imbedded in what we call “good manners”; to avoid celebrating gender is often seen as odd and sometimes rude behavior. Celebrating gender can also involve a sense of pleasure. When interacting with other people celebrating and responding to gender can create a sense of belonging to the “bigger” bodies, or with Foucault’s words, to the “discursive formations” of the feminine and the masculine.

When the dual presence occurs there is a break in the gender order and this requires other rituals. This is where the remedial work enters the scene. Remedial work is “simultaneously supportive of the symbolic order of gender and remedial of the offence” (Gherardi 1994: 602). When women enter public organizational life they break the symbolic order of gender. Through remedial work women can enter public life and still celebrate conventional femininity. This can be done by working in female dominated areas or by adjusting gestures and language. Gherardi gives the following example of remedial work:

“When women take the conversational initiative and apologize for doing so, when she expresses her doubts as to the importance of what she is about to say, when she minimizes her competence to speak on the subject – that is, when she requests authorization, protection and benevolence” (1994: 605).

## Data and Method

The empirical data comes from two departments at two different universities specializing in the same area of biology. Biology was chosen because several studies indicates that women at biology

departments have passed a threshold that attenuate gender stratification (Long 1993, Sonnert and Holton 1995). Twelve interviews of two types were conducted. The questions were loosely structured, with interviews lasting between 90 and 120 minutes. When needed, a second interview was arranged. All interviews were recorded, with the consent of the interviewed person, and all have been transcribed. The interview quotes in this article have been translated into English by the author.

The first type of interviews was conducted with senior researchers who were asked questions about the research organization, policymaking, dissemination of information etc. My intention was to get an overview of the organization of the department as well as a glimpse at its specific culture. The second type of interview was conducted with “new researchers” that rather recently had finished their PhD. The original ambition was to interview researchers that were within the first years of receiving their PhD degree. However, finding researchers matching these criteria was not easy and in some cases the time period had to be expanded. The “new researchers” were asked questions about personal background, ambitions and future plans, faculty advisor relationships, access to information, collaboration and support and other questions concerning how they perceived their everyday working life.

When working with a qualitative method and the material that comes along with it a researcher is often asked questions about he or she can be certain they are getting the “true story”. Naturally, it is extremely difficult to answer such a question; it would require a more psychological approach and even then it would remain highly problematic. Rather than dwelling on the issue I have preferred to see it from a different perspective; people create different stories when they answer the questions and this is a way of affirming their identity/ies. I have acknowledged the diversity, ambiguity and fragmented dimensions of the stories because they represent their lived experiences and are true for them. My interest lies in the *form* of these stories, more precisely, how the interviewed researchers present the stories, rather than trying to explore which story is the

“true” one<sup>7</sup>. It is also important to recognize the power dimension of my position as a researcher and that the interview situation is a rather extreme situation for both the researcher interviewing and the one being interviewed. However, the underlying assumption is that knowledge is situated<sup>8</sup> and that identities are multiple and continuing constructs, which implies that there is no “inner core” that represents a true version of what a person really think or believes.

## Results and Analysis

### *Situating the Researchers<sup>9</sup>*

At a first glance it is very easy to find similarities between the two departments; they belong to the same academic discipline so it is natural to expect that they share some structural constraints and possibilities. The research field is characterized by a quite good financial situation, at least compared to the humanities and the social sciences. Also, it does not belong to the pure applied technological and medical research areas where the funding situation must be considered to be better. Findings in the field have short life span and research development and research innovations become old news very fast. This most likely goes hand in hand with the use of/dependence on advanced technological equipment, something that is increasing. It is also reasonable to believe that the departments share the same research organization since most natural sciences are organized in research teams due to practical and economic reasons. Peters and Vanraan's (1991) study found that the internal co-authorship networks of a chemical engineering department centered on a few productive scientists and formed clusters. At our departments the researchers and PhD students were organized in teams based on research orientation. A “typical” research team consisted of a PhD research leader, sometimes a post-doc, and (at least) one or two doctoral students. In some cases the group also had their own laboratory assistant, which depended on their financial situation. However, a closer look at the departments revealed that they were differently structured by gender, academic position and research areas.

In Department A I found that four research groups were active. The department had one elderly male professor who was the research leader of one group, which did not appear to influence the power balance between the research groups. Since academia is a hierarchical institution it is natural to expect certain hierarchies such as those between PhD students and PhDs, however hierarchy between the research group leaders and the professor was not stressed in the interviews. The research groups appeared to be equally influential; no research orientation (or group) appeared to be more central or peripheral, or have more or less status than another. Below Howard, a senior researcher describes the seminar distribution and guest research distribution between the different research groups/ areas.

“We try to divide it up so that everyone has the same number. We are all very different but we try to divide it so that there is something for everyone. I mean, it would never happen that there would be a seminar series in my area only, that would be pointless.[...] Even if we're all different I'd have to say that we complement each other in a way.”

Bill, a new researcher describes the department the following way:

“[...] There's a good atmosphere between the senior researchers, they don't compete for the doctoral students, there's an alternating system. [...] So there's no friction between them like there might be at other places. They've built up a pretty simple system for who gets what and then if there are any objections, it seems to work anyway. So the atmosphere is relatively, it's a pretty good group of people.”

Collaboration between the research groups did occur although the groups had their own distinct research areas and consequently the collaboration mostly concerned methodological issues. Sex distribution appeared to be equal at both doctoral student level as well as research leader level; two of the four research groups were headed by women.

In Department B research was similarly

organized in research groups. However, the department was much more male dominated both at doctoral student level and at research leader level. The department had two male professors with strong positions, both as social and cognitive leaders. The formal structures for decision-making were well established but there also seemed to be informal structures in those processes. Edward, a new researcher describes the department the following way:

"[...] But it's pretty established, I think in comparison with other departments, formal democracy, departmental meetings once a month where important matters are discussed and prepared for the department board meetings where the decisions are made. Then it's like this, many important decisions are made in smaller informal groups. [...] But of course, our current second professor and department head is there, and before it was the older professor who took the initiative. He'd been here for so long, so he had a lot of power at the department until he went part time, then it became a bit more decentralized when the other professor took over being the head of department. He didn't have the same ambition to make all the decisions like the older professor did. Because, if you're both professor and department head for a long time then of course you make most of the decisions on your own. Even if it was he who started with the departmental meetings, in some way it really only gives the impression of democracy."

In this quotation we can see that although the department has become a bit more decentralized since the second professor has become the head of the department he still has a strong position. Edward also highlights that decision-making often takes place in informal groups outside the formal structures of the department. Status differences between research groups and research orientations were clearly expressed when describing the research activity at the department. The closer to the professor in terms of social and cognitive positions the higher status the researchers had. The department had six research groups but their research orientations were slightly more homogenous

than at Department A. Only one research group appeared to have less collaboration with the others. That group also appeared to have less status than the others. The female research leader of that group also reported that she lacked collaboration partners at the department, felt excluded from the inner circles of the departments and had difficulties getting access to informal information although she was a senior researcher and member of the department board.

Researchers at both departments were very keen on stressing their enthusiasm towards gender equality in academia. They were aware of the higher level of dropouts of female academics and offered several explanations for this. They had also developed equality plans for achieving equal sex distribution at all levels of the departments.

Formal ways of excluding or diminishing women in higher education are no longer accepted and the introduction of equality positions has among other things assured the discourses of equality between women and men in academia. Presently, it is unlikely that somebody would openly declare women as less suited than men for pursuing an academic career. This does not mean that gender inequality does not exist in academia. The diminishing of female academics is expressed in more subtle ways that are imbedded in everyday working situations. This has led to a debate about the possibilities and practices of the rhetoric of equality. This will not be further developed here. The main point is instead; how is inequality reproduced within a discourse of equality? Researchers were asked by me to describe what they thought the reasons for gender differences in career achievement in academia were and more particularly within the field of biology.

## Turning Positive Stereotypes into Grounds for Exclusion

A male researcher, let's call him Andy, who is still active within academia doing research in Department A, which appeared to be less male dominated, less centralized and less hierarchical than department B. Andy is married and has no children. His wife is not a researcher. In the



following quotation Andy answers to the following question: “Do you think it is easier for men than for women to pursue an academic career after receiving the PhD degree?”

“Within this area of biology we have fairly equal numbers of women and men taking undergraduate courses as well as at the doctoral student level. At the moment and at this department that’s also the case at research assistant level. It’s is not statistically proven but I guess that the situation is fairly equal. They [women: my remark] have not been able to make it all the way to the top but it takes time. I don’t think [there is a difference: my remark]. One difference is that women are away on parental leave longer, so the reasons should be looked for at home rather than at work. No, I can’t see that women have been discriminated against in academia, at least not here, I couldn’t speak for other countries, but I haven’t seen anything, at least not here. The difference is above all at home. Maybe women are not so manic as men are. [...] They’re not prepared to sacrifice as much. I mean, very few have “normal” working days and it’s very hard to advance if you have small children. That’s just the way it is. I wouldn’t be able to work as much if I had children. [...] You could put it like this, you have to have the brains but there’s nothing that can replace hard work. That’s the way it is, so there’s a tendency towards people who work a lot.”

Time plays a significant role in explaining gender differences in academic careers in this quote and is referred to at two levels. Firstly, time is found on a structural level: “They [[women]] have not been able to make it all the way to the top but it takes time.” This reasoning suggests that gender differences in scientific careers persist due to old values and perspectives, old ways of doing gender. Thus, it assumes that present ways of doing gender are unproblematic and leaves them intact. The stressing of time as an explanatory factor for gender inequality appears in other studies concerning gender equality in political representation as well (Tollin 1998:30). Secondly, it is present on a micro level, as a part of the labor division within families: “One difference is that women are

away on parental leave longer, so the reasons should be looked for at home rather than at work”. This puts the focus on processes outside of academia; however, it also tends to individualize gender differences in scientific careers. The focus is on situations within families rather than on structural constraints in the system of higher education. Although the concept of “parental leave” is used, it soon becomes obvious that what is implied is in fact motherhood, “women are away on parental leave longer”. To refer to motherhood is to refer to women’s reproductive capabilities and thus to stress the biological differences between female and male researchers. To stress gender differences as binary oppositions is a common way of producing and reproducing the gender order (Hirdman 1988). The ties between parents and children carry strong connotations regarding what is perceived as “natural”; however there are also has “positive” connotations. This legitimizes the differences in career achievement between researchers that have children and researchers without children but has an even stronger legitimizing effect on gender differences in scientific careers since motherhood is a major way of constructing femininity. Gender differences in career achievement is thus, deferred to “natural” and “positive” processes of motherhood and leaves the structures of the academic career system intact and seen as unproblematic.

Later in the interview a second explanation is introduced: “maybe women are not as manic as men are”. To be manic is to be in a negative mental condition or have a mental disease. At first glance this may appear flattering for female researchers: they are not as “manic” (sick) as men are. However, this quote also reveals that succeeding in academia is hard, in fact so hard that in order to succeed you must be able to break the “natural” and “positive” ties of parenthood. “Manic” is constructed negatively, breaking the ties of parenthood, but at the same time positively, being able to work hard and being ambitious, attributes that are normally used to describe good researchers. “Manic” appears to have been transformed and is now used as a positive indicator for being successful in academia. In the quote above we could see that “manic” was associated with men. However,

“manic” also includes the separation between the private and the professional: “I wouldn’t be able to work as much if I had children”. Management studies have shown that separating the private from the public and, thus, constructing women as a negation of the norm is a major obstacle for women’s efforts to reach top positions within organizations (Kanter 1977, Cockburn 1991, Wahl *et al.* 1998). This reasoning rests on the dualistic relationship between femininity and masculinity, the private and the public, the irrational and the rational. In addition it can be said that while being a successful researcher reinforces male gender identity it implies a contraction for female researchers’ gender identity.

The concept of “manic” appears to be central for the understanding of how Andy makes sense of gender differences in scientific careers. Let us therefore take a look at how he uses the concept in other situations. In the following quote Andy was asked if he had any intellectual role models in science.

“My biggest intellectual role model was probably my external supervisor. His extreme tattering and tarning of all theories, it was almost self-destructive. [...] The ones that have succeeded in science normally have bad personal lives so you really don’t want to be compared with them. So if I compare myself with those who have really succeeded in science, those who have build up megalomaniac organizations, I wouldn’t like to change places with them, because they really are totally manic about what they do.”

In the first quote we could see how “manic” was transformed to mean something positive, particularly in relation to women who were not as “manic” as men. In this latter quote the researcher is comparing himself to the scientific elite, and in relation to them “manic” is constructed negatively: “I wouldn’t like to change places with them, because they really are totally manic about what they do”. In addition, we can see how Andy uses the concept of manic to construct himself positively in relation to both groups; he paints a picture of himself as professionally and intellectually superior to women and emotionally superior compared to

the scientific elite. However, a second glance at this reasoning suggests criticism against the academic career system. “Manic” is constructed negatively as is the scientific elite, which implies that the researcher perceives the academic system as hostile towards those who can not put up with the harsh working conditions, particularly women and women and men with children.

From the quotations we can see that Andy is ambivalent towards gender in academic workplaces. In a daily working environment where females are present as high productive research leaders having both families, children and an academic career, the symbolic order of gender is not easily legitimized and thus, requires other rituals for making sense of everyday working life. The construction of a researcher as someone that is totally devoted to academia and has no family obligations can be understood as one way of reproducing the gender order and making sense of gender in academic workplaces.

The interviewed researchers in this study most certainly perceive themselves, as “pro-gender equality” and thus, their aim is to speak within the discourse of gender equality. As pointed out earlier it is unlikely that someone would openly declare women as less suited than men for pursuing an academic career. However, the changed discourse of “manic” from negative to a positive indicator for a successful researcher, and the construction of women as “lacking” has done this in a more subtle way.

The quotes above were chosen because they eloquently provided answer to my research questions, however other women and men from both departments expressed similar opinions. The quotations below give further insights into how the researchers understand gender differences in scientific careers. The following quote comes from Andy’s supervisor Howard who is a senior researcher at Department A. Below he gives his explanation as to why there are fewer women pursuing an academic career.

“Of course it may in part be because women are less forward than men, even if they have the same qualifications but I also think that it boils down to society. What they hell are you going to do when that’s standard, when women are



expected to stay home ten months with the baby and the man stay home two months? I mean right there there's a difference. I mean, society has to solve the problem. Instead of the women doing as well at research as men and at the same time doing more at home. It doesn't make sense."

Later he describes the success of the female senior researchers at his department in the following way.

"It's all by chance. You can't have a small department and start drawing grand conclusions. It's just turned out so, it just so happens that both Miranda and Isabel are doctoral students from here. They've succeeded, I guess you could say it's luck that we've had two bright doctoral students that have shown, in Miranda's case she had no children so in her case I guess you could say that she's been able to act like a man in that way. Isabel has succeeded with three kids and I really respect that. But I think she has a husband who does a lot at home. So I really think, I blame society, no not society but the attitude in society. I don't think that it'll get any better before women have true equality, at home. How the heck else are they supposed to succeed at the job if they don't, if they do everything, more than 80–90 percent at home."

Howard suggests two explanations for women's poorer academic career output. First he suggests that women are less pushy than men and second he situates the problem to the private sphere. He uses the term society but it becomes clear that he is talking about the researchers' family situation. It is also interesting to note that he refers to the notion of coincidence when referring to the success of his female colleagues. It is unclear whether he means that their success is due to coincidence or if it is a coincidence that they were trained at his department.

The following quote is from Amanda who is married to a researcher and has several children. Amanda has also been a doctoral student under Howard but she left the department after completing her PhD.

"Yes, but the problem is that they're cutting back and just when I was finished and was

about to defend my thesis, or just when I went on maternity leave, and I didn't want to stay. I saw these women who struggled with their seventy-five percent work time and who had children and didn't have time for it all and who were researchers too. And it was them who ended up staying at home when the children were sick and I mean, you fall behind on the research front and it really is pretty tough being a woman, and being a woman and a researcher. So I just felt like the pressure was too much both at home and at work. Very few know that they have research money and whether they have a position. There are so few permanent positions at the university."

Amanda has mainly been teaching during the past seven years. She is currently working as a teacher at a college and has ambitions to combine research and teaching. Amanda states that she did not want to stay at the department after she had her baby. We can see that Amanda is referring to women's double workload combining family life with an academic career. Amanda is also critical of the structures of academia that offer so few tenured positions. As we can see Amanda points at several processes influencing gender differences in academic careers as compared to Andy and Howard who mainly stressed the family situation of researchers. Researchers that had small children seemed to be more inclined to alternate between different explanations that sometimes included processes in the family situation of researchers, or processes included in the everyday life of academia, when explaining gender differences in academic careers. Later in the interview Amanda also reported that she had felt like an outsider while pursuing her PhD. She had felt invisible and experienced that her supervisor ignored her in favor of a male PhD student which made her feel discouraged.

Irene did her research training in Department B and is now working as a senior researcher at another department. Irene gives the following explanation for why there are gender differences in academic careers. Irene is married to a researcher and has several children.

"Well, often the women will say that they're not

prepared to invest so much, or don't think they have time, or that it's not so much fun that they have the energy for it all. I mean, it's very unusual that someone at that level will say they're stupid. If you've gotten your PhD you don't say you're stupid because you're not, or else you would never have gotten your PhD. No, it's more that, you don't say that you aren't good enough because you're stupid, but because you don't want to spend so much time, or because it ends up hurting the kids. Or because there are other things in life too. I felt that way, when I was at the end of my rope, I thought, God it would be nice if I didn't get any research funding, then I wouldn't have to deal with this rubbish, and maybe it's wrong to call it self-censorship, it's maybe not being prepared to pay the price. Not that the men have said that we shouldn't (laugh) but because you actually don't want to. Because it's just not worth the high price. I guess that's being a negative role model, a female professor at the department who's a negative role model, hard on oneself and on those around her."

Irene states that it is not due to intellectual inabilities that women leave academia. Instead she points at the harsh working conditions in academia and women being less willing to "pay the price". Irene also suggests that this is a common explanation among women. This makes sense since the construction of women as lacking can shift into an overvaluation of femininity, particularly when constructing motherhood. This can also be interpreted as criticism against the academic system. She refers to a female professor who is "*hard*" on herself and on the people in her surroundings, a negative role model.

In the quotes above we can see how women are constructed as lacking in a positive sense, "not being willing to pay the prize" or "valuing the family higher than a career". Thus, the lacking in a negative sense, that is to devalue women, tend to shift into overvaluation of the same, but both discourses are exclusionary. We can also see that researchers with children are more inclined to mention different factors as obstacles varying from family situation to the structures of academia when they talk about

gender in academic workplaces.

One tentative explanation for why the discourse of the impossibility of combining motherhood with an academic career seems to be prominent when explaining gender differences in academic careers is that in such a discourse the problem is both individualised and placed outside academia. Focusing on internal processes in academia would imply criticism of the structure of academia and would therefore require collective action for change.

## Internalization of Inferiority – Superiority through Paternalism

This section offers different examples of how paternalism coexists with the discourse of gender equality when making sense of gender differences in academic careers. The first quote comes from Irene quoted above and the second is from Stanley who is also from Department B. Let us begin with Irene. Irene was asked: "Do you think it is easier for men than for women to pursue an academic career after PhD exam?" She answers the question by telling a story about a female colleague of hers.

"Where I work now, there is a female researcher. When she received tenure after her PhD, she hadn't planned to continue after PhD. [...] but by chance a tenured position became available and her previous supervisor encouraged her to apply for it and she got it. I thought, a bit unfair, that she got it because she was a female but since I came to the department I've realized that she's one of the best in her generation. But she had given me those signals that she was not going to continue, that she didn't want to and that she didn't have the drive. But she had that [[drive: my ref.]] I think she's one of the best in her age group. She was putting herself down, I've tried to tell her 'you gave me those signals that you weren't good enough, but you are, there is no question about it'".

The example should be studied in the light of the Swedish context which includes a recent initiative to raise the number of females at professor level as well as facilitating the transition from PhD exam to tenure (Bill 1994/

95: 164). This is to be done with the help of affirmative action measures and has led to a vivid debate about the competence of women being employed under these conditions. The fear of many is that women will be seen as less competent and as having been offered positions or scholarships only because they are women<sup>10</sup>. Such arguments rest on the notion of meritocracy and reveal that the dominant discourse of female researchers is that they are inferior researchers compared to their male counterparts. In other words, if meritocracy is the basis for advancement in the academic system then women should be able to make it on their own as well as men. If they do not make it on their own, it is because they are not good enough. The notion of meritocracy has been widely criticized during the last few decades and social scientific studies of science have highlighted the social dimensions in the reward and evaluation systems of science. Feminists have pointed at the impact of the “old boys network” for future career development and concepts such as “glass ceiling” or “subtle discrimination” are well established in the field of gender in higher education (Harding 1986, Caplan 1994, Long and Fox. 1995, Mackinnon 1997, Husu 2000).

In this quote Irene is very keen on stressing her position in relation to her colleague. It becomes obvious that she perceives herself as the older and more experienced researcher in relation to her colleague “[...] I’ve realized that she’s one of the best in her generation.” Or “[...] I think she’s one of the best in her age group”. At a first glance she appears to be very supportive of her colleague. “She was putting herself down, I’ve tried to tell her ‘you gave me those signals that you weren’t good enough, but you are, there is no question about it’. These lines also reveal that she constructs herself in the position as the wiser, more experienced researcher who encourages her younger colleague to pursue an academic career. It is tempting to stop the analysis here and conclude that she is supporting her colleague but at the same time constructing her as less competent and inferior to herself. That would be to ignore the issue of subject positions<sup>11</sup> and the complexities of it. If considering the lines again it becomes obvious that the tone is quite paternalistic, consequently the

female researcher has taken the subject position of a (paternalistic) male researcher when explaining gender differences in scientific careers. She constructs herself as superior to her female colleague and constructs her colleague as feminine and inferior to her. This is not as contradictory as it sounds; it can be interpreted as one strategy for constructing herself more positively in a discourse where femininity is devalued. In addition it is important to remember that since academia is male-dominated, both historically and in its dominant discourses, there are no subject positions available to women academics unless they construct them themselves. This can be hard to accomplish without support.

In many areas the demands for equality between women and men in contemporary western societies have stimulated the processes of a reformulation of gender identities of both women and men. The interview excerpts above illustrate that gender differences in scientific careers are still explained in ways that reproduce gender hierarchy. Stanley from department B was asked the same question about gender differences in academic careers as Irene. Stanley has several children and his wife is also a researcher. He is ambivalent towards the effect of gender on scientific careers.

“Well, it’s a world of old men, doing research, or at least has been. Women who continue as researchers, they have to show “fighting spirit”, be really, [good: my ref.] they have to work even harder [than men: my ref.], it’s sad but that’s the way it is. I mean, it’s not the way I want it to be. One can see how many PhDs there are as compared to doctoral students at the department. If considering sex distribution. It’s probably fifty-fifty [[women and men: my ref.]] at doctoral student level but not at PhD level. But I believe we have a lot more female doctoral students compared to chemistry and organic chemistry, I’m not sure they have any females at all, well, maybe a few anyway. Why is it like that? It shouldn’t be like that.”

Stanley refers to the concept “a world of old men” in academia when explaining gender differences in scientific careers. The reasons for

gender differences in scientific careers are thus deferred to processes within academia, which can be seen in light of the previous quotes. This is even more interesting when considering the researchers' family situation; researchers without children were more inclined to stress the importance of having children as an explanation than was the researcher who had children and who pointed at several different difficulties, the family situation being one of them. The quote also reveals that Stanley is part of the category that he refers to as oppressive, however, in a different age and power position. He is also keen to emphasize his dislike, which makes his argument a bit defensive: "it's sad but that's the way it is. I mean, it's not the way I want it to be". The first part of the sentence also reveals an element of acceptance: "it's sad but that's the way it is". The concept of "a world of old men" appears several times when discussing reasons for gender differences in scientific careers. The following quote offers further insights into what is implied in this concept.

"It used to be easier for men to get tenure, that was what the study by Agnes Wold showed [...] I don't know whether it's still true but that's what it showed. I don't know, but it seems as if women who want to have an academic career have to work so hard, on the other hand it should be like that for us too. One can hope that the problems are due to generational differences, but I'm afraid they're not. I fear that it's something you learn from older colleagues and you take after their values. You become like them even though you didn't think like that from the beginning [...]. It is a world of old men, they have all the high positions. From the beginning you're so self-centered and determined to do your own business but then you attend meetings, meet people and hear how they talk. Then you see how it is."

In this quote we can see that Stanley refers to a study, which states that nepotism, and sexism effects grant distribution in the life sciences. He expresses doubts about the relevance of the study "I don't know whether it's still true but that's what it showed." A bit later in the quote he states: "[...] on the other hand it should be

like that for us too". This implies that he is aware of the inequalities of the system, though he is ambivalent towards his position in it. He also refers to socialization processes and there is a bit of self-victimization in it implying that he himself is exposed to the patriarchal structures "You become like them even though you didn't think like that from the beginning [...]. It is a world of old men, they have all the high positions". On the other hand we can see that he is in the process of internalizing their views: "You become like them even though you didn't think like that from the beginning". Stanley is ambivalent throughout the interview. He appears to be in a transitional period between, on the one hand keeping his distance to the system and being able to reflect critically over it. On the other hand he is on his way to being socialized into the system, realizing that he is inferior to the privileged group. He also realizes that in order to belong to this group he has to pay the price, to "become like them". To "become like them" also appears to include a denial of gender inequality in academia, since it is highly unlikely that someone in the privileged group would openly declare that they had reached their position due to positive discriminating practices. His position, between criticizing and internalizing the dominant discourse of gender in academia, may be one explanation for his ambivalence towards the relevance of gender inequality in academia.

If we explore the concept of "old men" in the quote we can see that masculinities, seniority and academic position construct the group that holds the regime of truth of gender differences in academic careers in academia. This construction also implies that its binary opposition is different types of femininities. Thus, we can say that the groups of older men and younger men mutually reinforce each other since a major way of constructing masculinities is to compare with other forms of masculinities and to negate femininity (Collinson and Hearb 1994). For women to belong to this group they would have to change subject position; however, the price they would have to pay would most certainly be much higher since they would have to break considerably more normative rules as compared to men that enter this group.

## Conclusions

As pointed out earlier it is highly unlikely that someone would openly declare women as less suited for pursuing an academic career. Still, gender differences in scientific careers based on gender inequality persist. In this article I have studied ways of reproducing gender inequality within the discourse of equality at two different Swedish university departments in the same area of biology. The results of the study indicate that the interviewed researchers at the departments are very keen to speak within the dominant discourse of gender equality operating on a general level of society. Yet, when making sense of gender differences in scientific careers, they tend to reproduce gender hierarchy, though in more subtle ways. One example is the exclusionary practices that seem to be at work. Women tend to be excluded, either by being constructed as problematic and lacking important qualities for succeeding in academia or by being constructed as different and sometimes overvalued as compared to men, however, both ways are exclusionary. There is also a tendency to individualize gender differences in scientific careers. Focus is often put on processes outside academia such as inequalities within families.

Another finding was that different forms of paternalism coexisted with the discourse of gender equality. By internalizing superiority as in the case of Irene in relation to her female colleague or by internalizing inferiority as in the case of Stanley in relation to the "world of old men" the gender order was reproduced when making sense of gender differences in academic careers. Thus, it appears to be more rewarding for researchers (male and female) to internalize the dominant views of gender rather than contest them and this seems to reinforce the "self-reproductive" tendencies in the academic system. By internalizing the regime of truth of femininity and masculinity the researchers can reproduce the symbolic order of gender in academia and still speak within the dominant discourse of gender equality. Thus, they construct themselves as "gender neutral", "good" researchers. Gender differences based on gender inequality in scientific careers becomes something that is outside the norm of gender equality

in the Swedish university system<sup>12</sup>. Gender inequality is then constructed as something "abnormal" or at least something that happens at other departments or universities.

The lack of available subject positions for women academics, and the hard work of constructing such alternative positions, is an obstacle for women academics to support each other. The absence of subject positions for women, combined with the often unreasonably high expectations on women to support other women, are factors that further complicate how women researchers perceive other women researchers. As pointed out earlier, it is very hard to avoid making gender since it is a major way of categorize and making sense of our daily lives. In order to stop producing and reproducing hierarchical relations between femininities and masculinities we need to further examine how we create and maintain the symbolic order of gender when making sense of different situations and relations related to everyday academic working life.

## Notes

1. Acknowledgments: I thank Nora Räthzel and Elin Kvist (Department of Sociology) and Maria Carbin (Department of Political Science, Umeå University, Sweden) for valuable comments during the process of writing this work.
2. In this article "scientific", "academic" and "research" career are used synonymously. They imply that the researcher has completed his/her PhD and continued to work with research or research related work within academia, or found research related work outside academia.
3. In this article "gender order" implies an asymmetrical relation between femininity and masculinity where the feminine is devalued in relation to the masculine.
4. There is an ongoing debate about the usefulness and implications of the distinction between (social) gender and (biological) sex. This will not be further elaborated in this article, however, for an introduction to the debate, please consider *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler 1992: 3–44.
5. For an overview please, see *Representations and signifying practices*, S. Hall 1997:15–74.
6. When a number of discursive events, texts or practices, share the same style or refer to the same strategy they are said by Foucault to belong to the same *discursive formation* (Foucault in Hall 1997:44).
7. For a further elaboration of such approaches

- please consider "Talking about Careers and Gender identities: A Discourse Analysis Perspective", Harriet Marshall and Margret Wetherell in *The Social Identity of Women* (eds.) S. Skevington and D. Baker 1989.
8. Here I am influenced by Donna Haraway's concept *Situated Knowledge's* (1996).
  9. The departments have previously been described and analyzed by sociological and bibliometric means in "Mapping gender differences in scientific careers in social and bibliometric space" *Science technology and human values*. Vol. 26. No. 2 Spring 2002:167–190.
  10. An analysis of the media discourse that followed after the bill was passed revealed that these types of arguments were very common and that male academics, with one exception, represented those who were negative to the bill. On the positive side were women and men as well as academics and non-academics (Bondestam 1999).
  11. Discourses produce subjects (for example the madman or the criminal), however they also produce places for the subject where the discourse makes most sense. In other words discourses produce different subject positions through which the subject can make meaning (Hall 1997: 56).
  12. Gender inequality as a contradiction to the Swedish "norm of equality" has previously been elaborated by Rönblom *et al.* in *Jämställdhet, retorik som Praktik?* (1999).
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ISBN 87-635-0192-9  
ISSN 0425-4597