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The Contradiction of the Myth of Individual Merit, and the Reality of a Patriarchal Support System in Academic Careers

A Feminist Investigation

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ABSTRACT This article draws on data from a qualitative research study undertaken in an old (pre-1992) UK university with the main aim of investigating the issue of the gender dimension of academic careers. It examines the idea of an individualistic academic career that demands self-promotion, which is still used as a measure of achievement by those in senior positions. However, there is a basic contradiction. While this idea is upheld, men simultaneously gain by an in-built patriarchal support system. They do not have to make a conscious effort to be helped by it, thereby perpetuating the cultural hegemony of individualism. Women are not admitted to this support system, and if they are seen as needing or wanting to set up their own system, this is viewed as a weakness. The answer appears to be for women to strategically harness feminist ways of working in a collaborative and supportive way.

KEY WORDS academic careers ♦ myth of individual merit ♦ patriarchal support system ♦ women

INTRODUCTION

This article reports the findings from a qualitative research study in one old (pre-1992) university. Its central argument is that, in terms of academic careers, individualism is the myth while male support systems are the reality, in the process disadvantaging women who do not take to the former and are excluded by definition from the latter.

The latest figures compiled by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 1998) show that women are still not succeeding in academic careers. Women in Great Britain, as in many other countries, now comprise over half (51 percent) of first degree undergraduate students. However, this has been a relatively new phenomenon, and they still remain a minority of second degree postgraduate students, particularly students studying for a doctorate; the ‘feeder pool’ from which future academics are likely to spring (Zuckerman, 1991). Also, sex segregation across subjects remains an important feature. While women make up over 70 percent of education and language students, they account for only 14 percent of engineering and technology students (HESA, 1998).

Greater numbers of female undergraduates have not been successfully interpreted into more women higher up the academic hierarchy. While men appear successful in negotiating the social processes that get them into the academic ‘fast track’, women are being systematically ‘derailed’ (Lorber, 1994). In fact, there has been very little progress towards equality in the academic labour market throughout the 20th century (Rose, 1994). Overall, women hold only 26 percent of full-time academic posts (including both teaching and research). Also, whereas women hold 33 percent of lecturer posts, they account for only 18 percent of senior lecturers and 8 percent of professors. The figures are even more revealing if we look at different disciplines; whereas 20 percent of education professors are women, only 1 percent of engineering and technology professors are women, and there are none at all in chemistry or civil engineering. Also, although tenure no longer exists in the way that it did, there is an important distinction between the security that a permanent appointment gives over and above a short-term contract. Not only have the numbers of academic staff on short fixed-term contracts increased overall (now more than two in five), but also the extent of this casualization varies between women and men. In 1996–7, fewer than half (47.6 percent) of female academics were on permanent contracts compared with 60.8 percent of men (AUT, 1998).

Concerns about inequalities of opportunity in higher education led the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) to issue comprehensive guidance to universities in 1991 (CVCP, 1991). Among the recommendations in the guidance were that all universities should maintain a statistical record of their staff by gender, marital status, ethnic
origin and disability and that this should cover job applicants, candidates interviewed, new appointments, promotions and holders of discretionary awards. Where the monitoring results identified areas of imbalance, the universities were encouraged to take appropriate action. In 1993, the Commission on University Career Opportunity (CUCO) was established by the CVCP, initially for five years, to assist in overcoming the remaining barriers to equal opportunities in universities. A survey conducted by CUCO in 1993 (CUCO, 1994) indicated that greater progress had been made on the introduction of formal policies than on action to implement them. A follow-up study (Bagilhole and Robinson, 1997) revealed that, although progress had been made in universities in the form of most having equal opportunities policies, there was a general lack of action plans, monitoring and evaluations of these policies, which reduced their effectiveness. While most universities have a formal commitment to an equal opportunities policy there are very varied levels of effective implementation. Opportunity 2000, the campaign to increase opportunities for women, has singled universities out as ‘under-performing employers’ who had ‘signally failed to make enough progress in promoting women... which sends a bad message to the next generation’ (Griffiths, 1997).

Typical and quite broadly accepted arguments as to why women cannot make the grade as university teachers focus on women as lacking qualities that men possess (West and Lyon, 1995). An example of this is Halsey’s (1990) claim that ‘meritocratic forces still favour men (since) women do have a higher proportion of non-producers and lower proportions of very high producers’. However, later Halsey (1992: 234) did include in his analysis the possibility that women’s lack of success may not be only of women’s doing, but rather may be being done to them; ‘women in this privileged profession put themselves, or are put, at a disadvantage in the competition to produce research’. Nonetheless, he did not offer a comprehensive explanation of the ‘markedly poorer prospects of professorial promotion which have so far been women’s lot’ (Halsey, 1992: 234).

Most important here is the question of how academics make their way through the academic career. Promotion, particularly into the higher levels of the hierarchy, involves the recommendations of academic referees. Therefore, the need for sponsorship is strong. This is problematic for women in the pervasive culture where they may find their academic achievements very differently valued and evaluated from those of male peers (Littin, 1983). In reality, academic life is often experienced by women as a hostile male environment (Bagilhole, 1993; Bagilhole and Woodward, 1995). Therefore, the study reported in this article attempted to contribute to the explanation of why women succeed less well than men by concentrating on the complex cultural and institutional barriers to women’s academic recognition and promotion.
METHODOLOGY

Thirty-seven semi-structured interviews with roughly equal numbers of both women and men were conducted across a pre-1992 university and were analysed using the Nud*ist software package. The interviews included academic staff at all levels and across all schools: lecturers, senior lecturers, professors, heads of departments (HODs), deans and the vice-chancellor. Decisions about the drawing of a sample of staff to be interviewed were directed by theoretical criteria. The concepts of the ‘academic career’, the ‘culture’ of the university and ‘gender’ were identified as key concepts for theoretical sampling.

The concept of the ‘academic career’ suggested that staff at different points on the academic ladder should be included; probationary staff, staff who might be considered eligible for promotion and staff at professorial levels. HODs were seen as key figures in the production and reproduction of the ‘culture’ of the university as experienced by their staff. They are also key figures in the implementation of change, and are therefore likely to have valuable insights into the changing culture of higher education. Selecting HODs from all of the schools in the university ensured representation from the whole of the university rather than any particular departments or disciplines. Also, while the research questions required paying particular attention to the experiences of women, addressing the impact of ‘gender’ dictated that both men and women should be included in the sample. The research provided an important opportunity to incorporate men’s awareness and perceptions of gender issues as they affect their own and their female colleagues’ working lives.

All the respondents in the study were white and non-disabled. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the focus of this study is on gender, and it is unmediated by the diversifying factors of ‘race’, ethnicity and disability.

While recognizing the problems of the extrapolation of these case study findings to all institutions of a particular type within the higher education sector, it is contended that the data give an opportunity to explore the complex, often hidden cultural barriers to women’s successful careers in universities.

THE FINDINGS

The Idea of an Individualistic Academic Career

The interviewees were asked to describe a typical academic career. The vast majority of both men and women detailed a classic route into, and passage through, an academic career which foregrounded their own
individual achievements rather than collaboration with and support from colleagues. This could be summarized as follows: a PhD immediately following a good first degree, one or more postdoctoral research jobs, prior to appointment as a lecturer. Either while still on a research contract, or after appointment to a lecturing job, there is a need to achieve success in attracting research funding, to supervise PhD students of one’s own and to build up a research group around one (particularly true of the sciences), including research assistants. Along the way one has to build a national and international reputation by uninterrupted publishing, and giving keynote addresses at high-profile conferences. Appointment to a chair might involve bringing resources, including staff, to the institution and establishing one’s position with the aid of a generous start-up package. Only interviewees who had not achieved the highest rungs on the ladder mentioned activities such as teaching students and of being a ‘good citizen’ in the academic community as part of an academic career.

This account played down any contributions made by others to an individual’s academic career. The analyses of the interviewees’ own career paths demonstrate the way in which this myth of individual, independent academic achievement is perceived.

You got a PhD, if you were good at research. Then it was – ‘Oh have a lectureship’. It was more or less like, you hung around a bit, and you got one.

(Male professor, 57 years old)

The interviewees’ own PhD stage of their career could be seen to perform a crucial role by supplying the apprentice with a model of the social relations of academic labour to be deployed later. This entailed those with power ensuring the highest visibility for themselves, and contributing to and colluding with the invisibility of their peers and subordinates. Also, while building up a research group, lessons are learnt about the social organization of research generally, where research assistants undertake the bulk of the labour, but remain largely invisible. Hence, the single academic, or head of research group, reaps the enhanced reputation and accompanying career rewards, and thereby perpetuates the myth of individualism and ‘independent’ achievement. This fits in with Evans’s (1995: 80) idea of academics being ‘part of a world which validates the “heroic imperative” . . . the compulsion . . . for individuals to lead and to be in all respects outstanding’.

These essential academic skills are never explicitly taught to novices but instead defined as an individualized problem for them to solve. They are perceived and portrayed as ‘innate, natural, inborn, and personal’ (Atkinson and Delamont, 1990). These ‘indeterminate’ features of the profession are the role performance of being a successful academic. While technical knowledge is important, so is the indeterminate ‘aura of
professional style’ (Atkinson and Delamont, 1990: 105). Because men were there first, the ‘rules of the game’ have been laid down by and for them, and cause discomfort for women (Aisenberg and Harrington, 1988). McIlwee and Robinson (1992) showed that women engineers found ‘the male style of interacting they are expected to display, not the work of engineering, was the most difficult and disliked part of their job’.

Studies have found academic careers dependent on the support of colleagues and superiors, and on the extent of collaboration (Cole and Zuckerman, 1991; Fox, 1991; Lorber, 1994). Also, there is a gender difference in the process with men, despite the lack of acknowledgement, tending to ‘accumulate these collaborative advantages’ and women tending to ‘accumulate disadvantages’ (Lorber, 1994). For example, citations of published papers by others in a field are part of the process of gaining visibility and reputation. According to Ferber (1988), women tend to cite other women more than men cite women, and therefore the fewer women in a field the greater the citations gap for them. Thomas (1990) revealed the powerfully gendered social organization of university English and physics departments and the difficulty they posed for women. Rose (1994: 113) identified patriarchal resistance as a problem, the ‘specific refusal to admit women to the positions of greatest eminence and cultural power within science’.

So we see that, far from being part of an individual’s natural talent or personality, the skills needed for a successful academic career can be exposed as part of a socialization process that some men and virtually no women are allowed to participate in. Reskin’s (1978) particular concern was the importance of collegial relations for the everyday practice of science. The socialization of successful scientists involves reliance on colleagues to maintain their surveillance of the literature, for technical help, for friendship, informal communications (both scientific knowledge and professional information), collaborative work and co-authorship. Aisenberg and Harrington (1988: 44) emphasized the need for both formal and informal networking, showing that, in contrast, isolation is costly in terms of ‘intellectual and informational exchange’. Atkinson and Delamont (1990) contended that the position for women and ‘outsider’ male scientists is therefore complex and less under their own control than is publicly portrayed. There is no easy way for academics acting as individuals to make their own work ‘weighty’ for others in the field. Success is not achieved by publishing more, or even doing better research, but through personal contacts, friendships and cooperative work with key players in the field.

Women particularly find it difficult to accrue these necessary resources to perform valued professional activities. Lorber (1994) identifies this circular proliferation of prestige, resources and power as the ‘Matthew effect’. As attributed to Christ in the Gospel according to Matthew, talking
in terms of faith: ‘For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath’ (Bible, King James version, 25:29). Those who benefit from the Matthew effect receive acknowledgements from their colleagues for good work, which builds their reputation and brings them financial and professional rewards. Zuckerman et al. (1991) incisively described this phenomenon:

You’re proposing your interpretation of the universe, and for that you need to have the recognition of your colleagues. You must assert that this is a good idea, the right interpretation, and that you thought of it, because all three of these things have to be accepted by your colleagues. It doesn’t do your career any good to have the theory accepted, without anyone giving you the credit. (Zuckerman et al., 1991: 103; emphasis in original)

Therefore, it is contended that women’s marginal status in science is due not to their lack of technical skills, but their failure to display the mastery (sic) of the indeterminate skills of the job. Rowe (1977) conceptualized this as similar to the way that Saturn is partially obscured by its rings of dust and ice. Women’s views of ways to become a successful scientist are in the same way blurred.

Self-Promotion and Gender

Self-promotion is essential to an academic career. In a system which rewards the manipulation and presentation of the image of an individualistic achievement record, self-confidence in intellectual ability and self-advertisement are crucial in establishing a reputation (Heward, 1996). The system dictates that one has to put oneself forward for performance awards and promotion. This self-publicizing of one’s work has become increasingly necessary as academic work has become commodified and defined as on sale to customers (Bagilhole, 1995; de Groot, 1997). Successful men have been identified as having the ‘savvy’, ‘calculation’ and ‘cold-bloodedness’ to ‘play on their own side’ (Aisenberg and Harrington, 1988). They treat themselves and their professional outputs as commodities, products to package well enough to sell. Women are less willing to play this game and therefore it can be seen to privilege men and disadvantage women. This leads to the divergence of men’s and women’s academic careers, with more men gaining promotion than women.

The following comment from the study demonstrates a man’s reaction to his work being dragged out of the academy and into the marketplace; his willingness to compromise:

Now it’s actually much better to whack out a letter that’s got the basic stuff in it, which has got the sort of whizzo idea – but that’s all it is – an idea and
a quick result. And then go to a conference and talk about it, with another paper, maybe two. And then follow it up... that's the name of the game now... dividing up the work in that way. I'm not saying that splitting it up makes it poor quality... but there's pressure to fly the flag now. (Male senior lecturer, 39 years old)

In contrast, many women are strongly disinclined to treat the knowledge and wisdom they have acquired in the academic world 'as a kind of trading commodity' (Aisenberg and Harrington, 1988: 56). These authors argue that, while it should be recognized that many men also express similar sentiments, women are particularly affected as a minority group whose 'professional identity... is still precarious' (Aisenberg and Harrington, 1988: 57). While many academics may feel that 'good' work should be and is recognized by some form of natural justice, they are ignoring the complex social processes identified in the previous paragraphs. Therefore, if women continue to rely on 'good work' and do not self-promote, their 'accomplishments in men's fields remain invisible' (Lorber, 1994: 226).

Men take to self-promotion with more relish than women, they 'respond to evaluational contexts by promoting themselves, their needs, talents, worthiness and accomplishments' (Martin, 1996). This can be seen as the practical enactment of 'careerist masculinity' (Collinson and Hearn, 1994). Importantly, however, they also promote other men as well as themselves and occasionally women, as the following example shows their power to do. A male professor in the study illustrated this by agreeing with the view that women are less likely to push themselves forward for promotion. In his case, the example refers to a female member of staff, who was doing her job well. He said he would have expected a man in her position to be knocking on his door demanding to know the rules for regrading. Whereas:

I had to almost twist her arm off to get her into upgrading, and I only got her to go for it on the basis that it was absolutely confidential between her and me. She didn’t want to be perceived as pushy. (Male professor, 56 years old)

This example, not only illustrates women’s reluctance to self-promote and the power of men professors in the academic hierarchy, it also highlights women’s reliance on men’s favours. As Sutherland (1985: 15) argued: 'The structure of the academic hierarchy puts women in the situation of being judged only by those of the opposite sex on a great many occasions.' Women’s lesser willingness to self-promote is not surprising when we acknowledge that this form of behaviour is discouraged in girls and women. They are not seen as ‘feminine’ characteristics and are stigmatized. Therefore, ‘behaviour viewed positively as evidence of ambition...
and leadership qualities among men may be seen negatively as "pushy" and "bossy" among women' (Heward, 1994: 253), as the woman in the example cited so deeply felt.

In fact, most of the women interviewed in the study had a misguided faith in the idea that high quality work and demonstrated commitment would be recognized and rewarded.

One of the things that I suffered from for years, was I always believed that justice would prevail, and that eventually there would be recognition of my achievements. Women presume that someone's going to speak on their behalf. There's a belief that . . . 'somebody must be regularly reviewing the situation and I will get recognition'. (Female professor, 47 years old)

This shows that some women do eventually recognize the reality of the system. Therefore, something more complex is occurring than lack of information. Women are not simply fooled by the myth that individual merit secures success. In fact, there was a strong sense of 'wanting to stand on their own feet' from most of the women interviewed. They very much wanted to achieve in their own right and through their ability. They may have wrongly felt that 'good work' would be enough, but also, importantly, they did not like the system. So we can see that lack of knowledge about the 'rules of the game' is also coupled with 'something like a refusal to know, a shunning of political issues' (Aisenberg and Harrington, 1988: 52). This is not just naivety, but also a rejection of 'the idea that playing games to advance themselves is necessary'. They wanted 'to believe that people advance in the academic profession primarily through . . . quality of mind and moral commitment as well as performance in writing and teaching' and held a 'deep repugnance for academic politics, a repugnance that remains even when the naivete is gone' (Aisenberg and Harrington, 1988: 52, 56). The women in the present study wanted to believe that 'true merit' and integrity would be recognized and rewarded by professional authorities without self-advertisement. Aisenberg and Harrington (1988) call this a 'merit dream', where women prefer 'purity' rather than 'manipulating the image'.

Nevertheless, the most successful female academics in the study maintained that women needed to know that they had to promote themselves, and needed to be actively encouraged to do so.

I make a point of saying to young women that it is very important to spell out their achievements, and to make them visible, and to indicate to whoever it might be that they do have a promotion case. I think men have said to other men, 'Oh, looking at your achievements, it's about time you moved up', and I think women haven't had that. (Female professor, 55 years old)

Therefore, it can be seen that at present self-promotion is essential to an
academic career not only in terms of actively applying for the rewards for one’s labours, but also, importantly, as a way of deploying the skills necessary to create the kinds of professional relationships which then act as ‘capital’ in making career progress. The latter implies the necessity of cultivating a system of active promotion by others. This creates a constant dilemma for women academics. Despite wanting to be successful, the women in the study were seen, by themselves and by men, to be less likely to be engaged in these activities.

Men’s Patriarchal Support System

Patriarchy is a useful conceptual tool here to assist us in understanding how male academics maintain their dominance and put up resistance to women. Hartmann’s (1979: 232) definition remains appropriate and relevant: ‘a set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men, and solidarity among them, which enable them to control women’, and, in the university system, to limit their success. It is important to acknowledge that Hartmann’s definition was carefully chosen so as not to imply that all men had power over women. However, as can be seen by the figures given earlier, universities contain gendered hierarchies of power; most men with power and most women without. In British universities, academic staff are dominated by white, middle-class, non-disabled men, and this lack of heterogeneity allows the vast majority of them to benefit through the system (Bagilhole, 1992). Patriarchy continues to thrive and chosen male applicants are actively encouraged to apply for rewards in terms of promotion and maintain a homogeneity in recruitment to the elite (Lorber, 1994). Even if a ‘token’ woman is allowed to enter the ‘pipelines to power’, they are actively discouraged in recruiting any more ‘like them’ or from competing with men for the very top positions. Therefore, not only is gender a ‘marker of homogeneity’ but so is a willingness for the token woman to play the game and collude with the myths. In this way, men maintain their values and ideas as the dominant ones and ensure the continued success of people as similar as possible to themselves. Tokens are usually eager to fit in and not embarrass their sponsor, so they do not challenge these restrictions or the views, values or work practices of the inner circle. Indeed, they may outdo the others in upholding the prevailing perspectives and exclusionary practices. ‘That is why token women tend to be “one of the boys”’ (Lorber, 1994: 241).

Academia values reputation above all, which is heavily dependent upon integration into formal and informal networks in the research community. Women are less likely to have access to these networks (Bagilhole, 1993, 2000; O’Leary and Mitchell, 1990). ‘Generally, the university is a “man’s world” and the old boy network is influential’ (Sutherland, 1985:
Success in the academic marketplace requires a high level of educational attainment, but moving through the system of rewards and status requires knowing colleagues who can provide guidance, support and advocacy to the newcomer (Bagilhole, 1993). Women have particular difficulty in securing access to this ‘colleague system’ that allocates resources, research support and opportunities to publish (O’Leary and Mitchell, 1990). This leaves women professionally and socially isolated, and makes it difficult to keep informed about professional matters and promote views (Bagilhole, 1993). Through it ‘women are marginalized and to some extent, alienated’ (Thomas, 1990: 181).

Men’s homosociability – the bonding of men – contributes to their maintenance of power (Kanter, 1977; Lipmen-Blumen, 1976; Roper, 1996; Witz and Savage, 1992). These men have the professional resources to do each other reciprocal favours. Most men and women relate to each other only in familial or sexual roles, or if at work as women assistants or secretaries to men, not as equals. Men, as the majority at the top of the academic hierarchy, in their role of selecting, rewarding and promoting others are making both formal and informal evaluations of ‘other’s potential, talents, legitimacy, worthiness, skill and performance’ (Martin, 1996: 189). In other words, these are ‘enactments of patriarchal practices’, which determine who should be included and who not, and involve the reproduction of ‘men’s dominance’, the assertion of ‘men’s rights to the best jobs, positions, opportunities and honours’, and at the same time frame women ‘as less valued and less worthy of powerful statuses and options’ (Martin, 1996: 189). By choosing men as insiders, they are relegating women to outside status even when intentional gender bias is absent on the evaluator’s part (Martin, 1996). As Prichard (1996: 227) strongly argued, ‘the senior posts of tertiary education internationally are held by men to a degree where they seem to be retained for men’. This means that women’s outsider positioning and their status as ‘other’ in the established masculine world at the apex of education institutions is solidly reinforced.

This patriarchal support system could be identified at work in the present study. It was certainly the case that all the successful men interviewed in this study, while promoting the individual approach, in other parts of their interviews revealed, but not necessarily openly acknowledged, the help, support and encouragement of significant men as crucial elements of their own career progress. In this male-dominated, patriarchal environment, men do not have to create networks for themselves, but can take advantage of ready-made ones. Informal networks, both ‘in-house’ and elsewhere, bring information about job opportunities and word-of-mouth recommendations from men already in the institution. This perpetuates an in-built conservatism where those who emerge via such processes are very likely to be another one of the ‘guys’. So taken for granted is the operating of such processes, that it can be attributed to ‘serendipity’.
I was approached by the university . . . so it’s just serendipity really . . . I was approached as to whether I would be interested . . . the previous HOD wanted to recruit someone to develop this side . . . there was a kind of third person contact. (Male senior lecturer, 43 years old)

Also, men receive help from senior colleagues in advancing their position.

One opportunity which came my way, which looking back was very fortuitous, was that the professor had contracted to write a textbook, which would have been the first in Britain on the subject . . . and for a whole series of reasons he had to abandon it. In any case, I’d been hauled in to help him with it . . . and he said to me, ‘Do you want to have a go at it?’, and had persuaded the publisher that I was competent to do so . . . it was the kind of success that a decent textbook would be and published by a major publisher. (Male professor, 49 years old)

This revealing account of ‘being hauled in to help’ and being offered the opportunity to ‘have a go at it’ is a rather disingenuous description of the sponsorship model. For men it seems so natural that they may not even recognize the support they receive.

Such help and support also took the form of mentoring, enabling important contacts, being coached through the informal norms of the profession and sharing knowledge of how ‘the system’ works.

The head of the group was always very helpful in terms of everything we’ve spoken about – about promotions, what you had to do. He felt he knew the system and knew what it took to beat the system . . . he advised me about the promotion trail as it were, and also put me in contact with some people. (Male senior lecturer, 45 years old)

I certainly learned the benefits of how research as a prime mover in all our work in the university environment can be made public, and advertised. (Male senior lecturer, 37 years old)

In contrast, we found no women who had experienced such opportunities, in some cases the reverse.

The university recognized my achievements with a gun held to its head . . . it took so long, and there were a lot of insults along the way, that it was actually offensive. So what should have been a wonderful feeling of success and achievement was really just, ‘oh thank god that’s over’. The process had been so unpleasant . . . and it was given so begrudgingly that I almost didn’t want it. (Female professor, 55 years old)

As can be seen from this woman’s account, women can experience the opposite of the validation and encouragement received by successful men. The cumulative impact of such knocks and doubts can be debilitating,
exhausting and defeating (Aisenberg and Harrington, 1988; Benison and Marshall, 1997; Martin, 1996). Martin (1996) conceptualizes this process by using the complexity theory in physics, where very small changes at an early point in a process can produce very large differences in outcome. She argues that similar ‘dynamics direct men and women to different places’ in the same occupation.

For the men who more usually find themselves in influential company, this process of networking, mentoring and sponsorship need not necessarily be a conscious activity. The enhancement of an academic reputation becomes a byproduct of an informal culture. Thus, women are largely excluded from these processes, but this does not mean that they cannot become participants. It does mean that it has to be a more conscious undertaking on their part, and it must be said that to do so women are expected to conform to male ideas and values, to become ‘more like a man’ (Benison and Marshall, 1997). Cockburn (1991: 164) exposes this as men’s argument that ‘if you want to join men as equals in the public sphere you must leave behind womanly things, you must be indistinguishable from a man, you must, in short, assimilate’.

West and Lyon (1995) argue that it would appear that the collegiate ideal, with its assumption of community and a sense of shared collective endeavour, sits uneasily alongside a meritocracy with merit defined in terms of particular kinds of individual achievement. However, for men, with their successful patriarchal system, ‘Collegiality . . . buttresses rather than conflicts with the pressure for individual success’ (West and Lyon, 1995: 63). In contrast, most women find themselves excluded from this culture. However, if a few are allowed to join, they either feel awkward and out of place in what is essentially a man’s world, or are invited under false pretences on the basis of the cultural hegemony of individualism. Therefore, if they fail it is seen as their own fault, thereby ignoring men’s patriarchal support system.

This creates a climate in which it is possible to interpret active requests for ‘support’ in deficit terms. Several senior academic men in the present study commented that they had little time for those who were not ‘capable of helping themselves’, thus expressing a pervasive set of values in academia. It is as though the individual problem-solving approach is taken as an indicator of personal and professional worth in an organizational sense – so that those who may come knocking on the door of the HOD with requests for help and support are interpreted as ‘incapable’. This is particularly true, if these requests come from women, who in many senses are interpreted as still having to prove themselves as academics. This is ironic given that women face particular problems from the outset of their careers in dealing with the lack of access to the patriarchal support system identified in this article. The academic profession does not supply adequate support and guidance for women. For both men and
women entering the academic profession, there are hurdles and difficulties to overcome, and inevitably mistakes will be made in terms of wrong career moves or plans. However, as Aisenberg and Harrington (1988: 42) argued and as has been shown in this article, ‘women entering the academic profession encounter the usual range of difficulty and then an extra margin’.

While the support, or rather lack of it, given to women is crucial for their professional development, the question often asked is, ‘Why do women need so much support?’, with the extra implied additional question, ‘What is the matter with them?’ They are seen as needing a ‘helping hand’ because they are not as able as others are, or they ‘cannot stand on their own two feet’, or they are unable to ‘help themselves’. As the present study demonstrates, the reality is very different. There is nothing wrong with the women. They are in fact entering this competitive professional environment ‘from different starting points and with heavier burdens than their male peers’ (Aisenberg and Harrington, 1988: 50). They face questions, usually unvoiced but still tangible, such as, ‘Do women have what it takes to do this job?’ For men, on the other hand, entry is perceived as ‘natural’. Ironically, as a consequence of the academic patriarchal system, studies have shown that younger men felt able to ask for help from powerful superiors (Martin, 1996). They expect and assume this help as a right, whereas women are fearful of exposing what would be perceived as a weakness, and are therefore keen to succeed ‘in their own right’ to prove their worth.

Women’s Way Forward?

Women academics, like others in non-traditional roles, can be seen as dedicated and committed, chipping away at institutions and employers that are not always fair to women, in a profession designed by and for men. Thus, the slow increase in women’s representation mostly at the bottom of the academic hierarchy cannot alone shift the nature and the process of attaining a successful academic career, nor their almost total exclusion from the system. As Byanyima (1994) argued: ‘The famous strategy of “add women and stir” can only have limited results because it does not deal with the essence of the problem.’ She calls on women engineers to do more. They ‘should ensure that women’s interests, women’s ways of thinking and acting are an integral part of the scientific and technological enterprise’ (Byanyima, 1994: 61). In the same way, women academics need to challenge the academic process to make universities places ‘for’ women.

This is not an easy task. When women are seen to require mentors in order to make career progress, the cultural hegemony of individual self-promotion identified in the present study accounts for this need being
represented by successful male academics as meeting a deficit in them as women. The underlying ideology put forward is that ‘if women want to be equal they must abandon any idea of “difference”’ (Cockburn, 1991: 161). However, this article exposes the flaws in this argument. It shows how women are different, due to men’s advantage through the thriving patriarchal system and the myth of individualism promoted through their cultural hegemony.

For all the apparent public valuing of academic individualism, the production of academic work is heavily reliant on all kinds of collaboration, and while the discourse of women’s preferred ways of working is characterized by a cooperative, collaborative ideology, it is not something that women have traditionally thought of in a strategic way as something which can be embarked upon instrumentally to advance their own careers. However, this is definitely changing, as women create and exploit their own networks. As this woman in our study demonstrated:

I do quite a lot of mentoring with other women around the place. It is something that comes up again and again. (Female professor, 53 years old)

There is always a constant tension for women in the academy. They need to change the rules of the game and subvert the system of which they are to some extent a part. They have to ‘bite the hand that feeds them’ and ‘be the enemy within’ without totally destroying the profession. As Aisenberg and Harrington (1988: 63) argued, ‘women must use the rules to change the rules and that is a game fraught with tension and hazard’. Rose (1994) sounds two notes of caution. In the process of change, women must avoid the difficult problem of being changed themselves by the system and thereby losing their belief in ‘true merit’ and integrity. Also, we should never underestimate the extent of the resistance we will encounter. However, this must be done because, as shown earlier, unless women set up their own ‘sisterhood’, women’s success is dependent on the men in power who are largely working to maintain their and other men’s positions. The reality for a woman in a man’s world is that at some time or another, often a crucial time, she will realize that her male colleagues never really considered her ‘one of them’. Therefore, women must promote each other and themselves strategically.

Women if they receive useful advice and mentoring usually receive them from other women. This is despite what Aisenberg and Harrington (1988) call the ‘sadder dimension’ of this mentoring, that is the relative weakness or insecurity in many cases of the mentor herself. Some writers also warn of the inherent tensions in these relationships currently, due to the risks of the small minority of senior women becoming overburdened (O’Leary and Mitchell, 1990). However, more women are now becoming survivors in a male preserve (Bagilhole, 1993; David and Woodward,
1998). This needs to be perceived as an ‘accomplishment’ and translated into strategies for the ‘transition from surviving to thriving’ (Pinkola Estés, 1994: 198).

Change will involve ‘new standards, new ways of interacting, and new ways of evaluating’ (Martin, 1996: 53), which also may need new reward systems and frameworks. As Bagilhole (2000) suggested, women must systematically and strategically include themselves in all gate-keeping activities in academia. Unless exclusion becomes inclusion the negative circle for women is likely to continue to be reinforced. Prichard (1996) showed that some groups of women in academia are challenging ‘masculine taken-for-granted ways of doing and ways of being’. It is also possible to find some men doing this as well, but he argues that it is around these women change agents that ‘the incisions, the challenges and the new patterns are being worked out’ (Prichard, 1996: 230).

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to expose men’s own, often invisible and taken for granted relation to the academic project. It has shown that there is an accepted and continuing perception of a ‘standard’ model of an academic career. This ‘standard’ model is not gender neutral, but a ‘male’ model which is individualistic and involves self-promotion. However, it is built on a myth perpetuated by cultural hegemony since men benefit from both formal and informal patriarchal support systems, so they are not in fact purely self-promoting but, rather, promoting each other. In addition to learning the value of adopting a ‘personal’ approach to relationships, men at the same time learn the ability to appear to be self-sufficient.

Also, self-promotion is in itself gendered, in that women are at one and the same time excluded from male networks, and interpreted in deficit terms as ‘needy’ when they seek to establish their own networks. In addition, self-promotion is repugnant and alien to many women, who prioritize other qualities as positive aspects of academic work A suggested way forward for women’s career progress is for them to collaborate and support each other, at the same time as learning to navigate career routes and the ways in which they function in practice, particularly in the context of the further commodification of academic work. Women need to get on and collaborate while keeping a weather eye open for how they are being interpreted and resisting interpretations of being ‘needy’.

This is a difficult exercise – fundamental and challenging to successful male academics. When we seek to change academia, we seek to create a new way of being an academic – far less comfortable to men. At present most if not all men are placed as insiders, whereas virtually all women are marginalized outsiders. The study reported here does not necessarily
identify any new phenomena, as women academics have been aware of these issues and experiences for a long time. But what it does do is make a contribution, I believe, by making explicit the process of the contradiction of individual career versus a supportive patriarchal system for men, which excludes women and names them as subversive or needy if they ask for help or set up support systems of their own. It offers insights into how successful men maintain themselves as the insiders and most women and other men as outsiders, as a matter of routine, with very little effort and without giving women that much thought. Women need to recognize and resist this process, and plan strategically for the future.

NOTES

1. In 1992, the then Conservative government renamed existing polytechnics as universities. Polytechnics had previously concentrated on a more vocational-led approach to higher education than the more traditional universities.

2. The UK academic hierarchy consists of lecturers at the bottom through to professors at the top. Overall the percentage in each academic category are as follows: 60 percent are lecturers, 27 percent senior lecturers and 12 percent professors (HESA, 1998). So it can be seen that professor is a designation for only a minority of academics.

3. They included at least two heads of department from each of the four schools: human, economic and social sciences; engineering; pure and applied science; and education and humanities.

4. The university in the study has only 3 percent of academics who classified themselves as ethnic minorities (17 staff out of over 500), and only 0.4 percent who classified themselves as disabled (two staff out of over 500) in their last monitoring exercise.

5. Even though this study was unable to address the issues of ‘race’ and disability, it is important to acknowledge that these are additional key aspects of the relations that keep certain academics on the ‘periphery’ (see Bannerji 1992; Carty, 1992).

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