

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at:
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281785057>

Myths about Meritocracy and Transparency: The Role of Gender in Academic Recruitment

Chapter · January 2015

DOI: 10.1007/978-3-662-48112-7_12

CITATION

1

READS

56

1 author:



[Marieke C.L. van den Brink](#)

Radboud University

28 PUBLICATIONS 363 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

All content following this page was uploaded by [Marieke C.L. van den Brink](#) on 15 September 2015.

The user has requested enhancement of the downloaded file.

Myths about Meritocracy and Transparency: The Role of Gender in Academic Recruitment

Marieke van den Brink

12.1 Myths – 192

- 12.1.1 Myth 1: The concept of scientific excellence is gender neutral – 192
- 12.1.2 Myth 2: Professorial appointment practices are transparent and decision makers are held accountable – 196

12.2 Recommendations – 198

- 12.2.1 Awareness of bias in the construction of excellence – 198
- 12.2.2 Accountability and transparency – 199

References – 200

This chapter focuses on the practices used to appoint the most influential people in the academic world – full professors – in order to contribute to our understanding of gender in the system of academic evaluation. Professorial appointments are considered to be of crucial relevance in the reproduction of gender inequality or equality in academic organizations, since they represent the point at which the standards that govern the academic field are determined, standards such as the prevailing construction of scientific excellence. The aim of the chapter is to explore the various ways in which gender is practiced in professorial recruitment and selection, and to provide recommendations for gender neutral recruitment practices. To reveal these gender practices, this research draws primarily on quantitative and qualitative empirical material including the recruitment and selection protocols of seven universities, 971 appointment reports and 64 interviews with committee members (Van den Brink, 2010), accompanied with recent work of gender in recruitment and selection.

12.1 Myths

In the general debate many reasons are given to explain the low number of women professors, from personal preferences to gendered institutional arrangements or discrimination. Research has revealed some of these explanations as myths: believed by many, but not in fact true, or only partly true. These myths are explored in this chapter by showing how gender plays a role in recruitment and selection practices. These gender mechanisms are often not recognized as such or reflected upon by the academics and practitioners involved, because they are mostly justified by the ideal of transparency and meritocracy. This chapter challenges the view of a scientific world where the allocation of rewards and resources is governed by the normative principles of transparency and meritocracy.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, I will reveal two persistent myths which are often used to explain away gender discrimination in academic appointments. These myths are unveiled by revealing the various gender mechanisms tied in with professorial recruitment and selection. Next, I will discuss the effectiveness of current policies and provide some leads to challenge the current gender order.

12.1.1 Myth 1: The concept of scientific excellence is gender neutral

Scientific excellence is not gender neutral

Mainstream ideas about how scientific excellence should be assessed relate to meritocratic principles which claim objectivity, impartiality and gender neutrality (Merton, 1973). They lead to a powerful meritocratic ideology: the belief that selection decisions are based solely on individual qualifications and the ability demonstrated, and



■ **Abb. 12.1** For women applying to professorship positions it can be harder to assure evaluators of their competencies (© contrastwerkstatt/Fotolia)

that gender does not matter in the assessment of male and female applicants. In this system talent will prove itself, and excellence will ›surface‹ automatically. However, several studies have shown that scientific excellence is not gender neutral ([Husu & Koskinen 2010](#); [Rees 2011](#); [Śliwa & Johansson 2014](#)). In my Dutch study, it was possible to show that excellence is in fact a problematic concept, difficult to objectify or assess and inherently gendered (see Van den Brink & Benschop 2012).

The recruitment of excellent academics is an honorable goal, but excellence as a social construction is fluid and shifting, only possible to define in a specific academic field and within the boundaries of the objectives of the institution in question. This was shown by respondents who often stated that they were unable to define excellence, but referred to it by saying ›you recognize it when you see it‹ (see also Schacherl, Schaffer, Dinges, & Polt 2007). It would therefore be misleading to treat excellence as a universal, easily quantifiable characteristic. Rather, it is a composite of many qualifications and characteristics that is achieved through training, networking, accumulation, and resources. These qualifications must lead to visible and recognizable achievements (forms of capital) before they can be judged and assessed (Brouns & Addis 2004, p.18). In the assessment of different achievements of the candidates gender can play a role (■ Abb. 12.1). To show this, I will analyze how gender plays a role in the assessment of professional individual and social capital.

First of all, gender is practiced during the assessment of candidates' professional capital. Professional capital can be defined as experience and achievements in the area of research, teaching, management, practical experience (patient case, consultancy) and contribution to the broader societal debate. This form of capital is based on the evidence

Gender plays a role in the assessment of professional individual and social capital

Professional capital

Academics with career interruptions

of scientific endeavor (publications, rewards, grants) and is widely seen as the most direct and legitimate way of assessing excellence in the academic world. Abundant research has demonstrated gender bias in the assessment of professional capital (► Research example). Indicators that appear to be gender-neutral (such as counting numbers of publications and citations) still produce gendered results when applied to a gendered system – by not taking actual research time into account, for instance. Women are overrepresented in part-time and fixed-time positions (Goode 2001; van Engen, Bleijenbergh, & Paauwe 2008).

Furthermore, the relatively monolithic standard model of professional capital – involving bibliometrics and peer review as the dominant measures – does not fully coincide with the heterogeneity of scientific activity. Because teaching and professional activities are usually valued less than publications, the heavier teaching loads associated with temporary or part-time contracts and positions serve as a source of gender inequality (Acker & Feuerverger 1996; Park 1996). Furthermore, academics with career interruptions who do meet the required standards are often older, thus, losing out because appointment committees prefer younger candidates with equivalent qualifications. The academic system favors academics, who have followed a traditional masculine career path, with no room for alternative paths or career breaks (Van den Brink & Stobbe 2014).

Research example: Bias in professional capital

In 1997, Wennerås and Wold published their groundbreaking *Nature* article on sexism and nepotism in the peer review of research grant applications to Sweden's Medical Research Council. The article showed that the peer review system was not as 'neutral' as it claimed to be. Although women constituted 46% of the applicant pool they received only 20% of the fellowships. Male applicants and researchers who were affiliated with one of the evaluators were more successful in their applications for post-doctoral research grants than other applicants. Women had to receive 100 or more impact points to get the same rating from the judges than a man with 40 or fewer impact points. The article concluded that, while the scientific quality of the proposal was an important factor in assessing the applicants for research grants, gender and affiliation with one of the members of the evaluation committee also played important roles. This research was a starting point for many other studies on academic research evaluation. The results of the Swedish study have since been partially confirmed by other research (Ginther & Hayes, 1999; McDowell, Singell, & Ziliak, 1999; Bornmann & Daniel, 2005) but refuted by others (Grant, Burden, & Breen, 1997; Bazeley, 1998; Ward & Donnelly, 1998; Boehringer Ingelheim Fonds, 1999).

Secondly, individual capital is seen as a collection of criteria related to perceived personality. These are not criteria listed in the job profile, but are rather ‘common sense’ criteria used at the discretion of the appointment committees. Gender practices in the assessment of individual capital are strongly related to gender stereotyped judgments. The stereotypical image of the female scholar in continental Europe is a part-time worker, with family responsibilities who lacks the ambition to put in the time and efforts to reach a senior position. Moreover, she will have difficulty managing a research group of autonomous academics and presents herself modestly and sensitively. This hegemonic image persists even though in practice, as my data shows, female senior academics in the Netherlands work the same number of hours as men, express their ambitions confidently, and engage in active self-promotion (van Engen et al., 2008). The concept of the ideal professor conflicts with the hegemonic female scholar, with the result that assessors tend to underestimate the qualifications of female candidates.

Individual capital

Research example: Gendered construction of excellence

To show how stereotypes about masculinity, femininity, men, and women can play a role in the assessment of candidates, an example is given from the research on professorial appointment. A male committee member from the medical sciences tells:

»It is possible that women are more often put on the defensive because they have a family with young children. It shouldn't be happening but the committee will wonder whether it can – or should – demand dedication of 100 or 150 percent of somebody with three children. You shouldn't be doing that as a committee, but if someone takes that into account without saying it, you will not find out. That is why as a woman, you should try not to be put on the defensive. If you have three children, you have to make it clear to the committee how you think you are going to manage that. You have to be one step ahead and say: 'I have discussed it with my husband, we have been thinking for a long time, and I think that if I arrange it like this, for ninety percent of the time, I will have all my hands free for this job'. So, it is possible that women are not equally represented because of behavior by the committee that is not entirely appropriate, but also by the attitude of the candidate. But everyone has a different agenda, so things like this can play a role.«

This quote illustrates that a committee sometimes tries to be protective towards women, wonders whether they ›can ask [such an demanding job] of a woman‹. So if committee members take a traditional view of care responsibilities, the chance that they will assume that a woman will have trouble managing her work is reasonable. Although well-intended, it perpetuates the stereotypes upon which it is premised: women's role is to take care of the children. Care-taking responsibilities are seen exclusively as

women's problems since these arguments are never discussed with male candidates. Men do not have to justify the arrangement of their family responsibilities. It is important that committee members realize that they have to be aware of their traditional gender roles, instead of making women responsible to explain how they organize their life.

[Source: Van den Brink, 2010]

Social capital

Thirdly, both professional and individual capital depend on the accumulation of social capital. Social capital is defined as an aggregation of networks that can provide certain resources or positions of power. It is not only talent and merit that determine who is appointed; this is also affected by social capital. In order to distinguish oneself as an excellent academic, professional and individual capital are not enough. Affiliation with the decision makers also affects the opportunities of academics. Social capital also helps boost professional and individual capital (see also van Arensbergen, van der Weijden, & van den Beselaar, 2014). This is the acceleration effect of social capital: success leads to greater visibility and new successes, and an enhanced reputation leads to more citations and more success in receiving grants and subsidies. Since in the male-dominated academic world men tend to have broader networks and the majority of academics in senior positions are male, female academics with no extended social capital suffer a disadvantage when building a reputation (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2014; Van den Brink & Stobbe 2014).

To conclude, gender mechanisms play a role in the assessment of different achievements of the candidates. This implies that men's achievements are systematically seen as more legitimate, and produce more 'excellence points' than women's achievements.

12.1.2 Myth 2: Professorial appointment practices are transparent and decision makers are held accountable

Lack of transparency and accountability

The findings of gender research have led to calls for more transparent procedures and accountability among decision makers in order to remedy the bias and arbitrariness of these opaque processes, and guard against the reproduction of gender practices that hamper the career progression of women. Although the call for transparency has been answered by universities to some extent, we must conclude that the policies developed in this area have hardly been implemented and therefore have little effect in the attempt to achieve gender equality. A close reading of protocols and committee reports shows that transparency in appointment decisions is a matter of »bounded transparency«: Access to appointment reports is limited to a very strict selec-

tion of academics, protocols often remain not implemented, and the appointment process takes place in a highly micropolitical context.

In contrast to European countries like Sweden and Finland, the Netherlands has no law forcing academic appointment decisions to be made public. Proceedings and appointment reports are not available to the general public or fellow academics due to strict confidentiality rules. Only a specific kind of ›outsider‹ – a very narrow selection of elite academics – is allowed access to appointment decisions. Rather than allowing public access to appointment decisions, universities attempt to make the process more transparent and decision makers more accountable by drawing up protocols for academic evaluation. These protocols provide guidelines and agreements, which the decision makers and committee members involved have to follow. The protocols contain a few explicit references to gender equality, and those mentioned pertain to the encouragement of (potential) female candidates and the inclusion of female members on appointment committees.

The implementation of these rules and regulations, however, seems to be a different matter. In all phases of the appointment process, micropolitical dynamics and gender mechanisms can be observed (see Van den Brink, Benschop, & Jansen). These run contrary to the regulations for transparency, accountability and gender equality. I conducted an interview study and found many examples of flexible interpretations of the rules and regulations. For instance, the protocols are easily overruled when decisions have to be made fast to appoint or retain candidates (usually male) deemed to be 'excellent'. Also the rule about the committee composition was neglected very often. Almost all committees (45%) consisted solely of male committee members and no women took part in the decision making. In another twenty percent of committees, the female member was a student or PhD candidate. Although the effects of a gender-balanced committee were vigorously debated by my respondents, increasing the number of female committee members does in fact make a difference, and indeed increases the chances of female applicants (Van den Brink et al., 2006).

The poor implementation of the appointment protocols can be explained by resistance towards more bureaucracy, the appeal to meritocracy, and the lack of back-up by the university board. A difference was detectable between the university boards and policy makers on the one hand – who stressed the importance of making the procedures more transparent and increasing gender equality – and on the other hand the committee members – who were critical or even cynical about the policies and rejected them as bureaucratic. Policies that explicitly address gender equality issues such as ›searching for women‹ and ›reporting the number of women in the process‹ evoked particular resistance, hence these policies are often neglected. In the most extreme case, policies designed to increase transparency were even counter-productive, leading committee members to use micropolitical techniques and strategies to ›stage‹ transparency or gender equality

Protocols for academic evaluation

Implementation of rules and regulations

Resistance towards more bureaucracy, the appeal to meritocracy, and the lack of back-up by the university board

while manipulating the system in their interest behind the scenes. Due to the lack of commitment from key figures and the lack of pressure from the university board, the protocols remain a paper tiger. Promoting transparency generally involves requiring institutions and individuals to release information they are accustomed to withholding. Therefore, transparency can rarely be achieved without pressure from above – from the university boards in this case.

12.2 Recommendations

By showing the subtle gender mechanisms in recruitment and selection, potential routes to change become apparent. Gender practices and how they are integrated into organization practices can serve as a starting point to challenge how academic life is organized and could serve as a framework to further improve and professionalize universities' recruitment and selection.

12.2.1 Awareness of bias in the construction of excellence

Overcoming stereotypical thinking

Training male and female committee members to function as agents of change to overcome stereotypical thinking on gender would provide a starting point. Agents in the recruitment and selection process should adopt a more critical stance towards knowledge and ideas, which are taken for granted. Stereotypical images of excellence, masculinity, and femininity can mean that female talent goes to waste (false negative) but can also mean the over-representation of male talent (false positive). Both situations are unproductive in terms of development of the sciences. Assessors and committee members should be made aware of how they interpret differences in presentational style between men and women (Abb. 12.2): Do they allow themselves to be impressed by masculine displays of self-confidence and do they look beyond the quieter, more hesitant presentation of women? Elite academics often select candidates congruent with their own personal and scientific preferences.

Diversity

The wish to 'clone' oneself (Essed, 2004) is understandable and has some merit, but may not serve the long-term interests of science. Diverse perspectives can and do add value to science. Knowledge of stereotyping and unintentional gender mechanisms is essential for good selection processes. Assessors and gatekeepers could be trained to be more aware of these potential differences, to reflect on them, and be more aware of how they influence their assessments (Fine et al., 2014). A greater understanding of stereotyping, implicit bias, and tokenism (Kanter, 1977) would lead towards more transparency and an adequate appointments process (see also Fine et al., 2014; Wroblewski, 2014). In other words, the existing rules of the game need to be questioned and



■ **Abb. 12.2** Observers may interpret the same behavior of men and women differently (© Isabelle Dinter)

transformed. Reflecting on cultural stereotypical images can be an important strategy in optimizing selection and evaluation outcomes. It is therefore advisable to have a critical reflection on the socially constructed nature of ›excellence‹. The universities have a duty to reflect on the unintentional effects of their selection procedures: What talent remains hidden and unexploited? What barriers do talented women and other ›outsiders‹ or newcomers face?

12.2.2 Accountability and transparency

Accountability and transparency are seen as tools to promote gender equality in higher education, but in the final analysis this outcome is dependent on the proper implementation of these measures and micropolitics also need to be taken into account. It has been demonstrated that transparency and accountability policies encounter considerable resistance due to the perception of increased bureaucracy. Focusing on professionalization could help counter resistance towards gender-related policies since they are often seen as outdated. Continuing to professionalize appointment committees, such as training one or more of the members, can contribute to the quality of the selection process.

The assessment of procedures for unintended effects on women is another important element in continuing to improve recruitment and selection procedures. This means that a training for some committee members – preferably the chair – would enhance the transparency of the selection process. Attention could be paid to the sex ratio in the pool of academic potential, the positive gender effect of a gender-balanced committee, and reflection on definitions of quality. Universities that have already formulated gender-neutral recruitment and selection protocols can be pioneers in this regard.

Focusing on professionalization

Enhancement of transparency

Support of these policies on university boards

Finally, the most important issue concerning transparency and accountability is solid support of these policies on university boards. This study has shown that transparency policies have hardly been implemented, and only through greater pressure from the boards and deans can these policies be made more effective.

Checklist for transparency and excellence

- Monitor the statistics of men and women on different academic positions in the different academic subfields, and make them public.
- Organize peer learning groups for committee members and work on awareness about the functioning and effects of male networks and the existence of gender stereotypes in appointment procedures.
- Search for eligible candidates in diverse networks of multiple academics.
- Create transparent policies and procedures and make sure these policies are modeled and reinforced by leadership.
- Develop clear and explicit criteria for evaluating candidates and apply them consistently while considering the entire application package. Review the CVs carefully and comprehensively.
- Use multiple criteria for evaluation that account for diverse paths of excellence. Identifying stellar women may require looking into a slightly older pool of candidates.

(Sources: Hoogleraarbenoemingen in Nederland M/V, Van den Brink, 2011)

For additional reading

- Ruest-Archambault, E., & d'Investigació, D. G. (2008). Benchmarking policy measures for gender equality in science: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities Luxembourg.
- Moss-Racusin, C.A., J.F. Dovino, V.L. Brescoll, M.J. Graham & J. Handelsman (2012). Science faculty's subtle gender biases favor male students, *Psychological and Cognitive Sciences*, (41) 16474–16479.
- Ulmann, E., & G. Cohen (2005). Constructed criteria: redefining merit to justify discrimination. *Psychological Sciences*, (16), 474–480.

References

- Acker, S., & Feuerwerker, G. (1996). Doing good and feeling bad: The work of women university teachers. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 26, 401–422.
- Brouns, M., & Addis, E. (2004). Gender and excellence in the making. Brussels: European Commission.
- Essed, P. (2004). Cloning amongst professors: normativities and imagined homogeneities. *NORA*, 12, 113–122.

References

- Fine, E., Sheridan, J., Carnes, M., Handelsman, J., Pribbenow, C., Savoy, J. & Wendt, A. (2014). Minimizing the Influence of Gender Bias on the Faculty Search Process. In V. Demos, C. White Berheide, M. Texler Segal (Eds.), *Gender Transformation in the Academy (Advances in Gender Research, Volume 19)*. Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Goode, J. (2001). Is the position of women in higher education changing? *International Perspectives on Higher Education Research*, 1, 243–284.
- Husu, L., & Koskinen, P. (2010). Gendering excellence in technological research: a comparative European perspective. *Journal of technology management & innovation*, 5, 127–139.
- Kanter, R. M. (1977). *Men and women of the corporation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Merton, R. C. (1973). *The sociology of science; theoretical and empirical investigations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Park, S. M. (1996). Research, teaching, and service: Why shouldn't women's work count? *The Journal of Higher Education*, 46–84.
- Rees, T. (2011). The gendered construction of scientific excellence. *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 36, 133–145.
- Schacherl, I., Schaffer, N., Dinges, M., & Polt, W. (2007). *Gender und Exzellenz. Explorative studie zur exzellenzmessung und leistungsbeurteilung im wissenschaftssystem*. Vienna: Joanneum Research Forschungsgesellschaft mbH.
- Šliwa, M., & Johansson, M. (2014). The discourse of meritocracy contested/reproduced: Foreign women academics in UK business schools. *Organization*, 21, 821–843.
- Van Arensbergen, P., van der Weijden, I., & van den Besselaar, P. (2014). Different views on scholarly talent: What are the talents we are looking for in science? *Research Evaluation*, 23, 273–284.
- Van den Brink, M. (2010). *Behind the Scenes of Sciences. Gender practices in recruitment and selection for professors in the Netherlands*. Amsterdam: Pallas Publications.
- Van den Brink, M., & Benschop, Y. (2012). Gender practices in the construction of academic excellence: Sheep with five legs. *Organization*, 19, 507–524.
- Van den Brink, M., Benschop, Y., & Jansen, W. (2010). Transparency in academic recruitment: a problematic tool for gender equality? *Organization Studies*, 31, 1459.
- Van den Brink, M., & Stobbe, L. (2014). The support paradox: Overcoming dilemmas in gender equality programs. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 30, 163–174.
- Van den Brink, M., & Benschop, Y. (2014). Gender in Academic Networking: The Role of Gatekeepers in Professorial Recruitment. *Journal of Management Studies*, 51, 460–492.
- Van Engen, M., Bleijenbergh, I., & Paauwe, J. (2008). Vrouwen in hogere wetenschappelijke posities aan de Universiteit Tilburg. Processen van instroom, doortroom en uitstroom nader bekeken. Retrieved January 2015 from <http://www.uvt.nl/medewerkers/vrouwen.html>
- Wroblewski, A. (2014). Gender Bias in Appointment Procedures for Full Professors: Challenges to Changing Traditional and Seemingly Gender Neutral Practices. In V. Demos, C. White Berheide, M. Texler Segal (Eds.), *Gender Transformation in the Academy (Advances in Gender Research, Volume 19)*. Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

