

Men, Social Capital and Academic Careers

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Abstract

Derived from qualitative research with New Zealand-based academics and international research on academia, this paper discusses men's perceptions of the impact of gender and family circumstances on their university careers. It argues that academic men often gain social capital through mentoring, professional networks and marriage. This enables them to view the academic promotional system as fair, to work long hours, and experience few dilemmas about family responsibilities. Although men's work/family integration becomes more complex when female partners develop high-level careers and insist on shared household work, men's social capital is often enhanced through their wife's professional networks.

Introduction

Considerable research finds that academic men are more likely than women to work in full-time positions in prestigious universities, to have higher publication rates, to express greater satisfaction with teaching loads and advancement, achieve higher rank and salaries, and be married with children (Brooks 1997, White 2004, Probert 2005, Nakhaie 2007, Toutkoushian et al 2007, Boreham et al 2008, Monroe et al 2008). Few articles on the 'academic gender gap' focus on men but studying men's circumstances and perceptions could expand understandings of masculine identities and gendered priorities in the workplace.

This paper, based on international research and New Zealand interviews, discusses the impact of men's gender and domestic circumstances on their university career. It argues that academic men typically gain social capital through marriage, mentoring and collegial relations. They usually value marriage and fatherhood but often prioritise career over family because colleagues and managers reward them for doing so and female partners typically enable them to work overtime. When female partners

expect equal careers, academic men face new challenges relating to household work and relocation for promotion.

Gender and Academic Work

Previous researchers have explained the academic gender gap through references to gender socialization, disciplinary specialisation, access to professional networks, institutional priorities and practices, career longevity, family circumstances and the domestic division of labour. As males are typically viewed as family earners, parents and teachers often support their career preparation, assisting them to gain confidence and knowledge about workplace practices. Academic men more readily apply for promotion, are rewarded for working long hours, and eventually become more professionally successful than women (White 2004, Probert 2005). Early mentoring has been related to career progression and more male than female academics report adequate mentoring, saying that their doctoral experience was positive, their supervisors were interested in their projects, and that they published with supervisors (Brooks 1997; Seagram, Gould & Pyke 1998).

Since the 1960s, universities improved their gender balance as more women receive doctorates, become academics, and move into senior academic positions (Brooks 1997, Probert 2005, Sussman & Yssaad 2005). Nevertheless, men continue to occupy 80% of senior academic positions, down from 90% in the 1960s, if 'senior' is defined as a full professor in Canada but associate professor and professor in Australia and New Zealand (Carrington & Pratt 2003, NZ Human Rights Commission 2008, Sussman & Yssaad 2005). In recent decades, equity and mentoring initiatives have been introduced but managers have also developed new measures of accountability and productivity.

Securing permanent employment and subsequent promotions requires peer assessment of research, teaching and service but studies find that research is often prioritised and men publish more peer-reviewed papers than women (Long 2001, Nakhaie 2007). When researchers control for structural variables influencing publication (such as subject, teaching loads and degree of specialisation) and if they include non-refereed publications, however, the gender differences diminish (Xie & Shauman 1998, Leahy 2006). Research also finds that men tend to work in positions and departments with greater research pressure and less pastoral care of students.

As universities restructure, more rely on international recruitment, external funding, rankings systems and institutional 'benchmarking' (Larner & LeHeron 2005, Taylor & Braddock 2007). Some prioritize research by attracting highly-productive academics and postgraduate students, encouraging academics to compete for research grants, and expecting publications in prestigious journals (Nakhaie 2007). External grants sometimes enable undergraduate courses to be 'bought out' and taught by doctoral students and part-timers (disproportionately female). Universities also hire internationally-acclaimed 'research chairs' with higher salaries and reduced teaching loads, and more of these are men (Side & Robbins 2007). This creates a dual and gendered labour market between research and teaching (Bracken, Allen & Dean, 2006). Promotion systems also reward longevity and men have more years of uninterrupted employment, as well as citations and peer esteem (Leahey 2006). Despite shorter lives, men retire later than women and more continue working as emeritus professors.

The next section discusses the study with New Zealand-based academics.

Study Design

This 2008 project was based on interviews with male and female academics working in the social sciences and humanities at two New Zealand universities. One emphasizes its research strengths and has a higher ranking, internationally with the Times Higher Education University Ranking System and nationally with New Zealand's Performance-Based Research Fund scores (based on research productivity, contribution to the research environment and peer esteem). The second emphasizes teaching and learning capabilities and has a slightly higher percentage of senior female academics (NZ Human Rights Commission 2008).

The sample contained 30 academics with doctorates and permanent positions: twenty from the research university and ten from the teaching university; twelve males and eighteen females. The men ranged from 28 and 68 years and the women from 34 to 62 years. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and included questions about credentials, mentoring experiences, domestic circumstances, promotional opportunities and professional commitment. The analysis identified patterns by gender, family circumstances, rank and university affiliation, and searched for themes and illustrative comments. In verbatim quotations, gender is noted but personal details are omitted to retain anonymity, and lecturers and senior lecturers are grouped together and labelled 'L/SL', while the associate professors and professors are labelled as 'senior'. Their university affiliation was also omitted to protect their identity.

Differences became apparent between academics from the two universities. Participants from the research university included more men and those who had achieved overseas degrees on international scholarships. In contrast, more participants from the teaching university were women, had local doctorates and experience, obtained doctorates later in life (often from the research university), and reported

higher teaching loads. These interviews cannot permit generalizations but can supplement the international studies on academics. The findings focus on men's circumstances and perceptions, including the impact of gender, marital status and fatherhood on their career and their household division of labour and promotional possibilities.

Study Findings

1. Gender and Academic Careers

Most male participants seemed puzzled by the question about the impact of gender on their career although two men mentioned that their area of specialisation reflecting 'masculine' concerns. The typical male response was: "It's not something I've ever really given a huge amount of thought to." Men's responses were quite different from the women's, who cited numerous examples of social exclusion, lack of collegiality and institutional discrimination influence by their gender and motherhood.

The men who had given the subject some thought were typically married to academic women and occasionally told stories of their partner's negative experiences. For example, one L/SL man said: "When (my partner) took up the job at x University, the number of obstacles that existed because she was not part of the network of men was enormous. They made her life extremely uncomfortable, which was part of why we ended up shifting up here." However, when men talked about their own lives, they seldom could pinpoint specific problems or even career advantages in being male.

Here are some examples:

"Mm. Well, I assume that things are probably easier for me than it would be for a woman coming through but I wouldn't be able to say how ... you sort of assume that the white man is getting the easy ride through the system."

“I’ve always just assumed that I have enjoyed some advantage or privilege as a result of being male, you know in the job market and maybe even in career advancement, but it’s something you just don’t really think about that much.”

2. Marital Status and Academic Careers

Previous research finds that more tenured men are married with children and fewer academic men than women become single parents (Brooks 1997, O’Laughlin & Bishoff 2005). Men’s marriage has been viewed as a form of social capital, as it can increase their networks and reduce household responsibilities especially if their wife is not fully employed (Toutkoushian et al 2007). More academic men are now in dual-career marriages, often married to other academics, but men’s partners are normally younger with lower work attachment (Bracken et al 2006). If couples publish together, husbands often receive disproportionate credit for joint publications (Creamer 2006).

In the interviews, more men than women were married or in long-term relationships with younger partners, and more were parents. All twelve men were married or cohabiting, and eight were fathers (67%) with another two seriously contemplating fatherhood. (Only ten of eighteen women were married/cohabiting (56%) and only ten were mothers (56%) including five sole mothers). More men reported partners outside the labour force, working part-time or in temporary jobs, and there was no association between men’s rank and their family status (but senior women were least likely to be mothers).

Some men acknowledged the importance of their partner’s career support. One L/SL man spoke of his wife: “She has academic skills that complement mine and she helps me out in my own work sometimes ... If I’ve got a journal article that I’m writing, I can hand it to her and she can go through it and proof-read it...” Another L/SL man

said: “My wife has always been very supportive of my career... She can easily find work ... wherever we go.”

Numerous male participants spoke about partners’ ‘transportable careers’, which enabled men to relocate to their preferred job. For example, one young L/SL man said: “My wife is in a very transportable career. She can do what she does just about anywhere ... so it’s quite easy to move around but it still gives me stability.” Another L/SL male said:

“I’ve moved around a lot and there’s always been a community base that went with me in my wife. So it wasn’t going into a place completely unknown; there was a support network there, emotionally as well as financially.”

Many men assumed that their partner would prioritise the husband’s career but several mentioned ex-partners who had previously been unsupportive. Men currently married to women with high-level careers also expressed concern about additional housework and relocation problems, discussed later in this paper.

3. Children and Career

Men clearly gained pleasure from their children but also reported that fatherhood meant less time for scholarly work during evenings and weekends. Most postponed marriage and childbearing until completing their doctorate and finding permanent work. However, one L/SL man talked about having a child when he was still a doctoral student and how this influenced his work:

“I think that in some ways, having (daughter) forced a certain structure upon me that ended up being advantageous... I would go in typically at 8 o’clock, then I would ordinarily come home around 5:30. I’d have an hour and a half with my wife and my daughter. We’d put (daughter) to bed and then I’d go back to the office or work in the back bedroom until about 10 o’clock.”

This man was married to a homemaker who cared for their child while he was working but a mother in the study talked about her overseas doctoral experience:

“The men who had children didn’t face the same kinds of difficulties and problems as married women ... To excel, you needed to be completely consumed by your studies on some level. And that just wasn’t possible for the women because their partners were also working and they had a lot of child care responsibilities.”

Most of the male participants reported that children delayed their research productivity but they did not always seem to resent this. A senior academic with two sons said:

“Well, I’ve had to realise that I can’t do things quite as fast as I used to... There are a lot of goals I want to achieve and I know I will achieve them, but it won’t quite be necessarily on the time frame I had initially hoped.”

Participants also discussed the impact of career on their family life and a few men mentioned delaying marriage and children, and moving the family around the world for their academic jobs. One L/SL male said:

“We delayed having children for several years as a result of my pursuit of my graduate studies... So there was a 3 to 4 year postponement of when (my wife) felt ready to have a child versus when we actually did... It certainly is the case that the family had to move around a whole lot more ... a result of my academic career. **Are they ok with that?** They are. Although as the children get older the costs are more pronounced”.

Most of the men were fathers or expected to become fathers, viewing children as desirable but also an obstacle to rapid promotion. One L/SL man said:

“Being a parent takes time, yeah quite a bit, and... that can really impact on your ability to produce your research and scholarship... It’s the fragmented nature of (childcare work) that poses a real challenge to maintaining your optimal productive potential as a scholar.”

Men’s careers were typically viewed as primary to their identity and their family’s well-being. They usually reported that their partner was willing to make sacrifices for their career but children were less understanding. As one L/SL man said: ‘Love is time with kids, and if you’re not spending enough time with them, they let you know’.

4. The Domestic Division of Labour

In previous research, academics report long working hours but fewer men than women say they are the primary caregiver of children, aging parents and other relatives, or changed jobs for their partner's career (Probert 2005, Bracken, Allen & Dean 2006). The New Zealand interviews reflected these findings. Both men and women talked about caring for children, and a few men mentioned responsibilities for aging parents and problems co-ordinating two careers, but these were typically female concerns. No men mentioned major work-related concessions they made for family reasons.

An unequal division of housework was reported by most men, especially fathers and men married to homemakers or part-timers. A few men reported that they shared the housework equally but after some discussion confessed that their wife might not agree. The implications of an unequal division were typically downplayed, such as the L/SL man who explained why his wife did most of the housework: "Her career aspirations in many ways have been secondary... and they've become less pronounced over time", mentioning that she was now a full-time mother caring for three children. A senior man reported that he did about 20% of the housework, even though his wife had a high-level professional career. When I asked if she was "ok with that", he simply replied: "Probably not entirely happy".

Both men and women discussed work-life balance but only a few men mentioned reducing working hours for domestic reasons, as many mothers did. Parenting was clearly important to the men but household work appeared less central even though more were married with children. Nevertheless, several men reported strong feelings of obligation to share parenting and housework.

5. Career Progression

Many males (but few females) assumed that they would need to relocate to further their career and that this was the nature of academia. Some men used overseas offers to improve their job situation. For example, one senior man said:

“Recently, I’ve had two job offers from other places and I have used those here to get better money and extra leave. I got my leave extended from one semester to two. In my experience it’s the only time that the University will offer you anything.... I was offered a position at the University of x and I would have gone but my wife didn’t want to live there. But it was a good job and I would have gone, yeah.”

Reasons for forfeiting overseas offers usually related to family circumstances and this was clearly a ‘bone of contention’ in many marriages. Several men doubted that they could move because their employed wife would not agree. This was particularly challenging for ‘head-hunted’ men with career-oriented wives. One man (L/SL) with a high-earning wife expressed this quite explicitly: “I’ve been offered lots of [overseas] jobs but I can’t take them. It’s not an option....If I wasn’t married with kids, I would have left here three years ago”.

Men were explicitly asked about the potential impact of relocation on their partner’s career. One senior male, who applied unsuccessfully for an overseas position said: “I suppose it would have [caused problems for his wife’s career] ... but we were just willing to face that if it happened...She would have been willing to try something else.” No academic women made these assumptions about her partner. Furthermore, more men than women reported promotional opportunities elsewhere and implied that relocation to an overseas university would assist their career.

Generally, the men expressed much more confidence about progressing through the ranks. Here are some male comments about expectations of promotion to professor before retirement:

“I can see how I could justify promotion to full professor in three to four years after the next promotion, based on my books...” (L/SL)

“I will certainly have enough publications in a year’s time - and significant ones - to justify a professorship.” (senior)

“I think that will happen by the time I’m 50.” (senior)

In contrast, women doubted their abilities, talked down their publications, viewed the promotion system as unfair, and reported that their gender and family responsibilities inhibited promotion. Men’s higher confidence could be attributed to early socialization but also informal mentoring, more peer acknowledgement of their research, and family circumstances. Having the time to allocate to research and writing was cited by participants as essential for career progression. Two fathers claimed that because they wanted a “balanced life” they were unwilling to work hard enough to reach the highest rank, but this kind of remark was more typical of women. Men were more likely to view the ‘long-hours culture’ as acceptable. However, some detected problems, such as this L/SL man who had been discussing his long working hours. When I asked if he worked all the time, he replied:

“Not all the time, although I’ve had to work hard not to work all the time.”
Are you a workaholic? “I am... I enjoy it, at the same time I find I’m often at loose ends if I’m not working, and that is a problem. It’s a problem in terms of my relationship both to my ex-wife and to my partner.”

Although a few single women labelled themselves as workaholics, most mothers complained about lack of time for research and writing.

Conclusion

This New Zealand study suggests that explanations for the academic gender gap partly fall outside the jurisdiction of institutional reform and into the realm of relationships. Many of these academics live in gendered families that expect women

to shoulder the childcare and household work and favour men's careers, even though men themselves do not always perceive a gender advantage. The amount of research and publishing that academics can do is infinite but more men felt they could devote the requisite hours without shirking their family responsibilities. Fewer men than women also doubted their competence or knowledge of academic practices.

This paper argues that the requirements for academic success still privilege circumstances more typical of men's lives, which partially explains the perpetuation of the academic gender gap. This competitive and entrepreneurial profession continues to reward confident scholars with time to devote to research, opportunities to relocate or bargain for career advances, and peer recognition as experts. Although marriage to a career-oriented woman increases academic men's household workload and reduces research time and relocation opportunities, these marriages may still increase professional networks and social capital.

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