

Mentoring in science: a difficult experiment

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FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
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D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



WOMAN IIP!

Political, business and academic perspectives on women's representation

● A transatlantic gender dialogue ●

Edited by **Judit Tánczos**
FEPS Policy Advisor




Jean Jaurès
Fondation



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MENTORING IN SCIENCE: A DIFFICULT EXPERIMENT

Andrea Pető

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“**T**hree of my most talented female graduate students have not ended up in those academic appointments where they were predestined to be at the beginning of their graduate studies: stars of our profession. My daughter, your colleague and a wife of graduate student, who was much smarter than her husband, still he became a star and she is just a lecturer in a small liberal arts college” said very self-reflectively a legendary senior professor evaluating his long career as a supervisor and promoter. This response was prompted by my question. I used the opportunity of meeting him to discuss one the issues I consider as a great challenge for senior academics: what do you do when you see more academic potential in a graduate student than the graduate herself? How can you stop yourself wanting her to realize her potential when that necessarily means a more difficult life for her? I think I dared to ask this question to him, who is only a couple of years older than my own mother because recently I started to think very critically about mentoring programs. Working as a professor in the more than twenty years I faced several times the dilemma how to make female graduates more ambitious and to armor them with all necessary skills to fight for their deserved (or at least I consider a deserved place for them) in the present structure of academia. In this article I am describing how the mentoring programs were discovered as one of the remedies for the “leaky pipeline” for women in academia and how I see structural problems with these programs but still



a possible solution to avoid disappointment of the senior academics looking back at the end of their academic career on wasted female scientific talents under their supervision.

First I will briefly discuss the phenomenon of the “leaky pipeline” in academia in the European context, then I will map the different European attempts to fight against the phenomenon then I will analyze my mentoring experience in a German mentoring program and then I conclude with suggesting some points for consideration for future mentoring programs.

● Explaining the “leaky pipeline”: Towards a kind of European unification?

The fact that academia is very slowly admitting and it is only partly integrating female academics is one of the well-known results of recent research on women's presence in academia. The report of the ENWISE group in 2003 described this phenomenon under two important headings: wasted talents and private issue to public.⁵⁶ The first argument of this report is an economic one: European countries cannot afford wasting the female talent (meaning the investment in educating female university students) in our competitive global world. It also assumes that there is another issue than objective evaluation of professional performance which influences one's career in academia. The second argument of the report is structural: namely how this disappointment of the senior male academic regarding the academic career of three former female students from the generation of her daughter is **not a private issue but a public one**. His explanation regarding the phenomenon of their “non-performance” in the present institutional framework, namely “It is surely gendered” requires a more detailed discussion.

Reports about women in academia are usually framed in a way to pinpoint the low percentage of women in men's world of academia. Academia is an activity in the public sphere, which has been originally “men-only” space. However we need to understand the origins of this present situation which also caught the attention of EU level decision makers and how it has been evolved differently on both sides of the Iron Curtain but shows a surprising similarity after 1989.

Women have been slowly admitted in academia as a result of the statist feminist emancipation policy of the communist countries after the Iron Curtain has divided Europe. The leadership made a point of having enough women in academia but of course the glass wall and glass ceiling walled women in different positions and sites of doing research. The relatively high percentages of women in academia in the so called Eastern Europe quickly evaporated with the trembling down of the Berlin Wall and victorious occupation of research by neoliberal rhetoric of efficiency and productivity together with the collapse of child support system. The legacy of the statist feminist emancipation policy actually made any contemporary attempts of top down policy attempts

56 *Waste of talents: turning private struggles into a public issue. Women and Science in the Enwise countries*, DG Research, Brussels, 2003, at http://ec.europa.eu/research/science-society/document_library/pdf_06/enwise-report_en.pdf

to secure place for more women in academia not only as a legacy of the discredited communist regime but also as an attack on “excellence” which allegedly has nothing to do with gender.

In the Western part of the Iron curtain however the path was different. The movements of 1968 have changed the way how women were looked at in the science. Or has it been really changed? Caroline Walker Binum, who made her career as a member of the generation of 68 in the US published an remarkable article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* where she analyzed how academia has been opened up for some women based on her own experience. “For all the heady possibility of the 60s, academic leaders were male; the anger that spurred the idealism and the rebellion was male anger; the danger of being killed or killing in Vietnam was a male danger. And because women were on the sidelines of this predominantly male drama, a conflict of fathers and sons, our 60s and 70s were different from theirs.” writes Caroline Walker Binum and she continues: “I want to point out exactly what broke in academe in the years between 1968 and 1972—and how that rupture allowed the margins, the unperceived, the absent to move to the center. I want to suggest that what broke in the late 60s was what I call male “filiation,” the long chains of academic fathers and sons that had forged academic careers during the whole of the earlier 20th century...

But it was the anger of fathers at their rejection by “academic sons” that produced a gap into which women could move. Women in the university had never been considered “academic daughters.” So they presented no threat of rejection to the fathers. Their repudiation of older values was as unperceived by the generation in power as they were themselves. And, never having been academic daughters, they expected little, were more or less unruffled by the fathers’ anger, as they had been earlier more or less oblivious to the sexism that made only men heirs... Women, who had never been in the club, didn’t notice much when it disappeared. Sometimes quietly, sometimes aggressively, they began to fill some of the few places that were available.”⁵⁷

I would like to challenge Walker Binum on the issue of women not ever being in the club therefore transition was going on smoothly for them from not being admitted to academia to being a tenured professor. As I pointed out this change has happened very recently and rapidly in both sides of the Iron curtain because of different reasons. We (meaning the academic community) have not sorted out how to deal with the emotional and psychological consequences of this change of the past fifty (!) years. The opening quote of this article from the senior male professor actually underlines the existence of an equally strong relationship to father-son bonding and that is father-daughter connection. The powerful and successful senior male professor is being disappointed that his “academic daughters” have not fulfilled *his* dream, namely they have never become “academic sons” or so called “stars” of their profession. They “only” became happy academics with more than one child and with successful husbands. **Is this really a personal issue or it has wider structural and emotional explanations?**

57 C. Walker Binum, *Gender, Generations, and Faculty Conflict Will Academe's Mothers and Daughters Repeat the Errors of its Fathers and Sons?*[in:] *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19 November, 2012.



● European structural responses

The fact that female scientists are not fulfilling their potentials has also caught the attention of the European decision makers. In the European universities 60% of the graduates are women but as far as research positions are concerned women are very far away from the target which was set by the *Horizon 2020 Framework Program for Research and Innovation*: namely parity. How to deal with this „leaky pipeline” in the European level? In 2001 the Commission published a preliminary report on the matter, the *ETAN Report Promoting Excellence through Mainstreaming Gender Equality* that, for the first time, provided a global view of the position of women in science in Europe. That was followed by the ENWISE report in 2003 and *Gender and Research Beyond* by the Helsinki Group in 2009. Gender is a priority issue in the Commission Communication adopted in 2012 on European Research Area entitled *A Reinforced European Research Area Partnership for Excellence and Growth*. The League of European Research Universities has issued a *Report on Women, Research and Universities* in 2012 also with recommendations addressed to various sets of actors and a selection of best practice from among its institutional membership. **The recommendations on the one hand demand top down involvement in monitoring hiring and publication activity on the other hand recommend mentoring programs for young women scientists.**

● Mentoring experience: Helping only the selected few?

The recent booming of mentoring programs all over in Europe as magic weapon to change women’s underrepresentation in academia is one of those structural means changing the present trend. The European Women’s Lobby has recently started a political mentoring program for the upcoming 2014 EP elections.⁵⁸ **It is definitely easier to set up a mentoring program for the already selected few promising female scientists than to combat other structural factors of discrimination.** Therefore these mentoring programs have been criticized by underlining that these programs ignore the gendered nature of science and the knowledge produced by science and altogether they are doing nothing more than put their trust in the concept of “critical mass”. Namely if there will be more women in academia these women will be able to change “the rule of the game”. Another form of criticism is pointing out that there has been nothing new in mentoring as even the German term: *Doktorvater* (father of the dissertation or doctorate) indicates that professors have always expected to do a kind of mentoring work for their young colleagues. However the picture is more complex. I would like to discuss my mentoring experiences which sharpened my understanding what these programs actually can do for balancing structural gender inequalities in the field of academia.

All these mentoring programs are based on the assumption that advancement in academia is not only dependent on professional excellence but also on a kind of special “craft” which can be learned only through interpersonal communication. This communication shapes the identity of

58 <http://www.womenlobby.org/spip.php?article4391&lang=en>

the young academic as a professional and also as a gendered subject in the academic world. Germany is especially performing low in the field of women's presence in academia. As Ulrike Beisigel, the recently appointed president of University of Gottingen pointed out: "The German system is extremely hierarchical and professors have a lot of power. The professors are predominantly men, and they seek out other men to be their assistants and successors. The men have excellent networking systems, and the unwritten rules of the academic game have been designed by them. It is no surprise, then, that men dominate academic committees, and continue to perpetuate themselves in academia."⁵⁹ This recognition led, among other measure (such as gendering the German Excellence Initiative) to launching the program by Cusanuswerk for promoting women's careers.⁶⁰ Between 2007 and 2009 I worked as a mentor for the first program of this kind launched by the Cusanuswerk.

An open call was inviting PhD students at the beginning of their fellowship and MA students looking for internship to join the program. As a part of the program the successful applicants for this program were offered the chance to meet with their mentors four times in two years and to participate in coaching sessions. The relaxed informal meetings at the weekends opened up space for asking questions from their mentors, "who made it" how one balances family and career in practice, how to deal with unfair criticism or somebody stealing ones ideas in research. It was also possible to raise those questions which are usually not being asked from a senior colleague such as how do you handle a notoriously professionally conservative senior colleague especially if he is also disrespects women (two unfortunate characteristics which usually go together). The questions I received from my mentee and also from others whom I also met there, in an informal setting basically varied from technical details of academic life management know-how to foundational and strategic issues of identity formation as a professional.

The novelty of the program was that we, the mentors have been also mentored. And that is the point I would like to elaborate on how myself, who is intrinsically skeptical to all coaching techniques found the training about leadership style and communication techniques very useful. Role games made me rethink back in time when I was a young researcher and how did I solve back then bad or a good way the problems which looked very personal but by now it is clear they were structural and very public issues. How can use my newly acquired retroactive wisdom and how much responsibility should I take for the life choices my mentee in this program made?

The trainings tailored for mentees were reaching beyond the traditional approach teaching them how to write a successful resume for a job application; however that has been also prioritized. One needs to speak the technical language of academia to be admitted. **But the trainings tried to map those psychological boundaries which we all have in us as a part of our socialization.** I particularly learned a lot from the exercise when we were expected to list our expectations towards our mentees career: in what sense was that list a projection of our hopes and fantasies based on

59 *German university head lauds progress of women scientists*, Interview with Ulrike Beisigel, *Nature*, 10 April, 2011, at <http://www.nature.com/news/2011/110410/full/news.2011.223.html>

60 <http://www.cusanuswerk.de/de/karrierefoerderung/warum-karrierefoerderung-fuer-frauen/>



professional evaluation on her future or that was what the mentee really qualified for.

If I look back to the results of the program of course it is easy to be proud of the achievements of those young women who were selected after a fierce competition for this training program. They were already the best from the best in Germany: determined to make it while acknowledging the present structural hurdles. They were trained how to handle these hurdles not to change them but only with their presence as “women”. No matter that there was no structural change at sight most of them managed to adapt to the existing standards. But still not all of them “made it” according to the mainstream standards. Those who did not made not that much career enhancing decisions (switching from lab work to administration etc.) due to family commitments which proved the old wisdom that balancing career and family is more difficult for women demanding more compromises or the redefinition of what career means and to how to measure it.

● **Conclusions: Replacing emotional expectations with structural change and redefining emotions**

In the conclusions I would like to refer back to the opening quote from the conversation with this distinguished senior male academic. His comments were raising several questions: is the intergenerational dialogue of mentoring necessarily a constitutive part of academic life? Is mentoring by senior female academics a good way of coping with gendered hierarchies and horizon of expectations in academia? Is micro-management of careers (namely mentoring) is a useful tool to fight against structural discrimination at all?

Discrimination is always structural but the space where discrimination actually happens is the individuals' life and it operates through expectations and fantasies. If I *a priori* expect a male professor hostile to my research, it very often this turns to be the case. Therefore changing women's life trajectories in academia should start on two levels. **First, from a top down way to offer means for a structural changes such as special age limit for young researchers (calculating the time spent with child care) or quotas in boards and among peer reviewers.** These structural means even if they happen, which is not the case in most European countries, will not guarantee in itself the success.

Secondly, what is needed is to redefine the father/son, father/daughter relationship in science. I argue this redefinition should not to be only to **switch to** an uncritical mother/daughter relationship but to a **cultivation of a relationship which is not wearing the heavy luggage of interiorized outside expectations but opens up space for new generation of women to decide upon their priorities.** **First of all opening a space to define what is the meaning of a career for them.** “Happiness functions as a displacement of a social wish, and a defense against an imagined future of loss” wrote Sara Ahmed.⁶¹ Maybe teaching in a small liberal arts college with a husband who is a “star” is not a successful (according to the standard of a senior male academic) but definitely a happy way of living somebody's life.

61 S. Ahmed, *Multiculturalisms and the Promise of Happiness*, [in:] *New Formations*, 63, pp. 121-137., 2008, p. 121.