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Discursive self-positioning strategies of Estonian female scientists in terms of academic career and excellence

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SYNOPSIS

The purpose of this study is to analyse the self-positioning strategies of Estonian female scientists in the areas of natural sciences and technology in order to understand how these strategies are influenced by discursive processes of career creation, success and excellence in science. An analysis of 20 in-depth interviews incorporates Laclau's and Mouffe's discourse theory to explore the hegemonies and boundaries in women's positioning strategies. The findings suggest that strategies that women use reflect different coping and resilience mechanisms in overcoming academic and career obstacles rooted in gendered processes in organisations. Gender neutrality, trivialising and superiority strategies reflect the tensions between women's self-positioning and academic excellence, which are framed by gendered symbols of achievements and careers in science. The findings contribute to the discussion of gendered organisations by focusing on the patterns that support the persistence of gender hierarchies and inequalities.

Introduction

The current status of women in science is a mixture of women's available human resources and the backlash of patriarchal social structures. In other words, women who have acquired academic degrees and should have accumulated significant advantages considering their positions in science and should be highly motivated to pursue successful research careers have not accrued resources to the same extent as men.

Searching for explanations for this discrepancy, a great deal of research has been dedicated to female identities and self-assessment in male-dominated science and management sectors. For example, it has been found that women whose careers were impeded by structural obstacles and who worked in male-dominated sectors may have adjusted their ambitions and self-expectations downward (Sonnert & Holton, 1996) Similarly, studies by Liisa Husu on women researchers have indicated that, as gender-determined structural factors are difficult to recognize, women seem to settle voluntarily for positions and spaces that are created for them in organisations and accept these positions as their own. As a result, women's marginal positions appear to be chosen by women, although they are created by the masculine structures in which they act (Husu, 2004). Women do not want to show their otherness but use different strategies of altering or compromising themselves to fit into the masculine culture (Keller, 2001).

The aim of the present study is to analyse what kind of self-positioning strategies Estonian women scientists use when they talk about their careers and how these strategies are related to discursive processes of career creation, success and management issues in academia. Using discourse analysis of interviews with Estonian female scientists, interpretations of career creation practices at work were seen not just as windows of inner experience or state of mind, but as ways of accomplishing social goals (Sools, van Engen, & Baerveldt, 2007), which can be explained in terms of the normative demands, conflicts and paradoxes that occur. These accounts of career creation practices not only produce and reproduce the cultural patterns of gendered workplaces, but also show how women position themselves in relation to these patterns and discuss alternative positions in the academic field. The study is

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based on interviews with 20 Estonian female scientists from different fields of natural and exact sciences.

Since regaining its independence, Estonia has gone through major economic and societal changes for more than twenty years, but gender roles have remained relatively unchanged. This means that traditional patriarchal structures and gender stereotypes are still constantly reproduced in society. In academic institutions, there is female dominance in higher education and in lower positions among academic staff that do not lead to successful careers at higher levels of research. Compared to other European countries, women in Estonia represent 49% of all researchers in universities, which is one of the highest shares in Europe. Looking at different levels of research positions, we can see that Estonia is on the top of women's share in lower level academic positions (57% of grade C and 67% of grade D position holders are women), but is having quite modest place in share of grade A (professors) holders, only 17% of these positions are filled by women. Moreover, the situation has undergone no noticeable change: between 2002 and 2010, women's presence at the grade A level strengthened in all EU countries except for Estonia (She Figures, 2012). Therefore, with a high level of gender segregation and its constant reproduction in science and in society, Estonia can be characterised as a "laboratory society", where changes appear in a unique manner, and studying the positions of its participants can provide valuable insight into the pushes and pulls of these changes.

Women in society and science in Estonia

The existence of successful female scientists in Estonia should come as no surprise, as education is regarded as a feminized field, where women outperform men both quantitatively (percentage of students) and qualitatively (percentage of successful graduates) at all levels of higher education. For instance, according to the 2012 data from Statistics Estonia, 65% of the graduates at the bachelor level, 68% of the graduates from master's degree programmes and 51% of those who defended their doctoral degrees were women. The predominance of women in higher education is explained by the fact that men make their career choices earlier than women. At the same time, the choice between education and work is affected by the fact that many students are forced to work part-time or even full-time while they study in order to make ends meet. Masculine norms demand that men earn money; therefore, men enter the labour market earlier than women and decide not to continue their studies at higher levels. Regarding academic careers, Estonian statistics show that if men decide to enter master's programmes, this indicates that they have decided to pursue academic careers, because most male master's graduates continue to the doctoral level. Women, on the other hand, prefer to postpone their careers by continuing their studies (Rummo-Laes, 2006: 74): master's programmes are more of a 'must' for them, so there is a relatively large proportion of female students at the master's level. This proportion declines significantly at the doctoral level, with almost equal shares of men and women among PhD graduates.

One more reason may lie in a fact that studies in management and entrepreneurship have constantly shown: women are highly motivated to be involved in continuous education and training. Women feel that they have to be better than men to be competitive; this means that good education and high qualifications are highly valued among women. Estonian studies show that high qualifications support women in the labour market and provide a sense of self-esteem that women would otherwise lack (Proos & Pettai, 2001). Men, on the other hand, do not particularly value formal education compared with women, as having high education has not been the primary driver of good incomes and sometimes not even for upward social mobility for men. Studies of mobility during the Estonian transition period (1990–2004) showed that despite the expansion of higher education there was practically no change in the percentage of jobs with the highest qualification requirements. This lack of importance of the role of education is also reflected in studies of perceived social position. Lindemann (2011) has analysed the relationship of social status and education among working people in Estonia. Compared to people with higher education, only those who had primary education gave significantly lower estimations to their social status, and people with vocational and secondary education did not perceive their social position to be lower than those with higher education.

Similar to general tendencies in the labour market, several studies indicate that gender inequality in the sciences is persistent, especially in the natural and physical sciences and in top-level academic positions (Blagojevic et al., 2003; Ergma, 2001; Velbaum, Lõhkivi, & Tina, 2008). Women are not rewarded for investments in human capital. Although they have earned the necessary degrees and started careers after graduation, their presence in executive positions and decision-making bodies is still rare. For example, the highest institution of Estonian science, the Estonian Academy of Sciences, has 66 members, among which only two are women. Liisa Husu has referred to women's under-representation in gate-keeping processes: they cannot control or influence entry or access to the sciences, allocation of resources, information flows, the setting of standards, developments in their fields or the external image of their arenas (Husu, 2002a). This systematic exclusion fundamentally affects women's positions and advancement opportunities in sciences.

Regarding the gender division among academic personnel in Estonia, it can be seen that a relatively large percentage of women among graduates do not reach the top-level positions in sciences. Fig. 1 shows a clear distinction in percentages of men and women in different academic positions. The share of women tend to be higher in positions where the main emphasis is on teaching (teachers, lecturers, assistants with teaching obligations). Women are also present in lower researcher position, but on higher senior researcher and professor level men are forming the majority.

Analysing more closely the gender balance in different Estonian universities, we can find similar tendencies. For instance, according to the 2013 statistics, only a fifth of the professors in the University of Tartu were women, while the situation was reversed in the positions of assistants and teachers: almost 70% of those positions were filled by women (Valge, 2013). The same trend has been clearly noticeable even in the most "masculine" of the universities, the Tallinn University of Technology, where the percentage of female scientists was lowest. Moreover, the picture was quite similar even in the former Tallinn Pedagogical University, which specialised in social sciences and humanities and, consequently,