

0270

Women Early Career Researchers in Schools of Education: a triple "whammy"?

Justine Mercer

Institute of Education, University of Warwick, Warwick, United Kingdom

Background

This study analyses how women early-career researchers (ECRs) at two UK university Schools of Education respond to having manuscripts and funding applications turned down, with a view to rendering such rejection less frequent and less negative. The topic is highly relevant to BERA members since almost all of them will have experienced this kind of rejection first-hand. In the social sciences, rejection rates are around 80% for both peer-reviewed journal articles and research funding bids (Arts and Humanities Research Council 2009; Australian Research Council 2009; Economics and Social Sciences Research Council 2009; Neuman et al. 2008). Yet, the impact of so much rejection on self-efficacy and subsequent behaviour has not been widely studied.

The issue is particularly acute for early-career researchers, who worry about passing probation and/or securing tenure (Hemmings and Hill 2009); for women, who typically publish less than men (Wolfinger et al. 2008); and for education faculty, who typically enter the academy after successful teaching careers and embrace the discipline's traditional commitment to teaching and service at the expense of research and publications (Levine 2007; Santo et al. 2009). Women ECRs in Schools of Education could therefore be said to face a triple "whammy" (or three-barred gate) in relation to research funding and publications.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What degree of rejection (of manuscripts and grant applications) do women early-career researchers in Schools of Education report?
- 2) How do they describe their experiences of rejection?
- 3) What do they do after a submission has been rejected?
- 4) What do they think of the processes currently being used to assess manuscripts and grant applications? What, if any, recommendations for improvement do they make?
- 5) How do they suggest the support offered to ECRs can be improved?

Methods

Data was generated opportunistically by three separate groups of women ECRs at two UK university Schools of Education. A highly-original methodology entitled Collective Memory Work was used. This was developed in the 1980s by a group of German Marxist feminists (Haug et al. 1987) and subsequently taken up by various groups of predominantly Australian academics (Crawford et al. 1992; Gannon 2001; Lapadat 2009; Onyz & Small 2001; Stephenson 2005) two of whom recently conducted a very similar study to this one (Tynan & Garbett 2007).

Collective memory work is "A feminist methodology based on a hermeneutic social constructivist epistemology. The approach grounds theory in collectively recollected experience, is consensual and non-hierarchical, and has an explicit aim of empowering the co-researchers" (Lapadat 2009 p960).

All members of the group are afforded equal status, and ideally data is not only generated collectively but also analyzed and written up collectively.

A three-stage process is suggested. In phase one, each person writes 250 to 500 words in response to a prompt. Conventional topics tend to produce well-rehearsed responses so "the trick is to produce [a trigger that accesses] the more jagged stuff of personal lived experience" (Onyx & Small 2001 p776). The written piece can be about a single memory, or a series of memories. It should be written in the third person, and include as much description as possible, even seemingly trivial or inconsequential details. It must also avoid any interpretation, explanation or cliché. In this study, participants were asked to "Describe how you felt when a funding proposal and/or paper was rejected, and what happened next".

In phase two, the group meets face-to-face and each person reads out their text in turn. Members of the group challenge each other for more details in an effort to identify similarities and differences between the memories, thereby making explicit the "taken-for-granted" meaning of recurring events (Onyx & Small 2001). In phase three, participants are invited to rewrite their memories in light of the group discussion.

The discussions were recorded and transcribed, and then coded in the traditional way, as were all the texts written by the participants.

Frame

The data analysis draws on the two distinct, but interrelated, themes suggested by Tierney and Bensimon's (1996) book, *Community and Socialization in Academe*. The first theme focuses upon the formation and impact of social networks and communities of practice. The empirical data is interrogated in light of the claim that strong cultural leadership is needed to ensure the potential benefits of social networks and communities of practice are realized.

The second theme focuses upon the creation of academic identities (Clegg 2008; Giddens, 2006; Henkel 2005) and the process of socialization (Knight and Trowler 1999). Again, the empirical data is analyzed in relation to the claim that academic identities are in a constant state of flux, and that although some (more experienced?) academics can flex simultaneously between multiple identities (teacher/counsellor/researcher/writer/manager/leader) with relative ease, the majority of ECRs, especially within Schools of Education, cannot. For this latter group, the tension between their "old" highly-successful teaching self and their "new" highly-vulnerable researching/writing self is hard, if not impossible, to bear.

Research findings

The one common theme to emerge was the importance of strong support networks in which participants felt sufficiently comfortable to share their horror stories and their embryonic drafts, and thereby learn from each other and from informal mentors. More surprisingly, participants displayed enormous variation with regard to:

- a) their motivations for joining the academy and/or submitting a particular paper/bid;
- b) their choice of research focus, and the extent to which this had to match their personal values;
- c) their awareness of how prevalent rejection is, and the extent to which they accepted it as an inevitable part of academic life;
- d) the nature of the reviewer feedback, and the extent to which comments were seen as constructive, and consistent across different reviewers.

This paper has significance for educational practice because it maps the diverse motivations, values, prior expectations and subsequent reactions of women ECRs, and then argues that the support

strategies advocated in the literature (writing circles, in-house mentoring, external networking etc.) could be rendered more effective if they took greater account of this diversity.