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“We all feel like worms”: subjective understandings of objective success in the experiences of senior female academics in the UK

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Background

This paper presents the findings from twenty, semi-structured interviews with female professors, from a range of academic disciplines and ethnic backgrounds, all of whom identify themselves as coming from a working class or middle class background. The socially constructed versions of success being produced, contested and/or subverted by senior academic women were elicited and analysed in this research. In terms of social justice issues, to what extent do the ‘hidden injuries of class’ (Sennett and Cobb, 1972) persist across time and within the lives of some of those women who experience objectively ‘successful’ career trajectories?

Research Questions

This paper draws on an in-depth doctoral study that explores the part played by familial, schooling and occupational ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1979) in the construction and deconstruction of achieving ‘success’ in higher education. The larger study examines what is meant by academic ‘success’ through an empirical engagement with this construct. This paper charts and theorises

professional status by highlighting the different characteristics and experiences of career success as reported by twenty senior female academics.

To indicate the different characteristics of success that are signalled in the interview transcripts, this paper concentrates on an interpretation of the profiles of the cohort in terms of six possible scripts which exemplified the working lives of these respondents. These composite scripts suggest possible ways of being an academic. The scripts are: collegiality, individualism, scholarship, educationalism, serendipity and careerism. The paper argues that the respondents draw on multiple, and at times inconsistent scripts to account for dimensions of their career success – i.e. teaching, publishing, administration, researching and winning research funding bids. Some are better placed than others over time to access these scripts.

Methods

This paper draws on a set of twenty, in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews that were conducted over a two-year period with twenty female professors. The sample was theoretically constructed to take account of various aspects of identity; predominantly class background, gender and ethnicity. Factors of subject discipline, type of university (old and new) as well as age were also considered in the sample construction. The approach is qualitative and the data have been subjected to content analysis and critical discourse analysis. Analysis, theorisation and writing have been ongoing and have been fed back into data collection to enable progressive focusing and identification of new themes and issues.

Frame

The analytical framework for this research draws on a range of theoretical insights, notably that of Bourdieu (habitus). In addition, the work also draws on a historiography-policy approach (Gale

2006) as well as insights from feminist theory and social justice concerns (distributive as well as cultural dimensions).

Research findings

The multi dimensional nature of academic posts means that the respondents' interpretations of their careers are complex. Within and across the six scripts, elicited from the 20 respondents' interviews, other circumstantial factors apply. When accounting for their career success, the respondents evoked various, and at times conflicting, combinations of factors including, luck, serendipity, boredom, planning and hard work. What emerged was a complex social justice 'story' where, although representation has taken place at the senior level (the respondents are all professors) nevertheless complex social justice matters of recognition and respect are still cause for concern in some women's' experiences in the academy.