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## Retiring Women: reflections about continuities and discontinuities in women's academic working lives

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### Background

The backdrop to this paper is constructed out of two main areas of enquiry; that is, research into women in higher education and women and age/ageism.

There is a wide-ranging body of research that has documented the experiences of women who work in higher education in the UK (Coffey and Delamont, 2000; Reay, 2000; Luke, 2001; Skelton, 2005). Much of this work demonstrates that women academics tend to be 'socially and psychologically located on the margins of the institution' (Acker and Feuerwerker, 1996, p. 416). This is not that surprising given the unequal gendered patterns that persist more generally beyond the world of higher education. Although the gender gap is closing (Arnot, et al. 1999) there are still disparities between male and female incomes in similar occupational settings. For example, in the UK, women still earn on average seventy-five per cent of what men earn in similar jobs and women are disproportionately located at the lower end of occupations even where these jobs are 'feminised' as with teaching or nursing (Crompton 1997; DTI, 2006). This gender inequality is mirrored in higher education. Although a small number of women do manage to break through the glass ceiling (David and Woodward, 1998; Luke, 2001; Thompson, 2007) women tend to occupy the grass roots positions while men are far more likely than women to become senior managers (Hall, 1996; Shakeshaft, 2006). The intention in this paper( and this symposium) is to highlight the ways in which women in the academy, 'whatever their differences... must all come to terms with gendered expectations about women's work in academe' (Acker and Feuerwerker, 1996, p. 405). Significantly for this paper, some of these gendered expectations relate to age.

When it comes to the issue of age and ageism, everyone becomes older and, if they are lucky, everyone, eventually, becomes old. However, as Featherstone and Wernick (1995, p. 8) have pointed out, 'unlike the other social oppositions, youth and old age... are transitional statuses' and work in a less clear cut way'. What impact does the ageing process have for women in the academy? What are some of the consequences of positioning youth and age as 'social oppositions' for women in education departments? Arber and Ginn (1991) have suggested that some younger women may feel that older women have 'sold them out'. Younger women (and younger men) attempting to 'storm the tower' of Higher Education may well have to settle for part-time work, short-term contracts and insecure futures. Some of the older women in full-time established posts might seem to these younger women and men to be as 'other' as senior males in the academy. Within the category of 'older women in higher education' some may be better positioned than others (Carnell and Lodge, 2009).

This paper will draw on these theoretical resources to critically explore the perceptions and experiences of some older women academics who are retiring/have just retired in terms of social justice, gender matters and age.

### Research Questions

This paper draws on an on-going small-scale illuminative study of the experiences and processes involved in moving out of the paid educational labour market and into retirement. The research questions are concerned with the influence and impact of retirement on the changing identity construction of these workers. They are also concerned with issues to do with identity transformations, power and agency (or not). Specifically, the research explores whether these older education workers perceive that things have got better for women in higher education, and, if so, in

what ways? In what ways are older women themselves still positioned in unequal ways as they move into/beyond retirement?

## **Methods**

So far, this ongoing project has interviewed fifteen retirees (from various education settings). Currently interviews are being undertaken with an additional six higher education women workers who have recently retired/are just about to retire. The research design is based on sets of in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews that are being conducted with different educational workers from different settings over time. The approach is qualitative and the data set has been and will be subjected to critical coding and analysis. Analysis, theorisation and writing have been fed back into data collection to enable progressive focusing and identification of new themes and issues. Currently the focus is with retiring women in HE.

## **Frame**

The analytical framework for this research draws on a range of theoretical insights, notably related to feminist work on age/ageism in educational settings. The work draws on social justice dimensions of cultural forms of respect and recognition and well as exclusion/inclusion.

## **Research findings**

This paper draws on a small sample of experienced women academics as they are coming up to/have just retired from working in higher education. The focus in this paper is two-fold - first with their perceptions of the gains that they believe have been made by women academics over time, that is; the changes and developments that they have seen as well as an account of how they understand their present condition as senior academics/ elders in a highly volatile setting. Second, the paper is also concerned with the sorts of opportunities and changes that these retiring women are offered/not offered and the ways in which they perceive that gender matters continue to shape their life experiences post paid work.