What does not happen

Interrogating a tool for building a gender-sensitive university

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Introduction

Gender equality work in academia is often understood in terms of the enactment of positive actions and policies of making things happen. Gender equality promotion has traditionally focused on achieving gender equality through positive measures, on the one hand, and preventing gender-based discrimination on the other (Fogelberg *et al* 1999). The focus has initially been on women, but since the mid-1990s it has shifted towards changing academic organisations themselves. More recently the emphasis is on the integration of gender into knowledge production (Schiebinger 1999; Caprile *et al* 2012).

Thus, work towards a more gender-sensitive university frequently focuses positively on such issues as scrutinising and changing institutional structures, reviewing recruitment and evaluation systems, clarifying steps in career paths, integrating gender content into educational curricula and introducing gender-sensitive pedagogies, improving gender balance in decision-making, as well as the implementation of anti-discrimination policies. Promoting gender equality in academic careers has often meant implementing various interventions such as career training, capacity building, mentoring and coaching programmes, and structural change interventions that target diverse career obstacles and discriminatory regulations. Meanwhile, academic careers continue to be persistently gendered in Europe and beyond, especially in the professoriate where strong male domination prevails (European Commission 2019). This is despite a significant increase of women in the early phases of academic careers, as well as active gender equality policies adopted in academia in Europe and many parts of the world. Despite these active measures and development of anti-discrimination legislation over several decades to remove gender-related career obstacles, gender inequalities continue to persist in academic careers. The question of why gender equality development is so slow is still valid (Valian 1999).

Moreover, gender equality work is not only about more easily identifiable inequalities, such as the number of women at various levels in the academic hierarchy but also concerns less obvious and less easily addressed processes in academia. How can gender issues and concerns that are subtle and complex be included

in discussions on gender inequalities and into gender-awareness training? It is a much more established process to focus on gender statistics, academic structures, procedures concerning career development and improving a more gender-equal representation in leadership positions and decision-making boards. How then to open up the everyday workings of academic cultures for critical discussion and reflection?

This chapter suggests that one approach towards building a more gender-sensitive university is, paradoxically, by interrogating and focusing systematically not only on what happens but on that which *does not happen*. This involves asking what does *not* happen in women's academic careers, interactions and academic work environments more generally and what impact these non-happenings have on aspirations, careers, the working environment and the processes of knowledge production.

Previous research demonstrates how historical gender discrimination and sexism have not vanished from academic settings even when gender discrimination has been legally outlawed and when gender equality is actively promoted. Rather, sexism, as well as racism, are adopting increasingly subtle and more covert forms (Caplan 1993; Husu 2001, 2005, 2013). These constitute the tangible deeds and actions that people experience as harmful, as documented in the testimonies of #MeToo, the UK Everyday Sexism Project (Bates 2016) and the Swedish *#prataomdet* [#talkaboutit]. These also chronicle what does *not* happen. The outcome can be that *nothing happens* in a career phase, academic arena or forum, or that what is supposed to, or should, happen *does not happen*. To make these phenomena visible they are called *non-events*.

It is necessary to clarify here that the use of *non-event* does not refer to its colloquial use, as when attending a party or celebration with great anticipation and finding it to be a let-down. Use of non-events draws from the meaning of events as occurrences or incidents that are happening in the flow of everyday life and also in organised events. In contrast to non-events in the colloquial sense, where the participant is actively disappointed about the event, the non-events discussed here refer to something that is often not initially apparent, or easily perceived by those involved. In this usage, the event, which then becomes a non-event, can either be an actual organised special occasion, like a conference or workshop, where somebody is not invited. It may also refer to a flow of everyday occurrences, for example, not being included in important informal research networks or collaborations which may become apparent very quickly in some cases, but years later in others. This approach can be seen as complementing rather than conflicting with conventional approaches to gender equality. The latter emphasise formal decision-making, policy and practice interventions and *what happens*, or what should happen. This complementary approach foregrounds informal decision-making, everyday interactions in academic contexts that are rarely regulated by policy or explicit practice and *what does not happen*. When it comes to more subtle forms of sexism, the conventional approaches to gender equality promotion and anti-discrimination policies often fall short. Specifically, many forms of subtle sexism,

including non-events, easily fall out of sight or are difficult to capture in positive actions and anti-discrimination work.

The remainder of the chapter is structured into three sections. The first section discusses the conceptualisation of the phenomenon of non-event from different perspectives: from the ‘creators’, ‘bystanders’ and those affected by them. The second section links non-events to some key earlier theorising. Finally, the non-event approach is offered as an heuristic in furthering the gender-sensitive university.

The phenomenon of non-events

What is meant by non-events? Much of the empirical material used here is from a qualitative study for *Sexism, Support and Survival in Academia* (Husu 2001), conducted in a Finnish context. It was based on semi-structured interviews, as well as several workshops focusing on hidden and subtle forms of discrimination (Husu 2001, 2005) and written accounts by academic women, aged from 29 to 73 years, from 11 universities, at all career stages and from all the main disciplinary fields. It also included a small number of established academics who subsequently left academia. The interviews were conducted mainly in Finnish, transcribed, and analysed thematically. Written accounts captured the experience of gender discrimination. The total number of the informants was 102 (31 interviews; 71 written accounts). The study documented the diverse experiences of discriminatory treatment, acts and episodes that women academics described in interviews and their written accounts. It also drew upon things or actions that had *not* happened to them but they considered relevant or significant in their career development, career aspirations, or for their wellbeing at work. Furthermore, when the informants were asked what or who had supported their academic careers, many started to reflect on the lack of support they had experienced. This can also be seen as a form of non-event. Although this research was published almost 20 years ago, it is worth returning to it. Readers may recognise the subtle processes described and wonder how much it resonates with them, based on experience in their own institutions (Husu 2013). Over the last 20 years, the notion of non-events has been presented and discussed in numerous workshops and seminars, often activating a collective memory on the part of academic women. Through this, many women were able to talk and make narrative sense of earlier, sometimes mystifying, career experiences.

Non-events in academia can take various and sometimes very specific forms: silence, exclusion, being ignored or bypassed, reluctant support, lack of validation, invisibility, not receiving credit or being cited, not being listened to and not being invited along. Women academics *at the receiving end* of such non-events may have liminal consciousness of the process and its existence, barely perceiving what is taking place. They could perceive the non-events only fleetingly when they occur or with hindsight, sometimes many years later, when looking back over their careers. Such non-events are challenging for the women concerned to name,

make sense of and respond to. As single events, they can often appear rather insignificant and not worthy of attention, but it is the impact of their accumulation in academia, over many years, that is of interest.

A female professor in natural sciences in her forties remembered several non-events from her career:

'Oh, my goodness, if I was a young man, I would be accepted in a quite different way, and I would have been pushed forwards. Some old professor would mentor me, would get me grants, take me to the sauna [a traditional Finnish site of both leisure and work-related negotiations, especially for men] and explain to me all the networks and so on . . . but I am outside all that'.

A postdoctoral researcher in a human science field described how she struggled with making sense of something that, as a student, she had expected to happen but did not happen:

'I think I have received just treatment, in official matters, mostly. So, what has been an obstacle has been sort of unofficial. It really was like a revelation to me in adult age, because I am more from an upper class family, always been good in school, among the three best in class, I do not have any visible handicaps, I am quite quick in my speech and have good language skills, so I did not have any kind of social handicaps until adult age. I grew up believing that no one has any reason to presume that I would not be capable of something, because I was rather above the average on all these visible social attributes. But when I came to the university I had a couple of sort of shocks, when I wondered, that what is it . . . what was wrong with me, why couldn't I? And then I realized that oh dear, he [the professor] wants a boy. As if he was waiting until a suitable male student came along. And I realised that my credibility at the university is weakened by the fact that I happen to be a woman, and that was something I had never realised earlier, and I never on the whole realised that something could weaken my credibility socially'.

The same interviewee described the general atmosphere in the department as depressing and distressing and went on to report that she had observed how the success of early career men was lauded while women's success was met by indifference:

'What I somehow cannot take is that those who should enjoy my success, are not doing so. So, I have always got unreasonably hurt and severely depressed, when I realise that the head of department is not terribly happy about some of my achievements. It feels that it is not always considered as relevant'.

If nothing has happened, how can one know or claim to have become a target or experienced a non-event? This is the territory of hypotheticals and counterfactuals.

Women academics in the study could become aware of being potential targets for non-events when comparing their situation with their male peers. A young female scholar, who had not received the support and advice she would have needed to develop her academic career, simultaneously observed how her male peers were willingly advised and supported by their colleagues. A female professor was not invited or welcomed to a social event of the inner circle of her discipline but observed that her male colleagues were. 'Forgetting' or delaying the writing of recommendations, reviews and evaluations was another manifestation of non-events. A young interviewee in the human sciences related how she had asked her supervisor, a male professor, to write a recommendation to support her funding application. Although she had approached him weeks before the submission deadline, she found out, on the very day of the deadline, that he had 'forgotten' to write the recommendation. She also found out that, on the same submission round, the professor had remembered to write recommendations for his male protégés in accordance with the deadline (Husu 2001, 2005).

One persistent non-event practice, contributing to invisibility in the academic arena, is to 'forget' to invite women as keynote or panel speakers for conferences and seminars, unless specifically reminded, usually by female scholars. Ignoring gender perspectives in organising mainstream lecture series, conferences or seminars is another form of professional disrespect. This phenomenon has been recently tackled with humour by the Finnish political scientist, Sara Särnä, who in 2015 initiated the widely acclaimed website *Congrats, you have an all-male panel*. The website pools women's experience from academia and other domains, with photos <https://allmalepanels.tumblr.com/> (see also Valian 2013 on all-male panels). This is an example of how social media platforms, established by women, can be used effectively to highlight and question sexism in different arenas.

Another example is the practice of including some women but granting more space and visibility to men. One informant, from a traditionally male-dominated human science discipline, described a research seminar organised by her discipline and university, in co-operation with a non-EU university. The programme was put together by a male professor from that university and the seminar took place in his home country. The informant observed how each female speaker in the seminar was given a half-hour of speaking time, whereas all male speakers were given an hour each. This led to some understandably critical discussion.

When interviewing academic women about the availability and sources of career support, their personal experiences of *not* receiving support were emphasised by several informants. Among these participants were some women who had left academia, some who were in the mid-career and women who were successful in attaining professorial chairs. An interviewee in natural sciences who had been highly motivated for an academic career, but later left for a successful career outside academia recalled:

'First when I read some reports on women and science, only then I started to think that really, it really is possible that you could get some support in your

job from professors and others. And when I thought about it further, it seemed pretty normal that this should be the case. But somehow, all the time I was in the university, it was somehow so out of the question that I really did not have the faintest idea that you could get that kind of support – but only afterwards’.

The lack of professional support from mentors and female role models is significant for female academic career progression (Sonnert and Holton 1995) and can be defined within the non-event framework. A postdoctoral interviewee in her thirties, from a field in the human sciences, with a majority of female students but very few female professors, identified this lack of support as an issue. Asked whether men and women were treated similarly in the university, she said:

‘Hmm . . . we all think that we are treated similarly and on paper it can be made to look like that . . . I think the most important thing is . . . sort of . . . if you lack identification objects [role models], and the few women there are, they do not genuinely promote your development’.

An interviewee who, in her school years, had dreamed of becoming a scholar had exited, despite two academic degrees with the highest grades, to make a successful career outside academia. Reflecting upon how she was treated whilst working as an assistant professor, she stated:

‘I don’t know, I have presumably very little experience directly of discrimination, but let’s say [what was an obstacle] that kind of general lack of support, that is lack of all kind of support. So, I got an impression that if I went on there [at the department], I would probably be very lonely later’.

Not only do non-events impede women’s early careers, they may also affect women in higher academic posts. Among the interviewees, several senior academic women in full professor or equivalent posts described attempts to subtly exclude them. For example, despite their formal high status, they were side-lined from departmental or organisational decision-making. Some senior academic women reported how their male colleagues did not bother to read or comment on their work; did not discuss with them or tell them about their own work; or their male colleagues rarely initiated collaborative research. In some cases, informants reported how female administrative staff willingly provided clerical assistance to male professors, whereas women professors were expected to handle these tasks themselves (see Chapter 4). These behaviours reported by senior women echoed the results from the MIT study on the status of women faculty, where senior women reported that they felt invisible, excluded from having a voice in their departments and from positions of any real power (MIT 1999).

Non-events also accumulate over time in academic environments so that they construct and shape both the informal and formal division of labour of specific academic settings in more persistent ways. For example, several informants,

especially in highly male-dominated disciplines, had experienced a tendency on the part of male academics to try to use their female colleagues as ‘agony aunts’. Women were expected to listen to the personal worries of their male colleagues, for example, about their marital or relationship problems, but the same women were then not invited, or made welcome, by their male colleagues to participate in informal professional discussions. More formally, in a study of ‘doing gender’ in a Finnish political science department, women doctoral students volunteered that they were not offered teaching assignments, considered meritorious for future career development in that male-dominated discipline, whereas their male counterparts were. These women doctoral students were not even aware that they could get such assignments (Kantola 2008). Non-events may appear fleeting, even insignificant, unknown and un-reflected upon, until many years later. Collectively they contribute quietly and invisibly to the background of so-called normal academic life.

Non-events as ‘doing gender’, homosociability and non-decision-making

Non-events can be seen as one way of ‘doing gender’ in academic organisations (West and Zimmerman 1987). Doing gender often takes place through overtly gendered actions but may also occur when people in certain key positions do not do certain important things and leave something undone, unacknowledged or excluded. Consciousness of this kind of ‘not doing’ is often only liminal, vague and difficult to quantify, as is often the case when doing gender (Yancey 2003). These actions contribute to persistent gendering in academic organisations, through gendering of academic careers, academic identities and academic culture and they demonstrate the slow pace of change towards a more the gender-sensitive university.

Non-events can also stem from or be related to non-decision-making processes (Bachrach and Baratz 1963; Lukes 1974). Non-decision-making can contribute or facilitate non-events. For example, sexual harassment before the #MeToo debate was an issue on which managerial avoidance and non-decision-making in academia was rather common even in the Nordic countries. This was evidenced, for example, by the Swedish academic collection of #MeToo testimonies: #akademiuppror (see, for example, Salmonsson 2019). One such case, from a large Finnish university, concerned the sexual harassment behaviour of a senior male professor. Senior women scholars brought it to the attention of the highest university leaders. Yet no formal decision on intervention followed and the issue was buried in the vice-chancellor’s private correspondence files, not recorded in the university’s formal records and no action followed from within the university (Husu 2001, 253–260).

Many non-events are linked to homosocial behaviour of academic men that may appear to them as a normal or ‘natural’, non-intentional bypassing of or ignoring women. One way of understanding academic women’s experiences of relative invisibility, lack of support or encouragement, feelings of exclusion from informal

professional networks or communication is to see them as excluded by practices related to male bonding and male homosocial behaviour. Lipman-Blumen defined 'homosocial' as:

'seeking, enjoyment and/or preference for the company of the same sex' and as the basic premise of her homosocial view of sex roles, suggested that 'men are attracted to, stimulated by, and interested in other men'.

(1976, 16)

The terms homosexual reproduction, homosocial behaviour, (male) homosociability, homosocial desire have all been used to refer to the phenomenon of male bonding in organisations (Hearn 1992; Roper 1996; Hammarén and Johansson 2014; and Chapter 8 of this book). Although homosocial behaviour has been discussed predominantly in organisational and management contexts, it appears to be a highly relevant conceptual framework for understanding the persistence of the gender order in academia. This concerns men's preference for other men in recruitment: universities are mainly led by men and there is continuing heavy male dominance in professorial appointments, as evidenced, for example, by European Commission (2019) *SHE figures 2018* and Chapter 3 of this book. Furthermore, men's preference for men in professional interaction, for example, excluding women from informal discipline or thematic networks or 'forgetting' to invite them, can be understood in homosocial terms.

Non-events also relate to women's relative invisibility or a 'visibility paradox' that women frequently encounter in academia, particularly in male-dominated fields such as engineering (Faulkner 2009; Van den Brink and Stobbe 2009). On the one hand, for male colleagues, women academics may be highly visible as women with male behaviours on a continuum of: women being complimented on their looks and clothes in academic and professional settings, to getting sexist comments or being targets of sexual harassment. On the other hand, academic women may remain relatively invisible to their male colleagues and managers as academic colleagues and peers: another form of non-event.

Non-events as a heuristic concept in gender training and research

From talks or workshops about sexism in academia conducted over two decades in the Nordic region, Europe and beyond, it is noticeable that women academics, from very different fields and different countries, readily grasp the concept of the non-event. It often acts as a trigger to remember, reflect and make sense of many less obvious gendered events in their own careers. Women start to remember and assess various seemingly 'small' unpleasant and ambiguous experiences in a new light. The concept of non-events can help to make sense of something that may have been difficult to pin down, name or articulate clearly but which had

a negative, discouraging or damaging impact, both personally and professionally. Similar dynamics can be observed in the #MeToo movement, relating to the experience of sexual harassment and violence.

The concept of non-events can be used as an ‘eye-opener’ in the provision of gender equality training for management; career training; training for doctoral supervision; research leader training; and in general awareness-raising activities. Episodes of non-events can be developed into vignettes or case studies for use in gender training. Equally, participants’ own experience and personal narratives can be used powerfully to ‘break silence’ about these pervasive acts and processes. Collective memory work is a fruitful way to highlight the issue of non-events in academic careers, through training, education and in research (Haug 1987; Widerberg 1998; Jansson *et al* 2008; Livholts and Tamboukou 2015).

Conclusion

Foregrounding non-events complements and deepens our understanding of the subtle dynamics of gendered academic institutions. Non-events impact on how gendered academic identities, academic careers, gendered academic cultures, gendered academic organisations and gendered knowledge production are constructed in the daily interactions in academic life. This occurs despite the norms, regulations and policies underlining equal treatment and gender equality. Non-events can be observed and understood from different perspectives: individual careers, disciplinary or departmental cultures and institution-wide. Even though many non-events may seem like minor, fleeting or one-off incidents, they are most often part of longer-term patterns and processes. What makes non-events challenging to respond to and deal with is that those who experience them may have only liminal consciousness of their existence. They may even perceive them only in hindsight. Finally, a non-event framework could be applied from an intersectional perspective, drawing, for example, from the dynamics of everyday racism and gendered ageism. Non-events can also be a methodological tool used for analysing and challenging inequalities more generally.

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