THE PERIL OF POTENTIAL

GENDER PRACTICES IN THE RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION OF EARLY-CAREER RESEARCHERS

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In the assessment of potential, we find multiple gender practices of which some practices can be beneficial but the majority can be detrimental for women researchers.
INTRODUCTION

- **Most studies look at senior positions** (e.g., Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012): why early-career researchers?
  - **Increase in precarious employment** (Armano & Murgia, 2013; Arnold & Bongiovi, 2013): Temporary positions, e.g., assistant professorships.
  - Strong competition for scarce jobs (Nikunen, 2014).

- Recruitment and selection practices important for access to jobs.

- How does gender play a role in the inclusion in or exclusion from an academic career?
GENDER PRACTICES

- **Gender practices**: “the intentional or unintentional and often unreflexive way of distinguishing between women and men, femininity and masculinity” in daily work situations (Van den Brink, 2010, p. 24).

- Gender as a social construction (Dick & Nadin, 2006; Poggio, 2006), practiced in interaction (Martin, 2003).

- Selection criteria and their meaning are socially constructed in ways that mirror the interests of a particular group, which can produce inequalities for other groups (Dick & Nadin, 2006).
HOW IS GENDER PRACTICED IN THE RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION OF ASSISTANT PROFESSORS?
RESEARCH METHOD

- EU FP7 GARCIA project: six European universities, STEM and SSH.
- Qualitative study.

Data collection
- 12 national research reports on 1) formal and applied criteria, and 2) gender practices.
- Semi-structured interviews (47) and focus groups with selection committee members (35) (27 women, 55 men).
- Documents: job postings, HR policy documents and recruitment policies, appointment reports.

Data analysis
- Thematic coding (Flick, 2009).
- Discursive construction of criteria.
RESULTS: RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

- A selection committee is composed.
- Job posting advertised.
- First shift based on CV (and reference letters).
- Job interviews with a small number of applicants.
- Ranking of candidates.
- Appointment.
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A. WELCOMING WOMEN
A. WELCOMING WOMEN

BALANCE IN NUMBERS

- More equal representation of men and women
  - 1: Women expected to positively influence the working environment.
  - Facilitates the communication and collaboration in a group.
  - 2: Role model argument.
B. ASSESSING POTENTIAL FOR EXCELLENCE
FORMAL SELECTION CRITERIA

- Junior level, limited track record.
- Publications as “indication of what the researchers are capable of doing in the future” (Belgium, STEM, M).
- Potential assessment.
But the aim is to just select the best scientist of that generation of which the selection committee thinks has the best potential to grow into a really good scientist. But that is really difficult to judge. So that is a very subjective process. That is absolutely clear. That is really absolutely very much constituted with all kinds of judgements, prejudices.

(Netherlands, STEM, M)
So what happens if the formal track record on which committee members assess potential is only limited?
Tacit Selection Criteria - Survival in the Competitive Academic World

- **1 Confidence:** Women perceived as modest, non-confident, and non-competitive.

- vs academia constructed as competitive.

- Respondents construct women as less suitable to deal with the competition.
TACIT SELECTION CRITERIA - SURVIVAL IN THE COMPETITIVE ACADEMIC WORLD

- 2 Commitment: women seen as lacking commitment to the profession.

- Excellence = expectations of fulltime availability, devotion to the job, and long hours.
Generally speaking, the guys, they’re ready for... I mean, you sense immediately that they’re ready to work 20 hours a day, to scrub the floor, if you ask them to. [...] Usually, the women, they’re more careful, reserved. (Switzerland, SSH, M)
Tacit selection criteria - survival in the competitive academic world

- 2 Commitment: women seen as lacking commitment to the profession.

- Excellence = expectations of fulltime availability, devotion to the job, and long hours.

- Equal women with mothers.
- **Motherhood** constructed as incompatible with a successful academic career.
- Problematize parenthood for mothers but not for fathers.
3 International mobility

Young researchers expected to go abroad, BUT informal criterion.

International = excellence.

Respondents assume that parenthood will create difficulties for women (only).
Tacit selection criteria - survival in the competitive academic world

- 4 Academic citizenship: competitiveness should not carry too far.
- Team player, academic citizen.
- Excellence and teamwork constructed as two opposite characteristics.
- Collaboration often ascribed to women candidates.

B. Assessing potential for excellence
Outside of here I know a lot of people, men, who, when you ask them to collaborate, reply: “No, I don’t collaborate, I compete.” I’ve never heard a woman say that.

(Switzerland, STEM, M)
DISCUSSION

Three discrepancies

- **1 Reflexively** welcome women - **unreflexively** construct women as incompetent for ‘survival’.
  - The ideal early-career researcher fits men and masculinity more.

- **2 Excellence vs academic citizenship.**

- **3 Welcoming** women stance but ostensible **unwillingness to change.**
  - Treat selection criteria as if they were etched in stone.
  - Do not see their own role / responsibility.
CONCLUSION

- A few gender practices can be beneficial for women academics.
- **Reproduce feminine characteristics** as innate or essential (Crompton and Lyonette, 2005).
- Women candidates suffer from perceptions held by committee members.
- Question whether these ‘beneficial’ practices are strong enough to drive change.
- **Detrimental** practices more pervasive.
In the assessment of potential, we find multiple gender practices of which some practices can be beneficial but the majority can be detrimental for women researchers.
THANK YOU - DANKE

FULL PAPER AVAILABLE IN 2018:
A. MURGIA & B. POGGIO (EDS.), THE PRECARISATION OF RESEARCH CAREERS: A COMPARATIVE GENDER ANALYSIS. ROUTLEDGE.

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