

CONCEPT MAP-MEDIATED INTERVIEW METHODOLOGY: EXPLORING GENDER IN ACADEMIC CAREERS

Camille B. Kandiko Howson, King's College London, UK
Email: camille.kandiko_howson@kcl.ac.uk

Abstract. Why do women succeed in higher education—but only to a certain point? This paper develops earlier research on the role that prestige plays in academic careers, and aims to explore the extent to which prestige is a gendered concept in academia. Drawing on 30 semi-structured concept map-mediated interviews this project explored the gendered nature of the prestige economy in academia and subsequently how mid-career academic women strategise their career development, and what barriers they perceive. Concept maps were used to facilitate interviewees career planning, facilitate dialogue and provide an artefact from the interviewee's own perspective. In terms of prestige, women generally feel that men access 'indicators of esteem' more easily. Many women also had ambivalent feelings about gaining recognition through prestige: they understood the importance of status and knew the 'rules of the game', but were critical of these rules and reluctant to pursue prestige.

1 Background

Several decades of research have demonstrated that women continue to be under-represented in senior positions in higher education (Morley 2014; Dean et al 2009; White et al 2011; Doherty & Manfredi 2006). Eighty per cent of professors in the UK are men, whereas the only academic category where women are in the majority is part-time non-managerial roles (Equality Challenge Unit, 2013). Despite this, higher education institutions can often be "complacent about what has been achieved for staff and hence, to think that 'gender' is solved by having a majority of female undergraduates and a few female professors" (Deem, 2014; see also David, 2014; Leathwood and Reid, 2009).

While there are signs of improvement in some areas, others remain static or are worsening. For example, there is concern that the proportion of women at Vice-Chancellor level is on the decline (Bebbington 2012), while this year only two of the forty-three mid-career scientists awarded Royal Society University Research Fellowships were women (Royal Society 2015). These gender imbalances are compounded by wider forms of inequality and representation on the basis of 'race', socio-economic status, nationality, ethnic group, disability, religion, and geographic region (Banks 2002). The Equality Challenge Unit (2013) highlights the stark statistic that only 2.8% of Black and Ethnic Minority female academics are professors, in comparison to the 15.9% of white male academics who are professors (see also David 2014).

2 Academic Prestige as a Gendered Concept

Previous research on motivation on motivation has highlighted the role of prestige in hiring and promotion decisions (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). We use the term 'prestige economy' (English, 2005) to describe the collection of beliefs, values and behaviours that characterise and express what a group of people prizes highly. Evidence collected on publication rates, first author status and workload balance indicates that academic women find it harder to access the types of 'currency' that advance their career; we therefore consider prestige to be a gendered concept (Coate & Kandiko Howson, 2014). We are interested in how women perceive academic indicators of esteem and how they strategise their careers accordingly. We are also interested in the apparent individualisation of academic careers, and how this affects and is affected by gender inequalities.

This research examines the career strategies of academic women who self-identify as being at a mid-career stage. The research aims to share the strategies that women have found useful in developing their careers, while also arguing for institutional change. While focusing primarily on gender, it draws on feminist theories of intersectionality to consider multiple forms of identity (Crenshaw, 1991; Berger and Guidroz 2009; Jones 2009). This conceptualisation reflects a perspective of universities as highly complex sites where multiple and intersecting spheres of 'difference', including culture, ethnicity, gender, disability, socio-economic status and language interact.

3 Research Methods

This research is based on qualitative research methods designed to explore mid-career academic women's plans, aspirations and experiences. We interviewed thirty academic women from a variety of institutions who self-

identified as being at the 'mid-career' stage. In this section, we outline our target group and our sample, and explain our approach to interviewing and analysis.

3.1 *Mid-career focus*

In considering women's academic careers and gender imbalances, research has tended to focus on academic women who are early-career researchers (e.g. Cole & Gunter, 2010) or those who are in senior and leadership positions (e.g. Fitzgerald, 2014; Hoskins, 2012; Dean et al, 2009; Doherty & Manfredi 2006). Valuable as this research is, it is also important to explore the experiences and perspectives of women who see themselves as being mid-career, particularly as this stage probably encompasses the longest period of most women's working lives. It may often be at the mid-career stage that women are thinking about promotion and leadership, or that they feel de-motivated, blocked or 'stuck'. As professional women tend to have children at an increasingly later stage, mid-career is also when academic women are most likely to consider having children. For all of these reasons, mid-career women are in a particularly challenging and interesting position in terms of their career plans and aspirations.

We recognise that the concept of mid-career is open to interpretation, and may feel different for individuals depending on their discipline, institution, confidence levels and other factors. For this reason, we invited women who *self-defined* as being mid-career to volunteer for this study. As part of the interviews we asked women what mid-career meant to them, and we discuss the 'neglected mid-career stage' later in the report. The majority of women who volunteered to take part in our study, self-defining as mid-career, were employed as lecturers, senior lecturers, senior research fellows and readers. That a handful of women professors, PhD students and post-doctoral researchers also volunteered to take part perhaps demonstrates the breadth of the term 'mid-career'.

3.2 *Recruitment and selection*

We recruited thirty women to take part in concept-map mediated interviews (see below). Aiming to speak to mid-career academic women from a diverse range of institutions and disciplines, we sent a recruitment email to a variety of institutional and discipline-specific mailing lists. We invited anyone who self-defined as a mid-career academic woman, working in a London university, to take part. We had positive responses from sixty women, of whom we selected thirty on a semi-random basis to maximise the diversity of institutions, disciplines and mid-career job roles. The thirty women we eventually interviewed were from nine different London institutions, and held a variety of job roles (lecturer, senior lecturer, reader, research associate, senior research fellow, senior investigator and interim school director). Participants were from at least seventeen different disciplines, with natural sciences represented more heavily than social sciences, arts and humanities. While some of the research participants were from Minority Ethnic backgrounds, most were white, and further research would be needed to explore Black and Minority Ethnic academic women's career experiences in more detail. The table in appendix 1 shows the participants' disciplines, job role, nationality and ethnicity.

While we recognise that interviewing thirty women can give only indicative results, and may be particularly limited in terms of making conclusions in relation to sub-groups (such as women in certain disciplines or from particular cultural backgrounds), the detail of the interviews and analysis nevertheless contribute to an valuable understanding of mid-career academic women's careers and decision making.

3.3 *Data collection*

We collected data through concept-map mediated interviews (Kandiko & Kinchin 2012; 2013). These were qualitative interviews that began with a request to participants to map out where they would like to see their career in five to ten years' time. Concept maps are a method of graphic organisation that can illustrate networks and links between themes. In practice, women drew a variety of visual representations of their future careers, some of which are included in this report. We then asked women to explain their maps, highlighting what would help them to achieve their aspirations, share any good practices they had experienced, and discuss any barriers they perceived. We also asked participants about what was valued in academic life, whether (and how) women communicate their successes, and whether (and how) gender and other social identities play a role. We finished each interview with a discussion of what being mid-career meant to the participants. We carried out thirty concept-map mediated interviews of around one hour each in October and November 2014. Interviews were audio recorded with the interviewees' permission, and recordings were transcribed.

3.4 Ethics

The recruitment email emphasised that women's responses would be kept confidential, and that interview excerpts would be anonymised in any publication or report by removing names, institutional affiliation, and other identifying details. All research participants' names in the report are pseudonyms. Participants were sent an information sheet in advance and were asked to sign a consent form, consenting to the recording of the interview and the storage of data. They were informed that they could choose to withdraw from the research up to the end of 2014. The project received institutional ethical approval from King's College London (reference REP/13/14-61).

3.5 Analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out, drawing on both the academic women's concept maps and the transcripts of their interviews. Analytical codes were initially developed after interviewing was completed. The research team drew on participants' concept maps to create our own analytical concept map, which identified emergent themes and tentatively linked some of these themes together. Interview transcripts were then coded using Nvivo qualitative analysis software, with new codes being added as necessary. While coding each interview transcript, each interviewee's concept map was consulted together with their transcript. Codes and analytical decisions were discussed iteratively amongst the three members of the research team.

4 Career Planning Findings

We asked women to draw a concept map or diagram of where they hoped to see their career in five to ten years' time. These concept maps represented a large variation in approaches to career planning. Some of the maps were detailed and clear, showing specific, measurable and timed objectives that led logically towards short, medium and long term goals. These women knew where they were going, and knew what they needed to do to get there. They represented themselves as assured planners with clear and often ambitious career paths, and felt that active career planning was a vital part of taking control of their lives:

The question is: do you go for the really professor route where you're staying research active or do you go down the management route? And I think that is the decision that gets made at this stage. And I guess I'm really keen that I make it, rather than it just kind of happening by default. (Fiona)

4.1 Strategy

The concept maps drawn by our interviewees gave clear and contrasting representations of their career plans. Wendy's concept map (below) shows her clear intention and hope to become a senior lecturer, then a professor, and eventually taking on strategic and managerial roles. She has mapped out how she will get there (via personal fellowships and a 'crucial period' building an international reputation) and the form as well as content of her concept map shows clear upwards progression.

Even for the most committed planners, however, five to ten year plans could never be entirely predictable. They depended on a number of factors, including publishing, job opportunities in other institutions, colleagues, grant income and family. Bernadette's concept map (below) is similar to Wendy's in that it shows an intention to become a senior lecturer and then professor, via a clear route of publishing and grants; however, its form and content are less assured, more circular and reflective.

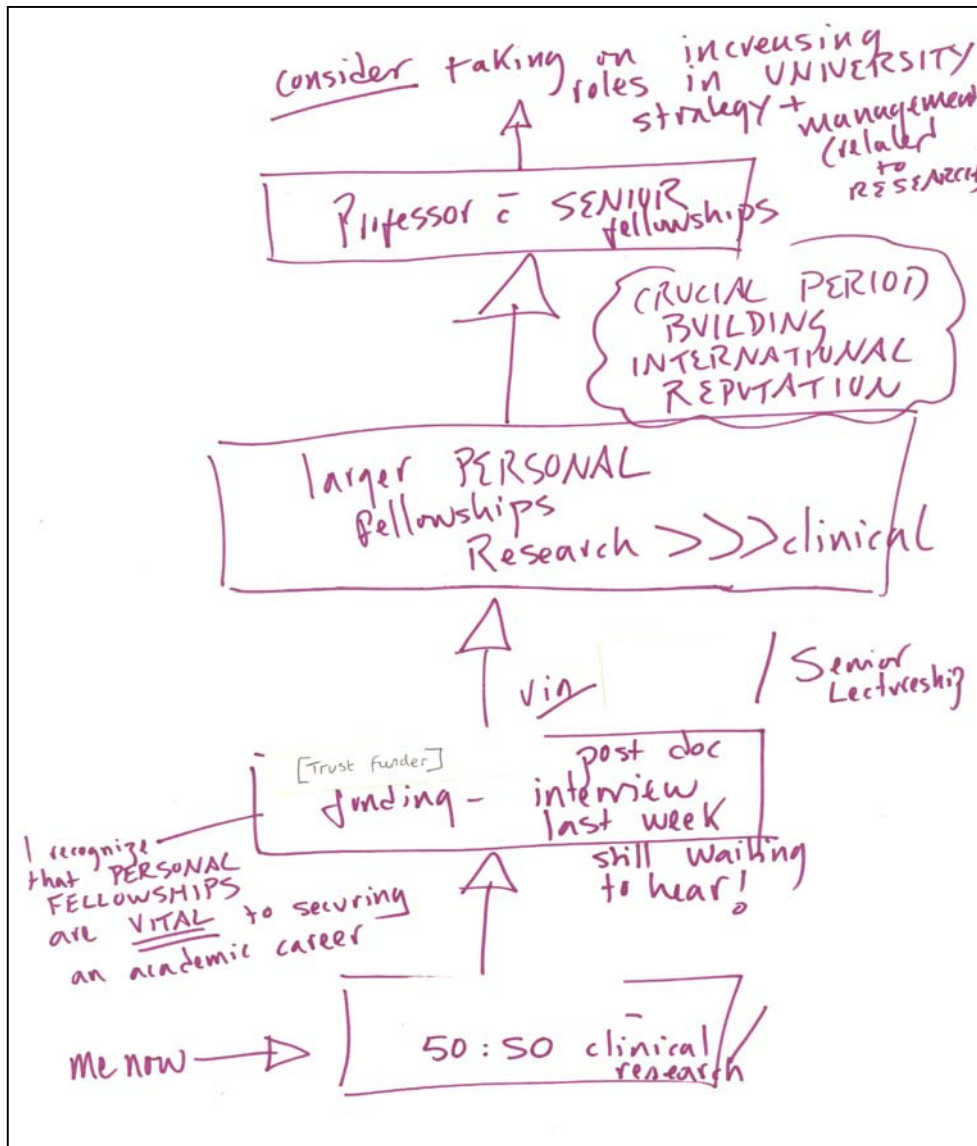


Figure 1. Wendy concept map

So, in five years' time, I want to be senior lecturer or reader... I want to publish my second monograph, I'm writing the book proposal for that now. That's to do with my second independent research project, big research project, after the PhD so that will feel nice. Big news is I'm pregnant... I hope that all of this is going to work out, childcare and career and so on... I'm finding it difficult to know where I'll be in ten years' time, it depends on so many things, such as job opportunities at other universities. Sometimes it's easier to get promoted if you just change institution a lot of the time; whether I'd have more children, whether I get more research grants. And long term career goal is definitely the professorship. (Bernadette)

Bernadette's map and discussion seem to signal some discomfort around the notion of being a good career planner. Some of the women who had clear career goals and pathways seemed almost to apologise for, or downplay, their careful planning:

I deliberately collaborated with people abroad and published papers with overseas collaborators to show international reputation and collaboration. I deliberately went for a large lecture course to the core of the students... I suppose it was strategic. Well, not that much, you know... it's rushing to juggle everything, really. (Beth)

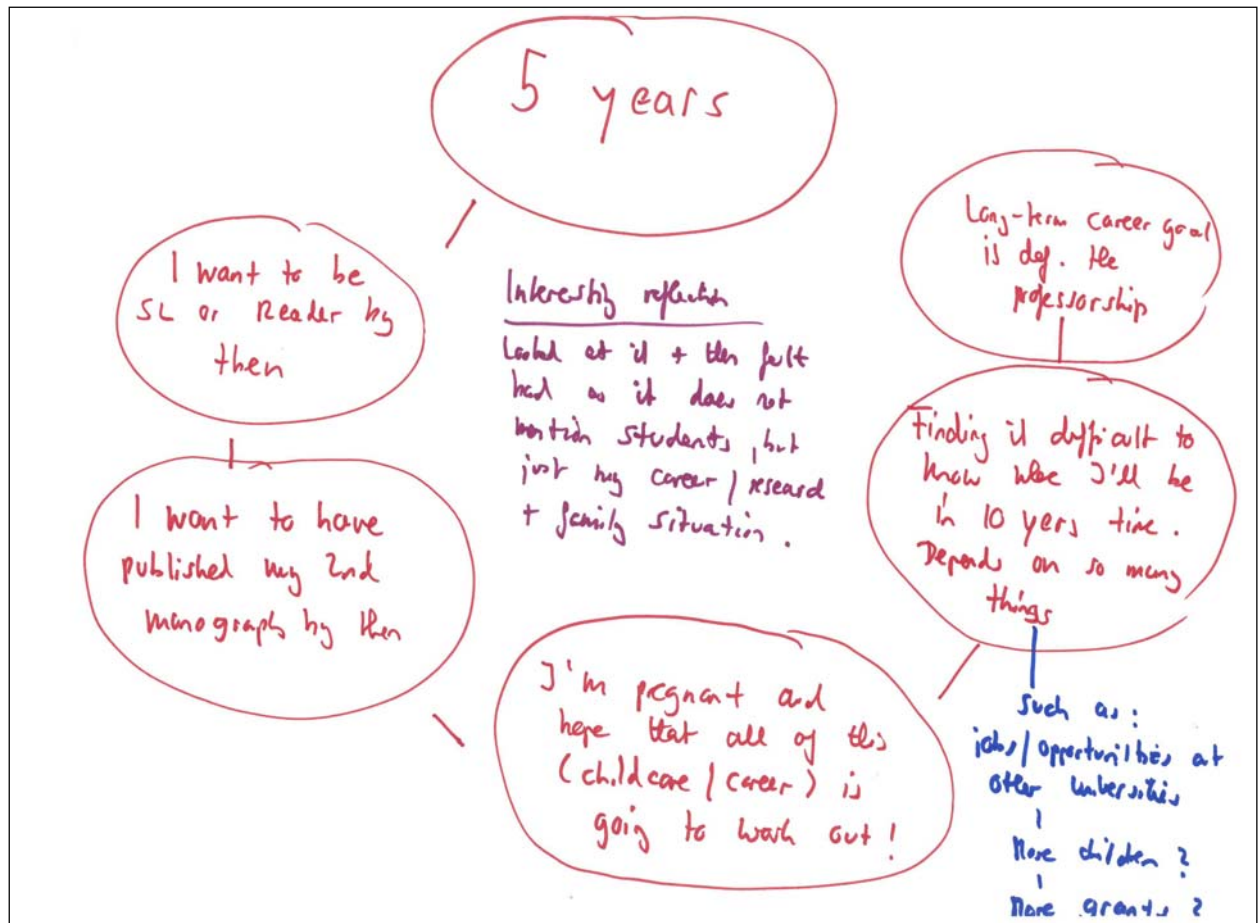


Figure 2. Bernadette concept map

Perhaps being a strategic and ambitious planner sits uncomfortably with other aspects of gendered and professionalised identities. In terms of gender, feminine 'norms' suggest a certain amount of modesty that conflicts with what might be seen as self-promotion. In addition, there may be conflicts between strategic career planning and the pursuit of academic values that emphasise the pursuit of knowledge, and often a notion of collaborative or collegiate working rather than personal ambition and progression:

I derive pleasure and satisfaction and fulfillment from excelling in that and doing it well, which means I'm playing the game, you know, in terms of participating in the REF, those kinds of things, which I also despise politically. But that is, I think, honestly, a part of it. I'd lie if I said it wasn't. (Bernadette)

Some women did not feel able to do what they felt they needed to for promotion to be a possibility. Nina describes being so burdened with teaching that she does not see how she will get ahead.

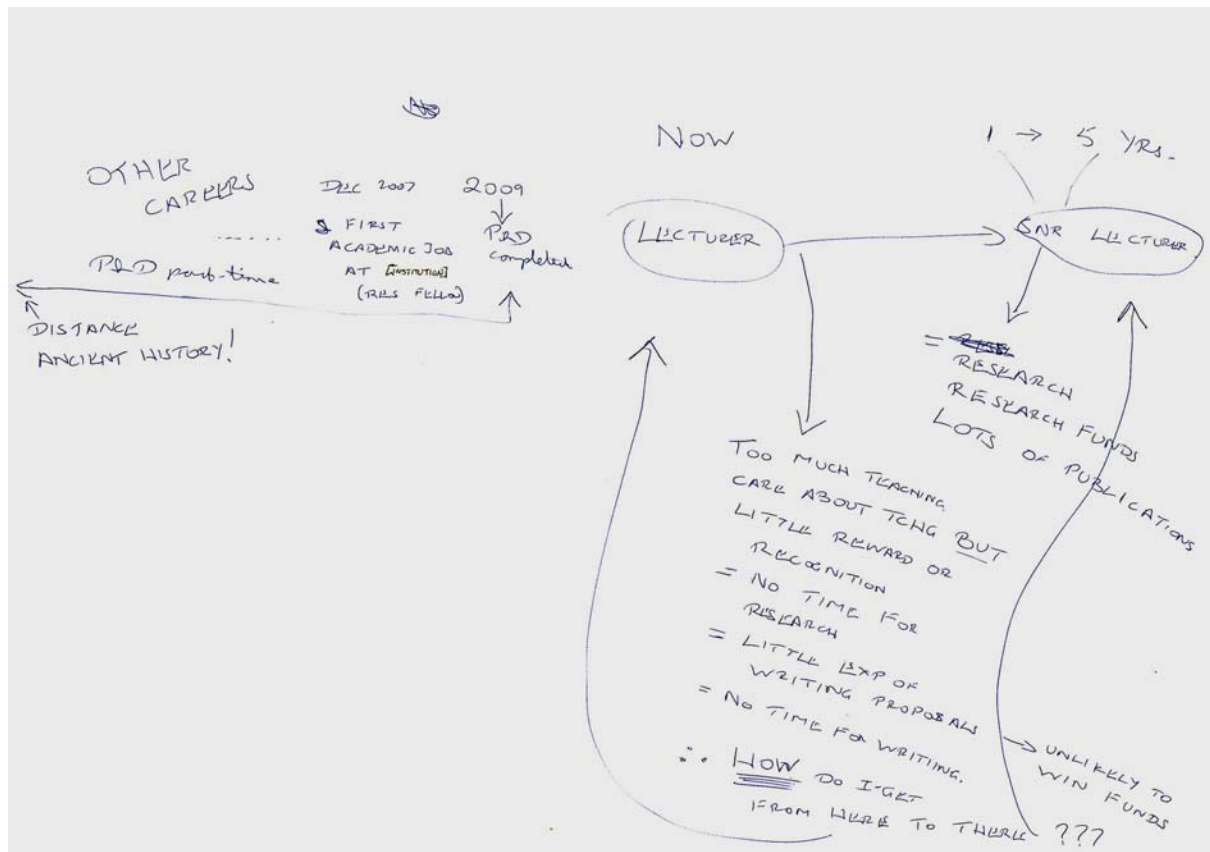


Figure 3. Nina concept map

4.2 Opportunistic

For other women, whose approach to career planning had been more opportunistic, their reluctance to engage in career planning meant that they had not been promoted as quickly as they might have been capable of:

I didn't bother applying for academic promotion for a very long time. And it never occurred to me that it was important. I always used to think, well listen, it doesn't really matter whether I'm a senior lecturer, a reader or a professor. It's the quality of my work that matters and I don't really care... And then only latterly it occurred to me... that I should have been promoted a long time ago and it would be a good idea. Because I was going to meetings where I would be the only person on the panel who's not a professor... And when I did the promotion to Reader I realised that I probably met the criteria quite a bit previously. (Yvonne)

In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that many of the interviewees drew concept maps that suggested a lack of clarity over career plans, even feelings of confusion and frustration. Here, the individualised nature of women's academic careers seems to come across strongly: 'I don't see myself going that much upward in the next five years. Which I wouldn't tell anybody of course'. Women who do not progress quickly might blame themselves, and feel unable even to discuss their difficulties. The word 'stuck' came up in several accounts, at times as a cautionary word, a spur to start engaging more actively in career planning or job seeking:

I took the senior lecturer's job, which I've loved ... it's a permanent contract, I do like that mixture of teaching and research... it is relatively easy to get to and having to be home to do the dinner and pick them up from after school clubs... I think I always thought maybe I've missed out on something, do you know, because there's a necessity to stay in the job and I see colleagues moving around doing other things, and I do feel a bit like, oh, I'm a bit stuck here, which was fine because, you know, I was bringing up my sons but in the last couple of years, they're... now my children are 19 and 22 ...they don't need me to come home and help with homework and whatever. (Pat)

While mid-career women (or at least those who took part in our study) generally identified their need to engage actively in career planning, this should not imply that women's careers must take a particular path. While nearly all of the women had wishes and hopes for how their careers would look in five to ten years' time, not all

of these aspirations were related to formal promotions or leadership positions. Some simply wanted a slight change in balance rather than seeking a high status role:

Where do I see myself being? I think very much still teaching, so not move completely away from teaching, but along those lines with more choice and less the donkey work as it were. Donkey work being lots of marking. I'd like to have a bit more cross school contact and work with people from other schools, to have a bit of influence at higher levels in the future development of [the university]... And some staff management. So no major ambitions there, but these are the sorts of directions in which I can see myself moving in the five to ten year period. (Amanda)

It's a bit odd because I am quite ambitious in many ways but I've never, I don't want to just have status for the sake of it. I can't see the point... That doesn't do it for me. (Olivia)

4.3 Communicating

Women faced the challenge of both needing to tick all of the boxes to be eligible for promotion, and also communicate their successes to others. Several women mentioned that their achievements were not always noticed in their institutions, and they felt this was gendered. Ethnicity, 'race' and background are also likely to affect how experiences and achievements are valued; one academic woman attending an event where we shared our research findings noted that women from the Global South often have a wealth of experience and qualifications that are not adequately valued or recognised in the UK academic job market.

It is often assumed that the lack of value given to the achievements of women and people from ethnic minorities relates to a lack of self-promotion. Our research confirmed other research that suggests a cultural and gendered reluctance to engage in self-promotional activities (see Scharff, forthcoming):

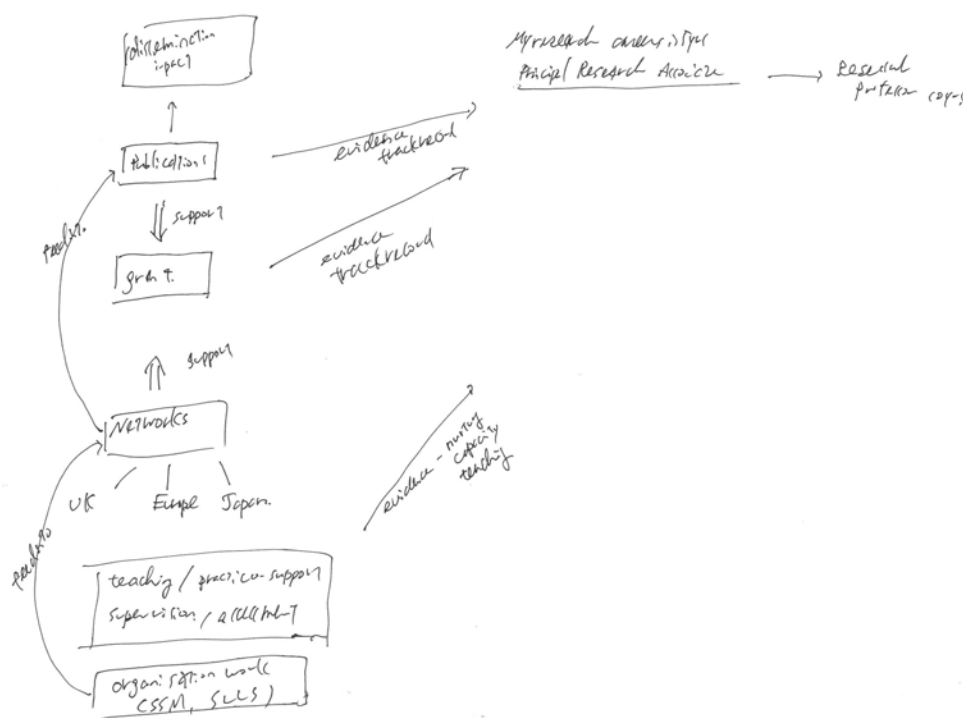


Figure 4. Haruka concept map

Well the thing is I'm not a sort of self-promoting person, it's not in my character. Maybe that is why I am maybe ignored in a way... I've really published but I don't talk about it... Maybe that's something there where I should be more tactical about making an impact. (Haruka)

People don't want to talk about being the best or, you know, oh, 'I'm the de de de de. I got an award for de de de de'. It's like, don't boast about it, you know... it's kind of, like, that British mentality, isn't it? You know, let's not shout about how great we are. (Lara)

Japanese women are brought up to be modest, but in the academic world you have to be, you know, present [that] you're very good, which I'm not really good at doing so far. So to say I'm reasonably good, I have to achieve much more. (Janeru)

As the map above shows, Haruka has a clear pathway (drawn from bottom to top) that includes the publications she feels she has, but her reluctance to share her success hinders her achievement. However, this should not suggest that women should become 'more like men' in selling their achievements. While women's career development schemes often include an element of encouraging women to be better at self-promotion, some women in our study questioned whether this was healthy for academia. This is a particularly important point at a time when it seems that academia is becoming *more* dependent on cultures of self-promotion. Academics are increasingly required to be entrepreneurs and to measure and prove their progress against varying goals, as Stephen Ball (2012) suggests:

Last year's efforts are a benchmark for improvement – more publications, more research grants, more students. We must keep up; strive to achieve the new and very more diverse targets which we set for ourselves in appraisal meetings; confess and confront our weaknesses; undertake appropriate and value-enhancing professional development; and take up opportunities for making ourselves more productive (p.19).

This critique was confirmed by a feeling amongst some interviewees that the goalposts keep moving; that what is valued by certain institutions is not consistent, but changes frequently according to economic and policy factors:

One year they'll say they value bringing in research money, but then if you bring in research money they'll say, 'oh, no, actually what we value is bringing in students', and then if you bring in students they'll say, 'actually what we value is publications'... What I value is being a good teacher, you know, doing solid research, but... I don't think that's valued here. (Abby)

Even some of those who felt they had been relatively successful in 'playing the game' were critical of what counts as valued and prestigious. The willingness to self-promote and 'play the game' is gendered and yet this should not suggest that 'all women' are modest while 'all men' sell themselves. The reality is more complicated, with many women engaging in self-promotion and doing well in the prestige economy. What we suggest here is that it is not sufficient to 'train' women to be better at 'playing the game', even if this might be necessary to tackle glaring inequalities at senior levels. It is also important for academic institutions to reconsider what is - and what is not - considered prestigious. In particular, institutions and departments should think about how activities that could perhaps be attached to collective values - such as teaching, education and outreach - can be sufficiently celebrated and rewarded:

I spend a lot of my time talking to people... writing reports for governments, you know, doing the kind of advocacy work... And that doesn't count. I don't get publication out of that. I don't get grants out of that. It takes a huge amount of time. It takes a lot of energy as well, and it's absolutely counted for nothing in an academic environment. But to me it's the most important thing, because if we're trying to achieve the goal of providing services for people that don't have them, that is the most important thing to do. (Elaine)

It was clear that a number of women found it frustrating that the types of things that motivated them in their work were the least likely to be the things that receive recognition and reward. Women sometimes had very ambivalent feelings about prestige and reward, especially if they were able to accrue it while wanting to downplay its importance.

5 Summary

Overall, women's approaches to career planning were enormously varied, as might be expected. At the mid-career stage, women are often actively engaged in contemplating their careers, and have a complex set of considerations to take into account when doing so – encompassing emotions, values and family commitments as well as the more formal aspects of promotions criteria, job opportunities, grant applications and prestigious publications. Their

aspirations change depending on these considerations, and career plans are sometimes put on hold, slowed down or sped up at different times.

For this reason, we need to be cautious in making generalisations about what mid-career academic women need and want in terms of career development. At times, they may need encouragement, a 'push' or simply a lack of barriers to aspire to the next level. At other times, they may need to be valued for their current work without any implied or explicit pressure to aim for more prestigious roles. It is also important to think further about the individualistic nature of academic careers. This individualism exacerbates the sense of having to be ambitious, to strategise and make plans, and to juggle everything. It also reinforces the belief that it is the responsibility of the individual as to whether progression is achieved or not, and downplays the role of structural inequalities and barriers that are related to gender, class, 'race' and ethnicity.

Perhaps what is most important is that mid-career academic women are given regular space, encouragement and support to assess their career goals and aspirations as they change and develop. Women should not be pigeonholed as being either ambitious or not, as they are very likely to change their priorities at different times, and need to be supported in their current roles as well as in their plans to develop themselves and aspire to new roles.

6 Acknowledgements

This Research Project was supported by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

References

- Banks, J. A. (2002) *An Introduction to Multicultural Education* (3rd ed.) Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bebbington, D. (2012) Revisiting Diversity in Leadership. In *Practice* (Leadership Foundation for Higher Education). Issue 31.
- Berger, M. T., & Guidroz, K. (eds.) (2009). *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academic through Race, Class, and Gender*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press.
- Blackmore, P. & Kandiko, C.B. (2011). Motivation in Academic Life: A Prestige Economy. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 16(4), 399-411.
- Coate, K. & Kandiko Howson, C. (2014) Indicators of Esteem: Gender and Prestige in academic Work, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*.
- Cole, B. & Gunter, H. (2010) *Changing lives: Women, inclusion and the PhD*, Stoke on Trent: Trentham.
- Crenshaw, K. W. (1991) [Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color](#). *Stanford Law Review*, 1241 -1299.
- David, M.E. (2014) *Feminism, Gender and Universities: Politics, Passion & Pedagogies* (London: Ashgate)
- Dean, D.R., Bracken, S.J. & Allen, J.K. (Eds) (2009) *Women in Academic Leadership: Professional Strategies, Personal Choices*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Deem, R. (2014) Women and Success (book review), *Journal of Education Policy*, 30(1): 146-148.
- Doherty, L. & Manfredi, S. (2006) Women's Progression to Senior Positions in English Universities, *Employee Relations* 28(6): 553-572.
- English, J. F. (2005). *The Economy of Prestige*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Equality Challenge Unit (2013) *Equality in Higher Education: Statistical Report 2013, part 1: Staff*, London: Equality Challenge Unit.
- Fitzgerald, T. (2014) *Women Leaders in Higher Education: Shattering the Myths*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hoskins, K. (2012) *Women and Success: Professors in the UK Academy*. Staffordshire: Trentham Books.
- Jones, S. R. (2009). Constructing Identities at the Intersections: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Multiple Dimensions of Identity. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(3), 287-304.
- Kandiko, C. B. & Kinchin, I. M. (2012). What is a Doctorate? A Concept-mapped Analysis of Process versus Product in the Supervision of lab-based PhDs. *Educational Research*, 54(1), 3-16.
- Kandiko, C. B. & Kinchin, I. M. (2013). Developing Discourses of Knowledge and Understanding: Longitudinal studies of PhD supervision. *London Review of Education*, in press.

- Leathwood, C. & Reid, B. (2009) *Gender and the Changing Face of Higher Education*. SRHE/OUP.
- Morley, L. (2014) Lost leaders: Women in the Global Academy. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 33(1): 114-128.
- Royal Society (2015) Gender Balance among University Research Fellows, *In Verba*, <http://blogs.royalsociety.org/in-verba/2014/09/24/gender-balance-among-university-research-fellows/>
- Scharff, C. (forthcoming) Blowing your Own Trumpet: Exploring the Gendered Dynamics of Self-promotion in the Classical Music Profession. *The Sociological Review* 63: 97-112.
- White, K., Carvalho, T. & Riordan, S. (2011) Gender, Power and Managerialism in Universities. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*.t 33(2): 179-186.