MEN AND WOMEN ACADEMICS: AN ANGLO-AMERICAN COMPARISON OF SUBJECT CHOICES AND RESEARCH ACTIVITY*

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ABSTRACT

In both the U.S. and the U.K. women academics are concentrated in certain subject fields. There is considerable similarity between the two countries in this respect: women are found in relatively large numbers in the humanities and are virtually absent from the applied sciences, but in both countries they are a small minority in all five major subject areas. In the U.S.A. the degree of polarisation between the men and women is greater than in the U.K. This is also true with respect to the teaching and research activities of men and women: in both countries women tend to publish fewer articles than men, but in the U.S. the difference is greater. The degree to which this is true varies according to subject fields; it is most marked in the humanities and least marked in the social sciences and applied sciences. There is one unexpected difference between the two countries: whereas in America women teach more than men, in Britain they teach less except in the social sciences. The causes of the different behaviour and interests of men and women academics are likely to be a function both of cultural definitions of male and female roles in the wider society, and institutional factors associated with educational systems both prior to the university stage and at that stage.

* This article is based in part on data gathered by the National Surveys of Higher Education, sponsored by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education and supported in part as a cooperative research project by funds from the United States Office of Education. The interpretations put forward in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position of the Office of Education, and no official endorsement by the Office of Education should be inferred.
Introduction

In all societies the sexes are differentiated in more respects than are entailed by basic physiological differences. As well as differences in the degree to which sex roles are regarded as universal, (Oakley, 1971; Holter 1970; Goode, 1963) and in the nature and strength of sanctions against deviance, the actual characteristics which make up acceptable male and female identities vary from one culture to another. In western industrial societies, dichotomies such as “instrumental – expressive”, ¹ supposedly implied by the traditional family division of labour, have been used to describe the distinctive qualities of male and female roles – though the concept of the division of labour suggests that such roles may have their basis in economic necessity and the unequal balance of power between the sexes, and not in any intrinsic fitness of either sex for one or other side of the divide.

In the last few years there has been an upsurge of interest among social scientists in the United States in the question of sex roles and particularly in the position of women in “non-traditional” occupational settings outside the family. Much of the research has concentrated on professional women; and the profession that has probably received most attention is university teaching and research. There are probably two reasons for this; its proximity for researchers; and the growing number of militant feminists among academics who have publicised the small numbers and low status of women within the profession.

One aspect of the postion of women in universities has received relatively little attention in both countries; namely the subject fields in which men and women are concentrated. In this article we begin by comparing and contrasting the subject specialisms of men and women academic staff in the U.S.A. and the U.K.

The sex differences that we shall be illustrating are the final outcome of a long and complex causal chain. Indeed, the subject fields of university women have been at least partly determined by choices made earlier in the educational system, although this is more true of British university women than American, because of the much greater degree of specialisation in the last two years of secondary school in the United Kingdom. Thus decisions

¹ Talcott Parsons wrote: “. . . . the most fundamental difference between the sexes in personality type is that. . . . the masculine personality tends more to the predominance of instrumental interests, needs and functions, while the feminine personality tends more to the primacy of expressive interests, needs and functions. We should expect. . . . that. . . . men would assume more technical, executive and judicial roles, women more supportive, integrative and “tension-managing” roles”. (Parsons and Bales, 1955, p.101).