1 The Research Context
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INTRODUCTION

Our purpose here is to describe and discuss the research context, to set the scene for understanding both our own experiences as women researchers in higher education and to provide a background for you to think about your aims, aspirations and skills. Although the experiences of women going into a research career are varied, they can be understood as structured by common features of the context within which they carry out research. What is evident from our experience and other literature on the subject is that women develop strategies to cope with, and overcome, the difficulties they may face. Some of these will be discussed later in the book. Our intention is not to suggest that the obstacles we face are insurmountable or indeed that the culture of higher education and research prohibits creative and flexible ways of working. It is our view that these structures are both constraining and enabling, that women are often able to find a path through the obstacles and develop research that is both creative and innovative.

First, we outline the position of women in the academy with reference to current statistics on the posts they hold and the terms and conditions under which they work. We consider economic explanations for the position of women in the labour market and why commonly they hold lower paid, lower status jobs than men. Despite the difficulties, some women have developed a career in research and obtained jobs in universities as academics. But, as our personal stories illustrate, women do not necessarily progress in a linear fashion along a career path, and the very idea of a linear model of ‘career’ is often considered unsuited to the life histories of women (Heward 1994). However, there are certain qualifications and experience which are needed in order to become a researcher. Usually both a first and higher degree are required, but we shall see how, although roughly similar numbers of men and women enter undergraduate programmes, few women go on to do a PhD or become academics. In the next section we discuss the idea of women as ‘strangers in the academy’ (Packer 1995). We examine cultural explanations for the position of women in higher education and how the organizational
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culture and ways of working within higher education shape the experiences of women researchers and can present obstacles to progress.

Finally, we explore issues around research practice and the literature on doing feminist research. The ‘academic mode of production’ has been criticized for excluding women and women’s experiences in certain ways (Stanley 1990) and feminist researchers challenge both the methods used in traditional research practice and the knowledge produced. While not all women claim to be doing feminist research, many are, and there is an extensive debate about the extent to which there can be a distinctive feminist methodology. Women have diverse experiences. We do not claim to speak for all women researchers, but suggest that there are structural features of the research context which affect women in similar ways.

INTRODUCING OURSELVES

Before discussing the research context, let us first introduce ourselves. Our stories illustrate the different ways in which women enter research but also point to the similarities between the two of us.

Anna

The question ‘how did I come to be myself?’ is a question posed by the feminist philosopher Morwenna Griffiths (1995: 173). In a purely academic sense, my route to this job reads as a rational strategy: ‘A’ levels; an economics degree; three years as a research assistant; one year as a research associate; lecturer; senior lecturer. This process took ten years, during which time I completed a PhD. However, I consider the answer to the question as requiring more than just an examination of my career path. It requires acknowledgement of the anxiety, self-doubt, fear, boredom, joy, depression and many other emotions that I experienced during that decade.

For example, the decision to do a PhD was not planned. I was appointed as a research assistant on an already established project and, a few weeks into the job, the professor handed me an outline and suggested that I use the research to write up a PhD thesis. At the same time he suggested I should teach some tutorials. Although the prospect of both of these activities filled me with dread, I didn’t like to say no. I hadn’t consciously chosen to become an academic and felt as though I had this first job purely through chance. I had just