7
Careers of Early- and Mid-career Academics

Teresa Carvalho, Özlem Özkanli, Heidi Prozesky and Helen Peterson

7.1 Introduction

Even if higher education institutions (HEIs) have been subject to important changes in the last few decades, it is undeniable that today, as in the emergence of the modern higher education (HE) systems enhanced by the Humboldtian revolution, producing and disseminating knowledge is one of their main missions (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff 2000; Olssen & Peters 2005; Santiago et al. 2008). However, what is considered scientific knowledge is still the subject of epistemological and ontological discussion. There has been a discernible shift from the positivist perspective that maintains it is possible to obtain objective and true knowledge by using scientific methods to more recent discussion about the possible existence of a reality that is external to the individual (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2003; Foucault 2002). These newer approaches question the important relationship between the production of knowledge and notions of power and control, and feminist writers have strongly contributed to this debate (Hekman 1992; Alvesson & Sköldberg 2003; O’Connor 2012). Studies of women in science reveal how the role of women in science and HE has been neglected, mainly because science and HE reproduce the dominant stereotypes in society (Rose 1994; Oakley 1997; Schiebinger 1999).

Similarly, Steedman (1991) argues that knowledge cannot be separated from the knower, while Sousa Santos asserts that knowledge is ‘self-knowledge’, in the sense that the object is part of the subject (2003). Consequently, a reflective/reflexive approach to research has been emerging in social sciences. As Alvesson and Sköldberg assert: ‘reflection means interpreting one’s own interpretation, looking at one’s own perspectives from other perspectives, and turning a self-critical eye onto
one's own authority as interpreter and author' (2003, p. vii). The testimonies presented here can be interpreted as a reflectivity process in the sense that, in reflecting on their own experiences and practices, academic women are also doing research and contributing to a better understanding of HE on social and cultural reality. The narratives that the five women constructed in Chapters 2–6, revealing their experiences in academia, are in fact good examples of reflexivity and ‘self-knowledge’. In writing their stories they acknowledge/ rationalise and bring to the level of consciousness the complexity of gender relations and experiences in academia.

Despite the social, economic and cultural differences that distinguish their testimonials, the common elements in these narratives give rise to the hypothesis that there are universal gender relations within academia.

The women telling stories of their academic careers come from countries with different historical, social and cultural environments ranging from the more open societies – New Zealand (Chapter 3) and Australia (Chapter 6) – to the more traditional and conservative societies – Ireland (Chapter 2) and Portugal (Chapter 5) – with one narrative focusing on a hegemonic, economically developed country – the UK (Chapter 3). Despite the different historical and cultural contexts in which these women built their academic careers, they all experienced gender discrimination at some stage.

While they came from different family backgrounds, with some having parents who had HE, such as Pat O’Connor (Chapter 2), and others being part of a first generation in HE, such as Jenny Neale (Chapter 4), all considered their families’ valorisation of education as a precondition of social mobility. As Kate White states in Chapter 6: ‘My parents both had an unwavering belief that education was the way out of poverty.’

Another interesting common element was the lack of gender consciousness or awareness they all acknowledge in the first phase of their career. This is particularly surprising in the case of those, like Jenny and Kate, who were involved in social movements fighting for women’s rights, but it can be explained by the institutionalised notion of universities as meritocratic and knowledge production as objective and free from political influence (Oakley 2001). But it can also be interpreted as the result of so few academics turning their research lens on the practices of academics, and instead focusing outside on the wider society (Reay 2004).