The Inclusion of Female PhD Students in Academia: A Case Study of a Swedish University Department

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The article introduces a framework for understanding women’s entry into the academic world and how it interacts with internal departmental structures and practices. It presents three specific strategies applied by a group of women to gain a doctorate and acceptance in their department. Few previous studies have stressed women’s strategies to cope with the organizational setting in academia. The article draws on previous research on women in academia and how organizational characteristics influence women’s careers. It is based on a case study of a Swedish university department. Sweden is often recognized for creating favourable working conditions for women. Yet the Swedish academic world is very male-dominated at the top and even the medium level. It is also more common than in many other Western countries that academics stay on at the department where they graduated. Therefore, a PhD is often a first step in a career within that department.

Keywords: gender, academia, entry strategies, PhD students, workplace inclusion

Introduction

The article investigates the interplay between the characteristics of an academic department and different approaches that women may have when entering the academic world. Several studies have discussed how organizational structures and practices influence women’s career opportunities. Fewer have studied women’s strategies to cope with the organizational
setting, and how these strategies influence career positions. The article is based on an in-depth case study of a group of female PhD students trying to establish themselves within a traditionally very male-dominated department of business administration. The fact that the majority in this group of women managed to get a doctorate was trend-breaking, but at the same time it had very limited effect on the department’s structure, norms and practices. Previous studies have stressed the gendering of academia (Clark et al., 1998; Goode and Bagilhole, 1998; Leonard, 1998; Martin, 1994; Morley, 1994; Prichard, 1996; Thomas, 1996). This article emphasizes the complexity of this issue. By focusing on the individual strategies of the women vis-à-vis the characteristics of the department, the study highlights how women can overcome the specific structural barriers of the academic world. However, the study also stresses that predominant organizational norms and structures may shape women’s strategies for completing a thesis in a way that has a negative impact on their long-term career opportunities within the organization and supports existing departmental patterns.

Even though Sweden is sometimes recognized for equality achievements and for providing favourable working conditions for women, most disciplines are still very male-dominated at the top, and even the medium levels. This is also true for the academic world. In fact, the male dominance is remarkable. In 2001 women carried out 37% of all the work done in Swedish universities, but only 14% of the work done by full professors and 30% for senior lecturers. Being a traditionally male-oriented subject, business administration is no exception. During the same year, women were engaged in 8% of the total work time for full professors, 19% for senior lecturers, and 33% of the teaching carried out by people without a PhD. In addition, 47% of the doctoral students in the area were women. Of all employees in departments of business administration in Sweden 28% were women.1 In Sweden it is also much more common that in many other Western countries — or at least compared to the Anglo-Saxon countries — that academics stay on at the department where they graduated, and only a small part of a department’s staff are recruited from external sources. Therefore, the doctorate is often the first step in a career within that department that requires several years of training before becoming permanent. In this respect, to be accepted for a PhD programme in many Swedish university departments may be compared to entering a profession such as auditing or law.

Other studies have described how established female academics may respond to predominant male values and structures (e.g. Clark et al., 1998; Currie et al., 2000; Leonard, 1998; Morley, 1994; Prichard and Deem, 1999; Thomas and Davies, 2002). Investigating doctoral candidates means that we study women at an early stage of their career. We highlight their strategies to gain a PhD, and the consequences these had for themselves and for the department. The study emphasizes that the strategies that women choose to promote their careers may be more or less deliberate in

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the long run, despite their effectiveness for obtaining a short-term goal. For instance, a chosen strategy can make someone more or less dependent on the institutional norms and structure of the department (Martin, 1994), can provide women with a more or less effective personal network for getting a long-term position within the organization (Leicht and Marx, 1997), and can result in a different degree of inclusion within the department (Pelled et al., 1999).

Even though a woman perceives a certain strategy as a voluntary choice, we argue that it is more or less inflicted on her by the organizational setting. Prevailing organizational practices and processes may, in turn, appear neutral and rational but they often contribute to the gendering of organizations by building on masculine values and properties (Acker, 1990; Alvesson and Due Billing, 1997, 2000; Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998; Calás and Smircich, 1996; Ely, 1994, 1995; Fletcher, 1999; Harlow et al., 1995; Martin, 1994; Meyerson and Kolb, 2000; Prichard, 1996). The aim of this article is thus to present a model that provides a better understanding of the interplay between women’s entry strategies and the organizational context, especially in academia, and of how this interplay influences women’s career positions and the department’s established structures and practices. As a result of the study, three specific entry strategies for female PhD candidates are presented.

The next section discusses previous research and our theoretical framework. Then the empirical case is introduced and discussed, following the structure of our framework. Finally, we present some conclusions and implications of the research.

Theoretical background

Previous research has demonstrated how predominant organizational norms and structures create gender inequality and, sometimes in a rather subtle way, prevent alternative views and behaviour. Additionally, individual properties and resources have an impact on women’s possibilities of becoming established and of influencing the organization (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998; Itzin, 1995; Kanter, 1977; Kirchmeyer, 1998; Pelled et al., 1999). In this respect, it should be emphasized that there is no such thing as ‘the woman’, but rather women more or less defined by the stereotypical sex-roles or the division of masculinity/femininity in organizations (Alvesson and Due Billing, 2000). Consequently, we study gender primarily in the processes, patterns and norms in an organization that recognize and reward different types of individual characteristics and behaviour (cf. Acker, 1990; Calás and Smircich, 1996; Harlow et al., 1995; Meyerson and Kolb, 2000).

Organizational features reflect and are reflected by the personality of the individuals (Acker, 1990). The issue here is the inclusion of women in an
academic department. The focus is on organizational practice supporting or hindering entry into academia as well as personal approaches to become included. Many previous studies have identified gendering processes that reward the masculine over the feminine in academia (Clark et al., 1998; Currie et al., 2000; Goode and Bagilhole, 1998; Leonard, 1998; Morley, 1994; Prichard, 1996; Thomas, 1996). Martin (1994) describes several factors and rules often perceived as gender-neutral, that restrict women’s opportunities. Other authors discuss similar factors and all have relevance for the focus of this article.

First, there is a tendency to separate the public from the private sphere (e.g. Currie et al., 2000; Thomas and Davies, 2002; Itzin, 1995; Leonard, 1998; Powell and Mainiero, 1992). This is often based on the rationale that what happens outside work should be considered as irrelevant to the employer, and the individual is expected not to let private matters interfere. Often these expectations are more demanding for women. Furthermore, the career demands at work are often especially strong at the same time as women’s private biological clock calls for starting a family. The demands on women to manage the domestic sphere are often not shared by men who hold similar jobs and the difficulties for a woman pursuing a career in an environment with few other women have been stressed (Kanter, 1977; Leicht and Marx, 1997; Prichard, 1996; Yamagata et al., 1997). The tendency to reward employees for being present at work as many hours as possible makes it increasingly difficult for many women (cf. Barry et al., 2001; Currie et al., 2000; Thomas and Davies, 2002).

Since women at universities are few, they are expected to serve on committees and to participate in meetings in order to ensure the organization’s gender neutrality and act as tokens (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998; Kanter, 1977; Wahl, 1992). A woman is also expected to represent women’s general interest at the faculty, leaving less time and energy to spend on her own career. Another aspect is that by being a minority, women may also find it more difficult to gain access to the social networks at work, dominated by men as ‘mates’, that are usually a valuable support for future career advancements (Gersick et al., 2000; Ibarra, 1992; Kvande and Rasmussen, 1994; Martin, 1994; Pelled et al., 1999; Prichard, 1996). In a male-dominated setting such as a university, male evaluators also give considerably lower evaluations to women (Thomas, 1996). Even when the evaluator is a woman, the same pattern holds, because it is even more important for the female evaluator to demonstrate that she is ‘neutral’ and does not favour women. A woman academic thus has to live up to more demands than a man in order to make a career. Studies have also demonstrated how difficult it is to alter these sets of restrictions within academia, and that it is hard for women to create alternative career structures or gain the more rewarding posts (Goode and Bagilhole, 1998; Morley, 1994; Thomas, 1996).
Similar patterns have been found more generally (cf. Acker, 1990; Calás and Smircich, 1996; Green and Cassell, 1996). When investigating the banking sector in The Netherlands, Benschop and Doorewaard (1998) found a number of institutionalized structures and procedures difficult to discern, called the gender subtext. Rules and norms within an organization are often seemingly rational and gender neutral, and individuals accept them without considering that they make it easier for some to become successful rather than others. Because people are prepared to follow these rules and norms the gender subtext is reproduced and reinforced. The gender subtext encompasses four sets of arrangements on different organizational levels: the organizational structure, the organizational culture, social interaction and identity. Like several others, Benschop and Doorewaard (1998) stress the personal network and the role of the ‘old boy network’ as the basis for many nominations and strategic decisions within the organizations. They also found that women are often referred to a special ‘mommy track’ because their social commitments make it impossible to live up to the ‘objective’ demands of the more qualified jobs within the organization.

Furthermore it has been shown that work motivation and future plans influence how an individual adjusts to an organization (Dodd-McCue and Wright, 1996; Powell and Mainiero, 1992). Demands on private life also differ between women. Powell and Mainiero (1992) found that the relationship between private and professional life is often more complicated for women’s careers. They present a number of organizational factors similar to those discussed above. Investments in human capital have also been found to have a lower effect on a women’s career because of biases among employers and discriminatory promotion practices, and the dominance of male mentors and supervisors within organizations (Kirchmeyer, 1998). Kvande and Rasmussen (1994) regard organizations as gendered political systems, where certain types of men have a strategic interest in blocking the careers of women and other minorities because they might threaten their own dominant position. This and other studies thus suggest that most types of organizations are governed by structures designed by men and based on male values and perceptions (e.g. Acker, 1990; Clark et al., 1998; Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Goode and Bagilhole, 1998; Green and Cassell, 1996; Harlow et al., 1995; Kerfoot and Knights, 1999; Martin, 1994; Morley, 1994; Prichard, 1996).

Both formal and informal practices within an organization have considerable influence on a woman’s choice of career strategy, as well as on its success. Pelled et al. (1999) present the idea of workplace inclusion as an important part in explaining whether an individual will become established and treated as an insider by others in the same work system. They present three indicators that can be used to analyse an individual’s position: decision-making influence, access to sensitive information and job security. The first two are also strongly related to a person’s individual network.
Pelled et al. also found it empirically supported that gender dissimilarity had a negative impact on organizational inclusion. In academia, this implies that women will find greater difficulties in being included and accepted by others. Gersick et al. (2000) found that women in academia framed their career as a personal assertion, while men framed it as an impersonal game. Previous research also suggests that the mechanism of inclusion and exclusion appears to be similar in both academia and other types of organizations (Goode and Bagilhole, 1998; Kahn and Robbins, 1985; Martin, 1994; Smith, 1975).

Some studies have also discussed how women academics may respond to the masculine principles of the New Public Management in the UK. For instance, Leonard (1998) found that some women actively confronted management, whereas others withdrew into areas less exposed to the new management principles but also less rewarding in career terms. A third strategy was to leave the organization altogether. In general, women have been found to cope by using a strategy of accommodation and/or resistance (Clark et al., 1998; Thomas and Davies, 2002), and to succeed it appears that women have to gain male skills and attributes (Brewis, 1999). These studies have, however, focused on women already with a position in the organization and not on new entrants.

Skeggs (1997) argues that the construction of the self depends on processes in time and social space, positioning women in relation to the social classes and power structure in society. These socially determined positions limit the way women can behave. Within the limits, however, a woman may use many constructive and creative strategies to determine her position. The subject of the women in this study is governed by their role as PhD candidates. This position, as well as the gender, implies limits on behaviour. The focus of our study is the strategies the women applied to give themselves an identity as doctoral candidates. Strategies in this context are defined as a number of actions over time performed in order to achieve a certain outcome, i.e. a PhD. DeCertean (1988, in Skeggs, 1997) refers to such lines of action as tactics rather than strategies, in order to differentiate actions within a specific social position and space from those of actors with all-embracing positions enabling the exercising of power in order to change the structural position or enhance their own position in society. We have chosen the strategy concept to emphasize that the lines of actions have grown incrementally as a series of decisions based on perceived possibilities over time (cf. Quinn, 1978).

On the whole, the literature identifies a number of organizational factors that influence women’s careers, and indicators that can be used in order to characterize an individual career. In an attempt to integrate the views presented above and the findings of our empirical study we suggest the approach presented in Figure 1. It stresses that a woman’s entry into an organization should be viewed as a process that concerns the woman’s in-
The organization and how it is perceived

Staffing structure – Practices for support, evaluation and promotion
Significant social networks – Respect for private commitments
Predominant norms and structures

Coping strategy
Network building – External support
Alternative paths – Visibility in the organization

Career position
- Influence
- Job security
- Access to information

The individual
Personal characteristics and resources – Work motivation
Future plans – Demands of private life

Figure 1: The entry process and the career position in terms of work inclusion

dividual characteristics and actions as well as the properties of the organization. The organizational level can be analysed both in ‘objective’ terms such as statistics and documents, and in terms of how the women striving to enter perceive it. The staffing structure — in terms of the total number of men and women and especially those in senior and influential positions — has been suggested as an important factor. Social and informal networks were found to be central in our study, and have previously been found to have a considerable influence on important decisions as well as on existing norms and rules. Furthermore, practices for promotion decisions, evaluation and support appear to be especially relevant for women at the beginning of a career. Obviously, predominant norms and structures in general also have a high relevance. They will influence the willingness to respect private responsibilities and to create solutions that, for instance, ensure that a woman with small children is not passed over because of seemingly gender-neutral criteria.

On the individual level, the idea of the private biological clock means women who want to have children often have to combine the demanding early stages of a career with a demanding private life (Itzin, 1995; Martin, 1994; Powell and Mainiero, 1992). A woman’s personal characteristics and resources — such as private money and support from friends and family — were also found to be important factors in our study. Furthermore, work motivation and future plans and expectations were found to be central. Based on a person’s own characteristics and the organizational context that was discussed above, the strategy that a woman applies can make her more or less successful. One dimension found vital by several previous studies is the network that a woman is
able to establish, and how it is linked to other significant intra-organizational groups. An aspect not highlighted very much in this study is women’s role as tokens and minority representatives. One explanation is that the studied women were not sufficiently established to be relevant as tokens. However, the case study stresses that it is very important for women with a rather low status as ‘only’ doctoral candidates to become visible to other members of the organization. A woman’s ability to generate external support also appears as a central aspect. In academia it is possible to generate external grants, engage an external supervisor, etc. A woman may thus create alternative paths and options outside the particular department, meaning that she can be more or less dedicated to following organizational norms and expectations. Finally the indicators introduced by Pelled et al. (1999) are used to analyse the career position resulting from a woman’s entry strategy.

**The achievements of twelve female PhD students**

This section describes a group of women who had the ambition to get a doctoral degree at a Swedish department of business administration. After some background data about the case and the research method used, we discuss different aspects highlighted by the case study and finally the strategies applied by the women.

**The case study and our methodological approach**

First, it should be stressed that a Swedish academic career differs from that in several other Western countries. Basically there are three categories of academics. (1) Chaired professors appointed by the government after long scrutiny by external, often international, expert committees. (2) Lecturers who do most of the teaching. This category includes what in the USA are called assistant and associate professors. (3) Teaching positions not requiring a PhD and normally not involving any research. For a long time a doctorate was more or less regarded as a ‘life-time achievement’, and the crown of an academic career rather than the start of one. As a consequence of this system a PhD often stayed on at the same university once the degree had been taken. This is still the case today, even though the conditions for getting a PhD have changed. Governmental reforms have been implemented to transform the doctorate into a four-year full-time course of study. The department is responsible for giving PhD candidates fair social and economic conditions during this time. In the 1990s the Swedish government also actively supported sex equality. A government policy was followed stating that the universities should have at least 40% employees of each sex (at each organizational level) within a few years’ time. The local university imple-
mented this policy as a goal that at least 30% of all newly recruited lecturers and professors should be female. Several years ago a law against discrimination in the workplace was passed. In addition to this, a law has been enforced saying that each workplace should have a plan of equality.

The department in this study started in 1960. In 1975 it had four full professors, three research positions, seven lecturers and 14 teaching assistants with no PhD — all men except one teaching assistant. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s the department went through an expansion phase that stopped in the late 1990s due to a deep financial crisis. In all, only two persons with a doctoral degree from another university have been employed in research positions, and four out of the 32 lecturers in 2000 were external recruits. The highest turnover is found among the professors where eight have moved to other universities since 1975. The first woman gained a doctorate in the department in 1988. The number of female doctoral candidates grew in the early 1990s, with 28% of the active PhD candidates being women in 1994–5. A number of those succeeded very well both with the programme and in financing their research projects. An image of these women as ‘promising’ doctoral candidates was established in the department. In 1995 a loosely coupled network (Club 20/2000) was started and included female PhD candidates who expected to graduate before the end of 2000.

This is a qualitative, in-depth case study approach. Given the complexity of the research questions, the need to involve different levels of analysis and to study a process, this approach is especially relevant (Yin, 1994). At an overall level, different kinds of secondary data available, such as statistics, yearly reports and other public records have been used to characterize the department. The women studied were all part of the network of female doctoral candidates who wanted to gain a PhD by 2000. Personal in-depth interviews were used, which also involved a follow-up study on how they had succeeded. The idea was to concentrate on the successful women in the group, i.e. those who showed good progress in their work on dissertations, to investigate why they were able to break the previous male-dominated pattern and analyse the long-term effects. The study therefore concentrated on the twelve students expected by their supervisors and the director of the PhD programme to graduate by 2000.

The first interviews were conducted during late 1996 and early 1997. A complementary study was done at the end of 2000 to analyse the results of the women’s strategies. The interviews were open discussions covering the process from deciding to become a PhD student up to the present, lasting on average between one and a half and two hours. We had a checklist covering a number of key issues generated from theory. It was continuously modified as the empirical study brought new aspects to the fore. The interviews were tape recorded, and when the material was analysed, our aim was to find recurring themes concerning the women’s personal characteristics, percep-
tions of the organization and approaches to PhD education. The quotations below used to illustrate the discussion all come from the interviews. Constructs included in the first preliminary model were modified as a result of the empirical analysis, and specific coping strategies were added. The research can be characterized as a continuous interaction between theory and empirical data (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000).

The university department and how the women perceived it

The staffing structure is very much characterized by stability and male domination. The picture of a traditional career in the department is one where professional skills are developed within the same position and at the same department over a lifetime. Careers are promoted through administrative work (as dean or vice-dean) and/or research. The first woman in a lecturer position appeared in 1990. In 1999 the number of female lecturers had increased to three. In addition, there have been three female professors. Given that there is a low level of employee turnover, it is also especially remarkable that all the female professors left after a few years. All three found similar positions at other universities, and a major reason why they left appears to have been a sense of not being accepted by leading actors within the department and a lack of internal support.

The same picture appears for teaching responsibilities. Teaching is the predominant task of senior lecturers. A woman heads very few courses. In 1994–5 about 12% of the teaching was carried out by women. To hold a management position in the department for a period of time is also a part of the traditional career pattern. All the heads of department up to now have been men. Until the fall of 1998 all the directors of the doctoral programme were men. The women interviewed also stressed the dominance of men and male values. For example:

You only have to look! Where are the women? They are secretaries, study counsellors — that is just a ting step from a failing doctoral career — and then there are PhD students. And then there are the men, who are heads of department, senior lecturers and professors.

The small number of female employees also means that the social networks are male-dominated, and the few women in the department have had difficulty in becoming accepted here. One example is the associated so-called Executive Foundation. It manages most activities to do with private industry (consulting, executive MBA programmes, evening courses, etc.). Its faculty club is important for social networking. It arranges social activities like trips that combine strategic discussions and family holidays at nice resorts. None of the employed females were included in these or similar networks by 1999, even though they participated in other foundation activities. The women
interviewed discussed several other informal networks. The one shaped by teaching and administrative duties was often mentioned. Another included men with powerful positions, and younger men in the beginning of their careers recruited and/or supervised by the former. The women found it difficult to get into these networks due to socializing habits and personal differences between sexes. As one of them put it:

I will probably never get into the boys’ gang. I am a woman and I have a family and that is my first priority. We don’t have anything to talk about. At lunch they talk about car engines, house maintenance, while I worry about getting language courses abroad for the kids.

To a large extent, a small number of men seemed to be the gatekeepers for both these networks. The women also stressed the network that included mostly doctoral students, but this network was perceived as distant from the department’s decision making and the flows of critical information.

The predominant norms and rules appeared to be of the same and seemingly ‘gender-neutral’ character as in many other organizations. The department observes the rights concerning parental leave, etc. specified by law, but otherwise issues to do with the private sphere are rarely raised by people in charge or in policy documents. The women also gave a picture of the department characterized by implicit and informal practices when evaluating people and making promotion decisions. These norms were often established within the social networks. The fact that many dominant actors in the department have been men supported by housewives further explains why private commitments are not normally considered relevant. The women’s perception was that you were supposed to have flexible working hours if something turns up or if someone wants a hand, and several of them had experienced that family responsibilities made social networked suffer. One woman expressed her frustration about this:

This world is built for single men who don’t have anyone or have daily housekeeping. The whole system favours that kind of a person. If you are supposed to have these two jobs, both research and teaching, then you have to be able to work ten to twelve hours a day . . . Children and family have not been a natural part of this context. It has been very clear, I think. It creates a feeling of stress that I can’t or won’t spend ten to twelve hours on my job. And that is insane. You are not really supposed to feel that way. That everybody else just passes you by and that everybody has time to drink red wine at weekends and discuss Sartre and do a lot of research and write a lot at the same time.

The weight that is attached to teaching and administrative responsibilities is further illustrated by the women’s perception of the department’s practices for support, evaluation and promotion. Their experience was that you had to do a lot of teaching and have connections with people with administra-
tive responsibilities. Otherwise, you had with press hard to get support and recognition. Some saw it as a question of visibility:

If you went around and introduced yourself as a doctoral student people looked right through you. I had nowhere to sit and work, no right to use the copying machine, no mailbox the first year I was here. In principle, I did not exist. When I complained about this, the answer was that I should take on a part-time job as administrator or teacher.

Besides the sense of having no legitimacy as a doctoral student, a current theme was that male doctoral students were more visible. This statement also takes us back to the organization’s predominant norms and structures. A lot of the women felt that the general interest in research activities was low, and that people were more interested in someone involved in teaching and administration. Once involved, members of the department were expected to be loyal and dedicated. Teaching responsibilities would thus take up considerable time, and to change the situation was an ordeal. One of the women who had taken on a lot of responsibility felt that this was really pressing:

Right now I am in conflict with everybody else in my teaching group, because before Christmas I said that I will not accept being responsible for this course any more. It seems to be difficult to find someone else so NN [male professor in charge] is not so happy. I have tried to hold back the teaching, but that is where I feel that I have been pushed the most by the department . . . Now I feel that this has turned into exploitation. I don’t like this and I feel half-criminal when I walk down the corridor just because I have said that I back out of this responsibility.

The women’s background

The women’s personal attributes can give a further understanding of their perceptions. Concerning private lives and responsibilities outside work the women can be divided into two groups with very different realities. One had few private obligations — either being single or married without small children — whereas the other group had career-dedicated husbands and small children. The latter group found it impossible to work round the clock to finish a dissertation or to do administrative work or teach in the department in order to satisfy senior staff members:

I have to work more or less from nine to three when I’m here. The children must have access to me from three o’clock and on. Some periods I have tried to work whole evenings, but I can’t manage that. Besides, the children have grown older and stay up longer so now that is not possible any more . . . Since my husband is not home during the week, there is a lot of stuff to do.
The attitude presented here also implies that becoming a PhD student may have been a way to get into a profession without having to comply with the norms and expectations of ‘normal’ working life. Concerning personal characteristics a very significant theme is thus to appreciate a high degree of flexibility and/or independence at work. To some, being able to come and go without having to adapt to particular working hours was especially valuable. To others, freedom had more to do with intellectual aspects. Another theme is having a broad frame of reference based on previous experiences. This relates to the women’s expectations and degree of work motivation, and may explain why some of these women were more dedicated and disciplined compared to doctoral candidates with few other working experiences:

I have worked at a research company, as a teacher and at an advertising agency. That was the last job I had before starting here . . . When I was at the advertising agency I felt that it was not real. To start with, it was like a dream job for me, because I had specialized in marketing. But I got a little disappointed. I thought that it was non-theoretical and rather trivial and I got fed up with it rather quickly.

A broader frame of reference may have made these women more critical, more demanding, and more research-oriented and less prepared to comply with pre-dominant norms. Some others, however, represent more or less the opposite. They had become doctoral students by chance, often recruited or persuaded by someone in the department, originally less interested in research and more inclined to perform administrative tasks.

Three different strategies and where they took the women

Based on how the women approached the department and the challenge of getting a PhD, three different strategies were identified (inspired by Johansson and Jonnergård, 1999). To a varying degree they appear to be consciously planned, and in some cases they seem to be the result of a number of personal decisions not always directly related to the PhD work. Nevertheless, they reveal three different patterns.

The first is a strategy of compliance. This includes being perceived as a member of the staff by recognizing traditional norms and values. A senior staff member had often offered these women a position in the department. For several of them the recruitment was an unexpected opportunity rather than a conscious part of a career strategy. The opportunity included a teaching or administrative position in the department and the possibility of getting a monthly salary was as important a part of the offer as the possibility of becoming a PhD. Socialization took place through an administrative position and/or a teaching assistant position. Part of this strategy was also getting a supervisor with a powerful position. These moves gave the women
visibility in the department and entry to the informal networks. To start with, other duties in the department had the highest priority, and the PhD studies were often experienced as spare-time work. Later on, however, more emphasis was put on completing the dissertation. This was made possible by a doctoral position financed by the department. It implies that the female doctoral candidates who were to some extent pushed into the organization nevertheless made a decision later on to pursue their PhD studies. The compliance strategy is rather similar to the traditional way of pursuing a doctorate in the department. Unlike earlier generations of doctoral students, however, this group focused mostly on the dissertation once they had received financial support — in spite of getting some criticism for doing so.

The second is a strategy of opportunity seeking. Here, a determination to get a PhD was present from the start. Socialization was supported by an administrative and/or teaching position but these women also found a research-oriented supervisor, implying the building of an internal network as well as access to the supervisor’s external network of research fellows. This strategy also involves an active pursuit of external funding and a full concentration on the dissertation as the work was financed. Nevertheless, their networking resulted in internal legitimacy. This strategy was a step further away from the traditional path of taking a PhD as the doctoral candidate openly and rather early on in the process gave priority to her PhD studies, and managed to get external funding. In a way, this strategy appears to represent the highest degree of intentionality and understanding of departmental as well as external logics. The women managed to become visible and accepted in the department, but also to benefit from external resources. At the same time, however, their internal networks were weakened along the way as they dropped their departmental duties and focused mostly on their dissertations.

Finally, there is a strategy of avoidance. This group actively applied for the PhD programme. Some were very determined to get a degree, but sometimes the choice seemed to be more the result of a personal situation that made it hard to have a job that demanded presence in the office. The women representing this strategy never made themselves visible in the department. They were fewer in number, characterized by not actively seeking any affiliation because it was perceived as too demanding, and as delaying the dissertation work. The personal network was based on research-oriented supervisors who had a limited interest in teaching and pursuing administrative duties, and on contacts with other PhD candidates. The strength of this strategy was the ability of the students’ and their supervisors to find external funding and access to external research sites. This allowed the students to be independent of the department. At the same time the grants gave them legitimacy as PhD students and a basis for claiming certain services from the department — such as office space and access to a computer. Overall,
however, this strategy meant being rather invisible to the department staff. It is a new approach for PhD candidates in the department, because, even though independent doctoral candidates have existed before, they have usually been part-time students without any office space. In a way this strategy means being the department’s first group of ‘full-time’ doctoral students. The possibility of pursuing this strategy is supported by the new norms concerning doctoral students that started to emerge among people in the department at this time and the existence of a small number of research-oriented professors with a large external network of research fellows.

Most of the women wanted to continue an academic career after getting the doctorate, and half of them claimed that they were prepared to move to another university. The rest of them had a family situation that narrowed their choices geographically, but they were all confident of finding work opportunities the day they graduated. All three strategies have been successful in that nine out of the twelve women achieved a PhD by the end of 2000, and two graduated during 2001. One is still working on the dissertation and is expected to graduate during 2002. For most of the women, however, it turned out to be difficult to get a position in the department as a PhD graduate. At the end of 2000, only one of them had been offered a permanent, full-time position and another was offered a part-time position by 2001. Both these women represent the compliance strategy. As stressed earlier, staying in the department where one graduates is the normal procedure for Swedish academics. Therefore, the result is remarkably negative.

Based on the approach of Pelled et al. (1999), only one of the women can be regarded as having a high degree of workplace inclusion: a medium level of influence on decisions that affect her working condition, a high level of access to sensitive work information and a high level of job security. All the others faced a low degree of workplace inclusion after graduating. Two groupings can be discerned with regard to workplace inclusion. One group of women has done their best to cling on to the department — by means of short-term teaching assignments, filling in for staff on temporary leave, getting a temporary part-time research position funded by external grants, etc. These women have had a very low level of job security, usually limited access to sensitive work information and a low influence on decision-making processes. In 1999 the job security law was changed, however, and the department then had to employ two of the women who had managed to support their own post-doctoral position with part-time jobs. One of them left early in 2001 anyway for more secure private employment. These two women represent the compliance and opportunity seeking strategies.

Another group left the department after graduating. None of them was offered any form of permanent employment, even though during our interviews several of them expressed a desire to stay. Most of them still pursue an academic career at other universities and have positions that the department could not offer. These women represent the avoidance or the opportu-
nity seeking strategy. Table 1 summarizes the coping strategies and their influence on workplace inclusion.

One insight is that the women’s individual strategies for getting a doctorate appear explain the difficulties when continuing their career in the department. As doctoral students several of them formed a network that gave effective guidance and support during this process, but with very weak links to the organization’s most influential networks and its most powerful male members. The compliance strategy was the most effective if the intention was to remain in the department. All the women using this strategy had some sort of affiliation to the department by the end of 2000. The other strategies gave weaker long-term support. The fact that the women chose to be independent of the organization as doctoral candidates, by withdrawing and focusing on the dissertation from the start or by leaving the teaching and administrative duties later on in the process, significantly reduced their opportunities. Often, the men in power did not even seem aware of their existence when they were considering possible future faculty members.

One relevant question is, however, what the situation was for similar male doctoral students. Figure 2 compares the positions after the getting a PhD and reveals interesting differences. First, the main choice for the men was between the university and the private sector, including the possibility of getting high-paid consultancy work. No woman pursued this alternative as a newly graduated PhD, implying that they had fewer alternative career opportunities or that they may have been more dedicated to an academic career. Second, in relative terms, new male and female PhDs were offered full-time positions to the same extent, but since fewer women graduated, the

Table 1: Coping strategies and workplace inclusion at graduation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Access to sensitive information</th>
<th>Decision-making influence</th>
<th>Job security</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compliance</td>
<td>The same as senior faculty members</td>
<td>Almost the same as faculty members</td>
<td>Offered long-term position as lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity seeking</td>
<td>Less than senior faculty members, dependent on personal network</td>
<td>Influence over own research, none or little over the possibility of gaining a teaching position. Dependent on personal network</td>
<td>Very little, dependent on the possibilities of hanging on in the department or finding alternative funds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>None, if not through personal network</td>
<td>Influence over own research, none or little over the possibility of gaining a teaching position</td>
<td>Very little, dependent on the possibilities of hanging on in the department or finding alternative funds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
overall gender structure was actually reinforced. Furthermore, several men were offered a lecturer position based on part-time work at the university and part-time in a private company, often in collaboration between the department and the private sector. No woman was offered such a position. Taking this into account, more men stay on in the department in both absolute and relative numbers. Third, getting financial support from external research grants appears to be a female alternative. This requires skill as a researcher, but preserves an insecure job situation in the department because it only gave the women a temporary position as long as their salary was paid by the research grants.

Certainly, one could argue that the women could have acted differently in order to get a better position when graduating, but the discussion above about personal characteristics and perceptions of the organizational context suggests that many women had limited choices. The staffing structure, predominant norms, support and evaluation practices, etc., indicate that they would have had to work hard to live up to departmental expectations and compensate for the obvious ‘handicap’ of being a woman — with private commitments not recognized by norms and rules and the challenge of being a little bit better than the men to get approval. Living up to these demands would have made it very difficult to find enough time to write a dissertation. In this respect, the independence route seems a rational choice.

Conclusion

Organizational changes are inert processes. This is stressed in the article by describing the effects of individual strategies for coping with an organizational environment while pursuing a career objective. One conclusion
is that in order for a young woman to pursue a specific individual career objective in a male-dominated department, she has either to comply with organizational norms or become ‘resource-independent’. However, to stay in the organization beyond the fulfilment of a short-term career objective, requires inclusion in the organization based on an effective personal network and behaviour that confirms the organizational norms. This conclusion is supported by previous studies (Kvande and Rasmussen, 1994; Pelled et al., 1999).

The use of strategies alternative to ‘traditional’ ones when pursuing a career objective also depends on the existence of alternative structures that can provide support and a basis for legitimization. The opportunity seeking and avoidance strategies were both supported by resources and norms in the department’s external environment. The fact that the women could pursue their career objective, the degree, within a limited time span and without ‘disturbing’ the department’s regular activities or resource allocation implied that their actions never challenged daily life. One could say that the women existed in a free space created by the norms and regulations of the external environment and by the women’s own ability to find resources. There was no need for the department to worry about them until they graduated. At that time most of the women found themselves without any support or further prospects.

The situation for doctoral candidates at Swedish universities may be specific. Still, the more general theme stressed by our framework should apply to other systems as well. By responding to different regulations and norms inside as well as outside the particular organization, women may find a space to pursue a strategy for entering the organization that corresponds to personal characteristic as well their short-term career goal. Whether this strategy also helps them to be included in the organization on a long-term basis after getting the PhD is an empirical question.

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Note

1. The statistics are collected from the Swedish National Bureau of Statistics, SCB, (Table 41a) and the numbers refer to full-time equivalents. The statistics were compiled particularly for this article from information given by the Bureau on the Internet. In other words, they represent hours performed by different sexes, not bodies of women/men.
References


