

GENDER, MANAGERIALISM, AND PERFORMATIVITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN ENGLAND AND SWEDEN

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we consider the implications of managerial reforms and performativity in higher education in Sweden and England, following the introduction of new public management and the development of neoliberalism. The article examines some gendered implications by drawing on the experiences of eight experienced female academics. The data are drawn from a data set of interviews. The first interviews we present were conducted at the beginning of 2001 with two long-serving academics from each country. The rest of the interviews we present were conducted 10 years later, with academics who were, like the previous interviewees, long serving. The same interview questions were used for all the interviews. We found differences between the two countries, in terms of social democratic and liberal traditions, as well as similarities. In the earlier interviews, we found the reforms to be viewed negatively, while the later interviews suggested some accommodation in respect of research and management. Yet, despite this, the female academics in both countries had become increasingly subjected to performativity and were experiencing difficulties in undertaking research as they took on more teaching and administration.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the consequences of the turn to management and performative managerialism in the guise of the new public management in higher education in Sweden and England, following the introduction of sweeping managerial reforms across a number of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries from the late 1970s onward (Hood, 1991, 1995), in relation to neoliberal influences (Harvey, 2005). We consider the implications relating to gender in terms of performativity and leadership, as well as their interconnectivity, which are explored through the accounts of a sample of long-serving academics, whose experiences are presented as illustrative of the central argument contained in the article. The research investigation from which the interviews are drawn originated in the mid-1990s in Sweden and England and was followed up some years later in 2001 and again during 2011–2012 with new interviewees (many of the original interviews having been conducted with staff who had left their jobs in the interim), who were in similar organizational positions. All of our interviewees were, nonetheless, long serving and in middlelevel management positions that rendered them best placed to experience the changes at first hand. Thus, we offer insights from an insider's view, not least since we are academics ourselves who have also experienced the changes referred to. This qualitative approach, which seeks to embrace subjectivity as offering insights not so easily or readily available to those academic colleagues who favor quantitative approaches, we consider to be in some sense a weakness but also a strength of our article, providing insights from those at the “coal face,” or on the “front line,” of change. But why go back over old ground that has surely already been fully covered?

The reason we decided to return to our original interview questions for a fresh round of interviews was related to the recent arrival of fiscal austerity measures in many parts of the world: we wanted to see how far Dickens' “Hard Times” might once more have heightened, lessened, or in some other way(s) impacted on the managerial reform process. We say “process” because, while we note that this process of change and reform has been estimated as taking 5–10 years to unfold (Forsell, 1994), the experience of our interviewees would suggest an unsettled passage and longer time frame.

But how have the changes in higher education been seen in the academic literature? Conventional wisdom sees organizational change as conceptualized and orchestrated from above and represented photographically as snapshots *frozen* in time before, during, and after the initiation of a reform agenda. For us, however, time is more helpfully understood as an unending process, itself in flux, subject to contestation and revision that change the change process, and shaped *through time* rather than represented by it in teleological fashion (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). It has been important for us, therefore, to examine interview data *across and through time* and at the intersection of varying historical, social, economic, political, and

other contexts: in short, in “location” (Nicholson, 1990). We open with a consideration of new public management, neoliberalism, and performativity as they affect the public sector generally and higher education in particular, before moving on to our empirical research, which, as we indicated earlier, is used to illustrate our central argument.

NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT AND NEOLIBERALISM

Academic literature on the public sector has noted the development of new public management reforms across a range of OECD countries from the late 1970s onward (Hood, 1991), designed to enhance efficiency and enforce accountability as a way of reducing costs, a process gaining a new poignancy in the present context of a perceived financial crisis that has led to the institution of harsh austerity regimes in a number of countries. This development has been further noted across higher education sectors around the world, with the UK and Sweden among the front-runners (Hood, 1995; Parker & Jary, 1995, for the UK; and Askling, 1999, for Sweden). It is now also acknowledged that the new public management reforms have been used as the means to embed neoliberal influences across widely disaggregated and dispersed states, acting as the glue that makes them sticky and difficult to dislodge (Clarke, 2004). And it is the impact of these reforms that we consider here, across two recent decades, as they affect gender relations at middle-level management positions in the academy.

The national contexts for our research investigation into higher education are Sweden and England, countries that have been characterized by Esping-Anderson (1990) as social democratic and liberal, respectively. These differences matter for our purposes, in that it was Sweden that saw, in the middle of the 1990s, the development of the THAM professors, featuring 30 appointments for gender researchers or women in research areas where women had low representation. This is not to suggest that the THAM initiative changed gender relations and studies at Swedish universities overnight. But it can be argued that it has been more than symbolic in a country known for its gender-friendly reputation, even if in practice gender inequity is notoriously difficult to disembed.

Yet, and perhaps not least, there are also implications for us as researchers, because we are originally from these two different countries, with two of us living in both. We are sensible of the view that while there are many contexts, they have a not inconsiderable part to play in shaping the subject positions and the social relationships of those living within them. Taking this position and contending that the differing contexts provide varying perspectives as well as opportunities and constraints in everyday working life (Alcoff, 1988), we consider performativity, leadership, and gender in the public sector under the sway of new public management (the meso level: see Hood, 1995; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011), shaped by neoliberalism (the macro level: see Harvey, 2005), and the elevation thereby of competition, self-interested instrumentality, uncertainty, and risk, operationalized

in public sector organizations through performative regimes. In considering these links between the macro and meso levels, with new public management acting as the glue that seeks to bind them together (Clarke, 2004), we examine their influence in embedding the reforms through their interactive embodiment and performative effects in academic workplaces, that is, the micro level at which the interviews took place (see Alcoff, 1988).

It is also important to emphasize that the universities in both countries are affected by reputation, which is linked not least to quality research and good research funding. In England, this has been increasingly driven by league tables and other performative metrics, with publication in highly ranked and respected journals being perhaps the most important indicator of earning a good score and thereby not inconsiderable funding. The privileges of academia, and not least research, are an important part of what David Lodge (1989) called “Nice Work” in his novel of the same name, something that has become highly competitive and hard to get as well as highly individualized.

It is argued that the rise of performativity has been facilitated by shifts away from grand narrative toward regimes of quantification and empirical verification, such as evidence-based practice, in the name of a science whose truths go largely unquestioned (Dent & Whitehead, 2002). They may, nonetheless, be contested and challenged (Clarke, 2004) in the micro context in ways that help to mediate their direct transmission into the working routines of those at the sharp end of the reforms. For while some female and male academics have been keen to engage with the new regimes, and other interviewees have come to adapt and adjust themselves to the changes over the past decade, still others are ambivalent or antagonistic, finding themselves hamstrung by neobureaucratic processes of surveillance and control governed by performative metrics, finding their aspirations and ambitions derailed as they are shunted into occupational cul-de-sacs from which it is increasingly difficult to return to active research. It is accordingly contended that neoliberalism and the new public management, which have impacted on organizational daily life, are associated with what are in effect masculinist (Ford, 2005) forms of rationality, leadership, and performative regimes that elevate individual winners and losers and divert attention from collective issues such as gender and the routines of daily working lives in academe; and this is perhaps especially so when the managerial reforms are implemented with ideological fervor, as they seem to have been in England rather more than in Sweden in recent years; for them, we use the term “managerialism.” We turn now to some methodological considerations that underpin our qualitative approach before presenting our data.

METHODOLOGY

In this article, we examine data deriving from interviews with four female academics carried out in 2001, and interviews with four different female academics in

late 2011 and early 2012. As many of our earlier interviewees had, as far as we could establish, left academe, we were unable to engage in longitudinal research, the turnover of staff being an interesting finding in itself. In the circumstances, we decided to contact new interviewees with similar profiles involving age, length of service (15–25 years), and position (middle-level positions involved in management) in the two European countries in question. This, we hoped, might provide us with some sense of the impact of the managerial reforms and the continuities and changes occurring through the experiences of those involved in the implementation of these reforms. To achieve this, we explored the opportunities available and the constraints faced. This was not ideal but seemed to us sufficiently aligned for our purposes with Berger and Luckmann's (1967) social constructionist approach to qualitative research.

Our choice of women rather than women and men for this particular article was based on our assumption (see also Butler, 1990) that women are a group with some characteristics and interests in common that we thought might provide interesting insights, as the academic literature tends to acknowledge the historical presence and continuing existence of gender inequities and inequalities (c.f. O'Leary & Mitchell, 1990). Our choice also enables us to see women as a category with which to politicize "the subject for whom political representation is pursued" (Butler, 1990: 3).

The focus on women alone may thus be seen as a way of drawing attention to the ongoing processes that keep them at arm's length from senior positions in universities in Sweden and England since, despite the former being hailed as a decidedly gender-friendly and equality-conscious society in organizational contexts, we see men in both countries as the majority of professors, associated professors/readers, and senior-level managers, and women remaining largely unacknowledged as key researchers (for Sweden, see Berg, 2001; Peixoto & Wyndhamn, 2011; and for England, see Davies and Holloway, 1995; Grove 2013).

In what follows, we report data from our research investigations, using pseudonyms for our interviewees: Betty, Sandra, June, and Grace from England; and Anna, Birgit, Inger, and Lena from Sweden. We make no claim that they are fully representative, given the nature of our qualitative approach; rather, they are illustrative. It is to the accounts of our interviewees that we now turn, presenting the data in date order, with the earliest, from 2001, first. It is here that we consider the impact of the managerial reforms some 15 to 20 years on from their implementation.

DECADES OF UNCERTAIN AND UNSETTLED CHANGE?

The overriding sense we gained from academics in our interviewing program in 2001 was one of constraint, measured in terms of both career advancement and the wherewithal to undertake research and publish in respected academic outlets, the RAE (now reconstituted and relabelled The Research Excellence Framework for

2014) in England having concentrated minds in that part of Europe, with knock-on effects in Sweden. Yet the female academics we interviewed in both countries found research and publication increasingly difficult to do as they had considerable teaching and administrative workloads, in contrast to their male counterparts who had more time available in their schedules for research activity, and who dominated senior management positions numerically.

Our research in 2001 was undertaken in part at a traditional university in Sweden, a country that implemented the managerial reforms some 5 years later than England, but still an OECD front-runner in contrast to other countries such as Germany, which came to the feast only relatively recently. The first quotation is from Anna, a professor who talked of the growing numbers of students and the concomitant need to undertake more teaching on her part. She was unhappy with this situation, having lost fruitful opportunities for discussing research ideas with valued colleagues in and adjacent to her discipline that had often led to advancement in the development of research projects. The increase in teaching had put pressure on her to find more time to apply for funding in order to continue with the research that she loved. But changing requirements for funding applications had made that task even more time consuming than previously:

[I have been here about 15 years and have seen] big changes. I started on a [research] project which was financed for five years. . . . nowadays we have to apply for new money each year and you have to write new project plans, you have to make new applications. . . . it's an incredible increase in the time that we spend. (Anna, professor, Sweden)

Anna found herself caught in something of a vicious circle, trying desperately to find the time to apply for the very funding that, years before, would have lightened her teaching load. By contrast, Birgit was a field leader, a post she said that she had been asked, out of respect for her experience and abilities, to take on. Her new responsibilities meant that she had regular contact with colleagues whom she managed and to whom she allocated teaching and other responsibilities. But it had not proven to be an easy job:

[T]he work is more, it's not so different [there's just] more of it . . . in teaching you must have more classes, more teaching and administration, there's much more to do . . . my work is very much administration and 50% education [teaching]. . . . [R]esearch is important, not for me but for some of my teachers. (Birgit, field leader, Sweden)

In England, in terms of performativity and echoing Anna's comments above, the task of finding time to undertake research, let alone prepare and send away articles or book chapters for review and then attend to the comments and requirements of reviewers, appeared Sisyphean, with no certainty of a successful outcome; unequal burdens of domestic responsibility only exacerbated the problems faced by many of our interviewees. The demands are captured in this quotation from Betty, a reader at a post-1992 English university:

[W]e've had someone who had a stroke and severe ulcers. We have had a couple of staff who have just left. They told us that they left partly because of the stress of the job here. . . . You feel you never get thanked for anything you do; everything is taken for granted; you only get blamed when something doesn't go how people want. It can be stressful and a bit lonely at times because you are slightly kept at a distance. . . . I must admit that over the last couple of years I haven't done much [research] and this has been with the agreement of the head of department, because he asked me to take on responsibility for other things. I'm setting up a departmental teaching and learning committee. (Betty, reader, England)

Betty did not view the managerial changes favorably. Another interviewee, Sandra, tended to voice similar concerns. She was also a reader, who would be expected to undertake research and publish in academic outlets, but she had come to identify herself as a teacher:

[T]he researchers wonder why the teachers are not interested in conducting research and think that they are too busy just doing their teaching. . . . This is very much a gender divide: the men tend not to end up with these kinds of jobs. The women tend to end up in these managing and supporting student roles and can never get on with their own research. (Sandra, reader, England)

The sense of exclusion from research activity, due to the sheer increase in the workloads associated with teaching and neobureaucracy, is evident in these illustrative passages, as is the onerous character of management, evidenced in the interview with Birgit, who attempted to manage as fairly, one might say collegially, as she could, enmeshing her in ever more complicated discussions and negotiations with colleagues over schedules. And gender is a significant factor for Betty, clearly expressed in her reference to a "gender divide" where men "get on with their own research." As indicated at the beginning of this section, drawn from our 2001 research investigation, the overriding sense from our female academics interviewed is one of constraint, measured in career advancement and the time to undertake research and publish in respected academic outlets, as well as to apply for research funding.

So how had women fared some 10 years on? Were women more research active, involved in management, maintaining a balancing act? We turn now to some illustrative interviews from our 2012 research investigation, to consider their experience of more recent change.

A DECADE OF MANAGING COPING, ACCOMMODATING, OR ASSIMILATING?

In contrast to the interviewees in 2001 in both England and Sweden, a larger number of interviewees in 2011–2012 indicated that research had become more established, and this, it seemed, had occurred fairly recently as a part of their working lives and identities; and they also indicated not only that they had

accommodated management into their working routines but also that they saw value in the management of universities. In Sweden, the female academics we interviewed appeared to be in a position where research had been acknowledged as a part of their job, albeit with different strategies available to achieve the “nice work.”

Inger, a Swedish academic, had worked in a number of different positions and encountered and met a number of challenges, having been a researcher, a field leader and a head of division during her career; she talked in particular of long working hours and staffing problems that had affected her research activity. More recently, however, she had been offered training and had participated in some educational courses at her university as well as a course designed to deal with leadership, for which certain staff members, including relatively large numbers of women, had been selected.

As Inger explained when referring to the balancing of teaching and research,

Expertise in both areas is needed of course—teaching and research. Where I stand today, all teaching staff have research in their job description. The risk is that you get stuck in one role and my wish is that you do both, although it is more or less certain [that you will have] periods of [largely]research or [largely] teaching. (Inger, head of division, Sweden)

Inger accordingly attempted to balance her priorities, which was not too easy, but she felt special, having been chosen for the leadership course. Her final comment was, “It’s fun to work as a manager; otherwise I would not choose to do it.”

Lena’s experiences extended to those of researcher, teacher, and field leader, the last-mentioned covering around half of her working hours, with teaching at a little under a third and the remainder left for research. Her scheduled allocation for research was three months every year, which she considered reasonable in contrast to earlier periods in her academic working life; even so, she still had difficulty in finding all the necessary time. She nonetheless published with a colleague, using empirical data from an earlier project. This was because the field leadership position was extremely time consuming, involving deadlines imposed by central administrators that took priority as they affected staff teaching and student queries, and this diverted her attention away from research. As this lack of time impinged on the budget, for which she was also responsible, she felt highly stressed being at everyone else’s beck and call. Despite this, she attended international research conferences regularly and wrote academic papers:

If I’m going to do research I need external funding, and I have not been that successful in that. I have been involved in different projects, more evaluation, that have given me empirical data which I’m writing articles on. (Lena, field leader, Sweden)

Research time was thus constrained for Lena, but nonetheless available and used, with her male head of department concerned to intervene where necessary in order to ensure that she had time for this, offering material support as and when he could.

Research in England was still seen as “nice work” (see Berg, Barry, & Chandler, 2003), and the opportunity to engage in it had to be earned, rather than research being assumed to be a part of the job and position of academics. June had in excess of 15 years’ experience in English universities in teaching, administration, and research. She had been in the management team in recent years, and pointed to the gender dimensions of academe in these respects:

It is quite gendered; women are more in teaching and admin and men . . . more involved in research and research activities and teaching. The research commitments are an only-men activity. Teaching and research are related to each other: I need the research to do good quality teaching. (June, principal lecturer, England)

When asked about the recent concerns over finances and the need for efficiencies, she talked of the need to be resourceful:

Everything is very confusing; the senior management are meeting the goal for the university rather than the individual. . . . the quality leader [position] was for three years but I wanted to be back on the management team. (June, principal lecturer, England)

June also indicated a growth in bureaucratic procedures, which acted to monitor and carefully track objectives against the meeting of targets and extended to the requirement to request approval to present papers at academic conferences a year or so in advance. Even so, in order to undertake research, she attempted to compartmentalize her time, although this was almost continuously subject to revision as other more pressing priorities intervened, priorities that she could not ignore. June nonetheless did her best to allocate time to research, often leaving almost countless emails unanswered for longer than she—and others—would have wished, causing her enhanced levels of stress.

Grace, by contrast, referred to herself as an academic leader, her role involving teaching, management, and research. She referred to the need to be ruthless in time management during working hours and also the need to take physical exercise. She saw management, or the academic leadership aspects of her role, as quite demanding, although she did maintain her levels of research, which she saw as supported by her university through funding and teaching cover. She also indicated that she did not espouse top-down management approaches, seeing herself as a reluctant manager, in a position that involved her in managing a minority of her colleagues who were underperforming in certain aspects of their job and letting down their colleagues, who were required to cover for them, a problem that had not previously been addressed.

Grace’s ideal was for colleagues to be professional and to manage themselves in what might be called a self-regulating way. But things being what they were, she considered it important when necessary to initiate informal meetings about performance that could lead to disciplinary proceedings. Grace’s ambivalence about

managing is reasonably clear in all this. She prefers self-regulation for professional colleagues but is prepared to take action if this is not forthcoming. Of interest, perhaps, is the fact that Grace contacted us after the interview had taken place to ask us not to quote her in case she could be recognized. Quotations from Grace have accordingly been deleted from the manuscript. We had never before encountered such a request in our years of research on this topic, and it surprised us.

By 2011–2012, it seems from our data set that involvement in research activity had become more established in working routines and academic identities. So too had management for our interviewees in middle-level positions, who were not only accommodating it into their working routines but also seeing value in the management of some colleagues' performance, where this was considered necessary in the interest of fairness to others.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We have examined some of the implications of the managerial reforms in higher education through the experiences of eight female academics, drawing on interviews from our research investigations in 2001 and 2011–2012, four with academics from Sweden and four from England, all with considerable organizational experience of 15 to 25 years. The overall experience was of growing pressures to perform, through objectives that were most obviously monitored through metrics in the English case, and an increasing specialization of tasks.

Our 2001 interviewees in both countries talked of constraints on their ability to undertake research and to enhance their careers while they were bogged down with teaching and administration; concern about the managerial reforms was thus in evidence, even if the managerial reforms seemed to offer some promise of future career enhancement. Yet by 2011–2012, research had become a part of our interviewees' work, and they were concerned to maintain their valued identity as active researchers; even so, their time for research was still constrained as they juggled their different responsibilities day by day. But while the earlier respondents often expressed negative views about the changes and said they were struggling to cope, 10 years later the interviewees in both Sweden and England did not overtly question the need for at least some kind of management that for them brought recognition of their value and worth, serving to bolster their professional identity. Instead they just got on with the job, seemingly able to find ways of accommodating competing demands, even while they recognized that this resulted in enhanced and unwelcome pressures and conflicted with the time available for research.

This is important because while the implementation of the new reforms, as we have seen, was estimated as taking 5 to 10 years following their initiation, our research investigation suggests that they continue to affect and place a strain on

academics in middle-level positions after some 20–30 years; perhaps the managerial reforms are a little more far-reaching than sometimes might be supposed. But while respondents in the earlier interviews in our research investigation often expressed concern about the changes and said they were struggling to cope, more recent interviews from Sweden and England suggest that those involved are finding ways of coping. Even so, there is a recognition that accepting the pressures that accompany the reforms does not stop them from conflicting with research time, exacerbating the difficulties as academics juggle their everyday responsibilities, as if they were keeping balls in the air; and this appears to affect female academics more than males, as females' time for research is still constrained by competing responsibilities, especially in England, where performativity appears to have become more established and widespread as far as we are able to establish from our wider research investigation. Even so, women's seemingly increased presence in research might suggest something akin to an unspoken strategy that, while espousing two steps forward, simultaneously accepts at least one step back in terms of maintaining broader inequalities of gender relations in the academy.

As recently as 2001, our female interviewees talked of constraints in their career choices and said they were coming to see themselves increasingly as teachers and administrators, rather than as researchers. They also seemed to be poised only to maintain, or even reduce, the levels of responsibility they had, rather than to pursue career "advancement" in order to secure professorial or senior managerial identities.

By 2011–2012, however, research was coming to be an important part of their work in terms of maintaining a research profile and research identity. Yet time for research was reported to be highly constrained, with other responsibilities and their performative effects impinging upon it and affecting women academics adversely, with female and male academics alike focusing increasingly on two out of the three traditional areas of academic work—teaching, research, and administration—which have meanwhile become subject to managerial oversight through neobureaucratic performative regimes of surveillance and control, with some in our illustrative sample indicating that as middle-level managers themselves they were engaging in managing junior colleagues as and when considered necessary to ensure that others did not take on an unfair burden of work. Yet the reluctance to be seen as one of these managers shown by our interviewee who withheld her quotations remains somewhat puzzling; or is this a more politicized issue than the supposedly neutral technicist performativity of metrics would imply?

The limited nature of our sample, which is nonetheless illustrative of our broader research findings, must caution generalization, as does our focus here, which is predominantly on women rather than on both women and men. Yet in all this, it does appear that research activity, with funding and respected publication as the end result, is becoming more important for all academics, including women who have taken advantage of opportunities that have opened up, but who

nonetheless remain disadvantaged as they struggle to balance these opportunities alongside heavy teaching and administrative responsibilities, where oversight and regulation may just be helping to maintain their marginalized status.

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