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Career Trajectories of Female Academics at a German University of Applied Sciences: Barriers and Enablers on the Road to a Professorship

SARAH VADER. ANICA WALDENDORF

Introduction

Although many female academics work in academia, only few women make it to high-level positions in university institutions (Zimmer/Krimmer/Stallmann 2006). Much has been written on career trajectories of women in academia and the hindrances for female academics on the road to a professorship (e.g. Briedis et al. 2014; Kahlert 2012; Krais/Beaufaÿs 2005). However, these studies either solely focus on the career trajectories of professors at universities or do not differentiate between the different types of institutions. In Germany, there are two different types of professorship that entail distinct qualifications. In addition to teaching experience and proof of academic work experience, a professorship at a university requires a postdoctoral lecturing qualification whilst a professorship at a university of applied sciences demands a minimum of three years work experience outside of the university. These differences in formal requirements potentially lead to different factors playing a role in academic trajectories toward a professorship. Only little research has been conducted on the specificities of women's career trajectories at universities of applied sciences (Schlegel 2006; Stark/Kiendl 2013). In order to elaborate the knowledge on this topic and gain more specific insight into the career trajectories and decision-making processes of female academics at universities of applied sciences, we carried out a small qualitative study at a university of applied sciences in North Rhine-Westphalia. We conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with three female professors and four female postdoctoral researchers[1] who currently work at a university of applied sciences about their career trajectories and choices. The interviews took place from the end of 2016 until 2017. We transcribed the interviews and analysed the material using qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2011), allowing us to highlight the factors that play a central role for the career trajectory towards a professorship at a university of applied sciences.

Career Trajectories at Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences

Whilst academics at universities follow a comparatively clear sequential career trajectory, this is not the case for universities of applied sciences (Schlegel 2006). Ideally, a career trajectory for a professorship at a university follows a clear sequence and is very direct. This makes career planning and setting the goal for a professorship important in becoming a professor at a university (Schürmann/Sembritzki 2017). For Heike Kahlert (2012), those who opt for an academic career follow a clear path towards a professorship. For those who do not work towards a professorship or make that decision at a later stage in their career, a professorship is only taken if the opportunity presents itself (usually at a university of applied sciences). Academically focused career planning is thus much more important for university professors than for university of applied sciences professors who can (and must) leave academia to gain work experience outside the university. As our empirical data shows, this makes the career trajectories of academics at a university of applied sciences very diverse.

Career Trajectories of Women Who Decide for a Professorship at a University of Applied Sciences

The interviewed professors and one postdoctoral researcher make up the group of women who decide for a professorship at a university of applied sciences. In the following they will be referred to as group one. The career trajectories of these women are very diverse. Two of them started their PhD directly after obtaining their university degree and before working in positions outside of the university. The other two women went back to university to obtain a PhD after having worked in different positions outside of the university. When asked about their career planning all four of them stated they did not plan their career at all, neither did they originally aim to become a professor. All of them had or have alternatives to becoming a professor: "But I also had an offer from (…) in accounting I just remembered, well, and then I had also applied at the (…) university and then I received a scientific assistant position there."[2]

The interviewees' decision for a professorship was mainly based on their wish for a job change, a new challenge. Furthermore, the freedom that comes with the job, the love for teaching and the combination of theoretical and practical applied work has also been mentioned as central factors in their choice for the professorship.

Three of the women in this group have children. Two of the women currently hold a professorship and started their families before taking on the position of professor. The other woman has a child and sees becoming a professor as a possibility in her future. Although they do mention difficulties in their work-family balance they never saw the combination of an academic career with family life as impossible. According to all three of them, working in academia and especially being a professor leaves a lot of room to organise family obligations around work and vice versa. It is even

suggested that the compatibility of family and work is higher in academia than in the private economy.

> Of course you can do that as a professor, because really only half of your working hours are fixed appointments (...). That means, for example, in the evening when a child is in bed you can start working again or you can also sometimes work at the weekend (...).

For the current professors, looking back on their career, they wish that they had had more support from their supervisors in the early phases of their career, especially with regard to career planning: "You could have planned more. That should be the supervisor's task. If I may criticise my habilitation supervisor again."

Career Trajectories of Women Who Decide Against a Professorship at a University of Applied Sciences

Just like for the women who choose to pursue a professorship, the career trajectories of those women who decide against a professorship, referred to as group two, are also very multi-faceted. And just like the first group, they also mention not having planned their careers. Although all women in group two have the required qualifications to apply for a professorship at a university of applied sciences, they are unsure if they want to take on such a position in the near future. This is mainly due to the interviewees perceiving such a position as being incompatible with family obligations, the hierarchical and masculinist structures, the difficulty of having a good work-life balance due to the high workload and the restriction of one's career due to the partner's career.

The women in group two name combining a family and a career as one reason not to aim for a professorship. As one of the women explains, taking on such a position would mean that she has to organise extensive childcare, and could not be there for her children as she would want to. Importantly, family encompasses not only children but also partners. In some cases, the problem is not about combining children and work, but rather about combining two careers within a dual-career couple: "But I have to confess, somehow, I would, well I find it difficult as a family, if both have a full professorship."

Another factor that affects the postdoctoral researchers' decisions against a professorship is academia's masculinist and hierarchical structures that make it difficult for women to attain a certain position as an academic. Two women mention this as a reason not to pursue a professorship: "These structural limitations speak against it the most. (…) social origin, class, gender (…)."

Whilst the work itself makes a professorship attractive, the surrounding structures appear rather disfavourably.

Discussion

The diversity present in the career trajectories of female academics at universities of applied sciences, in contrast to the more sequential and standardised trajectories at universities becomes apparent in this study. In both, group one and group two, women do not set out with a clear intention of becoming a professor, hence they do not pursue a clear sequential trajectory toward a professorship. For most of the interviewed participants, the decision for a professorship or a job in academia came at a later stage in their career. The lack of career planning is (more) compatible with the university of applied sciences professorship, in contrast to the university professorship.
Significant about this study is that all interviewed women in group two have the formal requirements for a professorship. It is not the lack of qualification preventing them from applying for a professorship, but instead other factors such as the perceived incompatibility of work and family life, hindering conservative structures and the desire to have a good work-life balance. This study reveals the way in which career trajectories of women at universities of applied sciences differ from the career trajectories of professors at universities that are presented in the literature. The career trajectories at universities of applied sciences reflect the specificities of the requirements at universities of applied sciences and thus offer more flexibility within the career trajectory. It is therefore important to differentiate between the two types of institutions and conduct more research on the particularities of (female) careers at universities of applied sciences in comparison to universities.

Notes

1 The term postdoctoral researcher in this study does not refer to the current academic position of these women at the university of applied sciences but instead indicates that they have obtained a PhD degree (two) or are very close to finishing the PhD (one).
2 AW translated all quotes from the interviews into English.

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