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Dorte Marie SØNDERGAARD

Making Sense of Gender, Age, Power and Disciplinary Position: Intersecting Discourses in the Academy

This article provides analyses of ways in which sociocultural categories interfere with more formal assessment practices in academic contexts. While arguing that university careers demand academic as well as cultural and social capabilities, the analyses set out to understand how discourses of sex/gender, age, power and disciplinary position intersect, and how these intersections affect mutual interpretations among academicians. The text opens insights into some of the discursive practices that are provided for men and women, young and senior academics working in the margins or the core of their disciplines, in order for them to be read as culturally intelligible in their academic contexts. Intersections are shown to form highly complex networks of discursive practices that not only ‘cut through’ or ‘add’ effects of meaning to each other, but also work to tone and transform the pathways laid out for individuals in their lived lives. The analyses are based on an empirical study conducted among male and female assistant, associate and full professors at five different universities.

Key Words: hybridity, intersectionality, organization, sex/gender, university

How does academic positioning work? How do sociocultural categories and discourses on gender, age, power, etc. intersect in an academic context? And how do they interfere with formal categories like academic titles and other official assessment markers in the field? These are some of the questions that I will discuss in this article. To do this I bring in the concept of intersectionality as an analytic tool that emphasizes the focus of intersecting practices of differentiation.

To take up university positions and to achieve promotions within academic hierarchies demand at least two sets of competences. The first regards proving a range of research capabilities gradually accumulated in publications, academic degrees and other kinds of academic performances exposed to formal assessment. The second concerns the management of a range of cultural and social
capabilities that would imply knowledge about how to ‘do academic’. This involves practical-social knowledge about how to behave in different situations, what to say when and in what way, how to network, how to economize information and how to handle mutual favours as well as obstructions in interactions with academic colleagues, competitors, friends, superiors and subordinates. And it certainly involves subtle knowledge about how to do ‘academic boundary work’, as Eva Petersen terms it (Petersen, 2004). It involves knowledge of how to do all this through which kinds of formal and informal institutional practices. All academicians know that informal assessments are as important as the formal ones, but in assessment processes the informal evaluations are tacitly working behind and underneath official presentations. Talking about others works to position others as well as oneself. The reputation of each scholar will, in that sense, consist of discursive practices that go far beyond those rooted in the formal assessment procedures. Competences in ‘doing academic’ in this practical-social sense are obviously never exposed to formal assessment (Bloch, 2003; Bourdieu, 1990a, 1990b; Haavind, 1989; Hasse, 2003; Søndergaard, 2001, 2003).

The two sets of competences are mutually entangled. Reading Latour we learn that no ‘result’ of research is living a life in isolation from the efforts of interpretation delivered by the researcher (and others) (Latour, 1987). The researchers are bound to make their ‘results’ relevant in more comprehensive contexts. ‘Results’ gain existence and authority solely by the recognition from other agents, i.e. other academics/scientists, potential purchasers (of ‘results’ that may have been turned into ‘products’), politicians, etc. The recognition implies interpretation of the potentials and character of the ‘results’, their situated relevance and local usefulness – for instance, in other researchers’ efforts to progress and to gain recognition for their ‘results’. So, in this ‘Latourian’ sense, ‘doing academic’ involves the management of the two sets of intertwined competences invested in practices that facilitate comprehensive recognition through multifaceted efforts of interpretation.

However, talking about the two sets of competences as mutually entangled in the ongoing interpretation of ‘research results’ calls upon yet another layer of complexities. The academics, the interpreters of results and the receivers of potential interpretations, are themselves enmeshed in mutual interpretational processes based on readings of their belonging to a range of sociocultural categories and positions. The analysis in this article therefore calls upon questions about how this ‘doing academic’ intersects with ‘doing gender’, as well as ‘doing’ other categories.

The meanings attached to gender are established through connotations that intersect cultural codes of other categories. There will always be a whole range of other categories involved in the constitution of subject positions: age, ethnicity, membership of other academic groups such as ‘she/he was educated at university x, or y’ / ‘was a student of professor z or w’ – all such ‘signs’ or ‘markers’ may open very lively presumptions about who s/he is, what is relevant
for him/her and what one consequently might expect from such a person. So will knowledge about sexual preferences (or even the lack of particular preferences or of sexual interest, as it were), marital status, social background, being a parent or not, etc. Taking up all potential categories is, of course, out of reach in one article. The analysis here will limit itself to sex/gender, age and positioning concerning power and disciplinary engagement. Let me, however, address the concepts of sex/gender and of intersection briefly to provide some analytic premises going across this next layer of complexities.

Sex/gender is basically understood as a cultural construction with strong effects concerning subjectification processes (Butler, 1990, 1993; Davies, 2000; Haavind, 2000; Søndergaard, 1996, 2002). Therefore it is the product of the reiterative and citational practices by which, as Butler terms it, ‘discourse produces the effects that it names’ (Butler, 1993: 2). As Butler argues (while simultaneously dissolving the distinction between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’): “‘Sex’ is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the ‘one’ becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility’ (1993: 2). The ongoing doing of gender is processed as an inevitable aspect of sociocultural specific discursive practices (Foucault, 1978; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Sex/gender is in this sense produced, reproduced, negotiated and reshaped through all kinds of discursive practices – all of which involve humans being read and identified as belonging to a specific sex/gender category depending on (interpretations of) the signs on their bodies (Butler, 1990; Søndergaard, 1996, 2002).

The concept of intersectionality has been developed in and among theoretical traditions like postmodern feminist theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory and black feminism (Lykke, 2003). It has been used for analysis of sociocultural categories and their mutual interacting effects (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1994; Young, 1997), and it has provided analytical tools for studying interacting processes among power relations and constituting effects of categories such as, for instance, gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality. Interacting relations of these kinds have been studied before in the theory of feminist research (Haavind, 1987; Hartmann, 1981; Mitchell, 1971). And one may think of the concept as an emphasis of analytic potentials rather than a new conceptual invention (Lykke, 2003). In this sense, intersectionality may appropriately be understood as a conceptual contribution that gathers and redirects theoretical and empirical endeavours within a range of different critical research traditions. Doing so also renders the concept open to improvement. And critical discussions have already focused upon a range of aspects in need of further reflection (Lykke, 2003; Staunæs, 2003). Most importantly, the concept needs specification in order to help avoid additive approaches of the kind that may simply sum up suppressive and constitutive characteristics of two or more categories. This is an approach that would focus on a group of, say, black working-class women first in terms of their oppression by race, then by gender and then by class. Adding it all up results in a threefold version of oppressive history. Although this kind of approach carries
important political potentials (linked to strategies of identity politics), it also runs
the danger of a far too stereotyped and deterministic analysis of the socio-
cultural categories as well as the persons subjectified through them.

The additive approach misses the opportunity to analyse the complex mutual
saturation and toning among the categories. Black doesn’t remain the same
unaffected ‘black’ when intersected by class, gender, nationality, sexuality – you
name it. Saturation and toning mean that their constitutive dynamics move,
transform and work on and within each other, while mutually intersecting in
everyday discursive practices. This point links up with the already mentioned
poststructuralist understanding of sociocultural categories as something subjects
‘do’ rather than something they ‘are’. Sociocultural categories are in this sense
not to be conceptualized as stable and fixed, easily demarcated entities, but rather
as discursive practices being taken up and reproduced or altered, reiterated or
challenged by the subjects and groups of people that come into existence through
them (Søndergaard, 2002).

Following this line of argument, the additive approach also misses the oppor-
tunity to analyse and understand how men and women in their everyday lives take
up these intersecting categories and their discursive invitations (interpellations)
in particular ways (Staunæs, 2003). Individuals are not merely determined by
their categories, they move in and through these categories with all the contra-
dictions and ruptures that the intersections among the categories represent. As
Nina Lykke points out, it is important to understand subjects as living in and
among a range of asymmetric power relations as these intersect each other
(Lykke, 2003).

Some of the new ambitions concerning the concepts of intersectionality would
include focus upon complexities of these kinds and upon the emergence of
new versions of diversities in and among the sociocultural categories and their
mutual constituting dynamics. That means highlighting the various kinds of
hybrid versions and mutual discursive toning that result from the intersecting
movements. Ambitions would also include a focus upon subjectification
dynamics and, in particular, aim to develop sensitive analyses of variations and
new kinds of discursive practices and ruptures brought about in the intersecting
movements, since these new tendencies and new practices may carry the kind of
discursive critical potentials asked for by feminist researchers among others.

I cannot promise to meet all these ambitions in their full vigour in this article,
but it is this complex and sensitive use of the concept of intersectionality that
informs the analysis below. The selection of some of the categories in focus,
though, is more context specific than those mentioned in the theoretical defini-
tions above. There is no doubt that sex/gender makes up a strong category in the
academic field. There are certainly national variations as to the numbers consti-
tuting the gendered patterns, although the patterns themselves seem to follow
the same basic rules. Taking Denmark as an example shows an increase in the
proportion of female full professors at the five ‘old universities’ from 3.4 percent
in 1979 to 6 percent in 1996. Permanent academic staff of all categories at the
University of Copenhagen were 18 percent women in 1970 and 21.5 percent women in 2001 (Henningsen, 2003).

THE STUDY OF GENDER AND THE ACADEMY

The analyses in this article are based on an empirical study conducted around the millennium. I interviewed 18 academics from the humanities and social sciences at five Danish universities. Nine men and nine women told me their experiences, observations and understandings of everyday life seen from positions ranging from assistant professor to full professorships. My interview questions circled around decision-making processes, recruitment practices and collegial relationships in everyday life at the universities. The questions appealed to all sorts of telling that might narrate the cultural and discursive practices within the particular fields.

In the narratives it was possible to follow practices of meaning making concerning sex/gender and the intersections with age, power and disciplinary position. It became possible to see who would talk in what ways about which potential positioning, and to follow the gendering processes as the discourses were taken up or contested (Søndergaard, 1996, 2002). It was, for instance, possible to see how male-signed academics in varying positions of power and within the hierarchy would assess the earlier mentioned two sets of competences of female as well as male-signed academics positioned lower, parallel to or even potentially above these male-signed academics themselves. Thereby, the analysis points to boundaries, acceptance and contestation for ways (and intersections) of doing gender, doing academics, doing age, power and engagement.

The interviewees cited below were selected from the interviewee group as a whole because their wordings help understand and vitalize the patterns of meaning-making that the analysis of the overall data material has revealed. It would therefore be incorrect to talk about the citations as, in any sense, ‘representative’ since that would imply a realist take on the study. Since the analyses are about discursive practices, the citations are aimed at helping the reader realize what the discourses of social categories are doing. These discourses make up conditions for male as well as female academics. When the analysis follows patterns in the meaning-making processes of single persons, in this article four male interviewees, this is in order to help communicate the kind of meaning-making at play in the field as such; not as a word-by-word generalization, but as a way of understanding codes and discourses at work.

A FEMALE ACCESS TO TRANSGRESSION?

I will open the analyses by letting one of the interviewees tell of his observations. When Robert tells me about his closest female colleague, with whom he has done
a couple of research projects, his story expresses a mixture of respect and slight wonder. He sees Ann as a very ingenious academic. She is theoretically strong and good at empirical analysis. She is capable of structuring a thematic field in no time. She is good at organizing, at writing and presenting ideas; so he tells me.

When I ask him: ‘Will she be one of the big guys here some day?’ he nevertheless hesitates. He says:

Yeah, well no, well, she is very, you know – I don’t know! She is very determined in a way. And then she is also very – but she is very, you know, like, unconventional or, yeah – and, that of course is also a way to gain ground. Unorthodox or – yeah well, like very like unimpressed and very, like she doesn’t obey protocols, as one might normally expect someone to do around here. And that’s also a way to win through – sure!

Then he adds:

And – that is something a man couldn’t do. That’s a hundred per cent for sure!

Robert finds it quite difficult to estimate Ann’s career potentials. On one hand, she performs all the adequate academic skills. But on the other hand, she fails to perform ‘academic’ as normally expected. He notices that by not conforming to protocols she gains ground – in some sense. But he is obviously not quite sure what this might come to mean in the long run. Asked about specifics as to what protocols would be, and how Ann seems not to observe them, Robert describes a range of concrete situations. When the two of them would go to a meeting with men in authority – a huge table surrounded by senior men, decision makers with access to funding potentials – one thing to comment on is the outfit. Robert will wear a suit and tie. And so will all the men around the table. Ann will also be ‘well dressed’, as he says. Still, she is well dressed in a different way. Her outfit makes her visibly different.

Well dressed includes a suit and tie. Well dressed doesn’t exclude the female-connoted versions of the genre. But a suit and tie make up a more specific compliance of well dressed at the entrance to this social space. Ann doesn’t have any kind of access to this kind of compliance in terms of suit and tie. So, regarding appearance, she is referred to more unspecific and less precise signs of who she may be in this particular group in this particular context.

These men in the room were cooperating partners in one of the research projects conducted by Ann and Robert, and Robert describes this meeting:

We were there to sort of show who we were, and they should see us and so on. And there – even in a situation like this – well, I would probably be prepared to say: all right, now you play this play, and then I am there and I behave well and wear a tie and so on and what it takes to . . . and that’s where she was clearly able to play at different keys.

He continues:
Like for instance she would come in and joke: ‘Well, I think I want some of these’, and then just start eating the chocolates on the table, and then say: ‘Can I have’ – there were these high quality cigars on the table, in a nice cigar box, and cigarettes and things like that, and then she goes: ‘I think I want a cigar’ – you know joking with it. That is, I took it to be a joke, but the persons who sat there – they were all, like, senior men and very polite – and well, he handed her a cigar and so on. And then she said: ‘It was only a joke,’ and she played on it.

Now, if we look at the categories and signs at play here, there is first of all age and gender assisted by dress – interacting with doing academic. Robert and Ann are both young and by that different from the men in authority around the table. Robert does, however, through his dress tied to the sign on the body take up a very distinct marker indicating that in spite of his age he is basically one of the same kind as the men in the room, only he is younger. Age is a category in which the members are expected to move. By dressing alike – an option only offered to people belonging to same sex/gender category – age may be foregrounded as something that can potentially be bridged over: one day Robert will no longer be young. He will be senior. He will be no different from the other men around the table. He exposes himself as potentially on his way to becoming one of the same kind.

‘Younger’ here does, however, indicate Robert as being the same kind as Ann. But Ann carries more markers of difference vis-à-vis the men. She is not only younger, she is also woman; something (inevitably, following cultural norms) exhibited by assisting signs in terms of different dress. And she is also behaving differently. She does academic differently. These additional signs of difference may function to weaken the potential of bridging age in the case of Ann. Difference for Ann is signed not only by age, but by gender, dress and behaviour. ‘Demanding’ a cigar, an act that disproves femininity both in the craving and in what she craves, even destabilizes expectations about her doing of difference. This is not only doing feminine, the opposite of masculine, this is also doing feminine as academically different.

The interesting thing is that, as Robert also notes, the men seem to exhibit some kind of hesitant acceptance, even approval, of Ann’s doings of difference. To understand this means to consider that, by her gender, Ann is expected to do difference, but that conventional femininity would be incompatible with doing academic. So the tie-dressed male-signed individuals in the room tend to remain expectant to see what expression her difference will take, not too repelled by first looks: Here comes the ‘stranger’, differently dressed, look what she does: starts eating before it is appropriate, exhibiting inappropriate smoking habits for her kind. Here comes the ‘stranger’, let’s await her performance of difference.

In the space left by this hesitant expectancy, Ann does, however, not only take the opportunity to joke, but also to exhibit academic skills and (again) unorthodox ways of bringing these skills into concrete use of relevance to the senior men. She even exhibits the capability to move flexibly between conventional academic investigation and unorthodox concrete inquiry. Ann could have read the men’s
hesitancy as an indication of her presence being irrelevant. She might have under-
stood their falttering as an indication of her inappropriateness in the context. That
might have resulted in uneasiness, dislike and withdrawal, even hostility on her
part. But instead she reads the hesitancy as an invitation to take action. She starts
playing, and performs ‘the difference’. She takes the stage and actively performs
‘different’, ‘stranger’, ‘other’, all pointing to ‘potentially inappropriate’. But this
doesn’t prevent her from contributing academic discussions at a high level and of
clear relevance to the male-signed seniors in power.

In the interviews with males and females alike, this female strategy, vis-à-vis
hesitation and expectancy from the male-signed in the academic encounter with
‘woman’, is revealed more than once: the visibility, the relative silence and
uncertainty on the part of men confronted with the different is narrated most
directly by female interviewees as a potential opportunity to take action and set
the stage; so to speak to make a virtue of the visibility as different. I shall return
to the effects of this strategy when intersected by disciplinary position, age and
power.

Robert talks about another setting among academics, where he and Ann again
are the young researchers among senior men in power, in this case professors
from an international scene:

Also here, I think, she was very good at this softening up – she joked and made
the presentation in a different way, where they sort of accepted it. I experienced
it very much as if they took it as a relief – that you – where you softened some-
thing up, as – as I said before, I could not have softened up things in the same
way, I don’t believe so – that is, it would have been understood as odd or it may
not really have been perceived at all – where she can come in and make them
relax a bit.

Apparently, in this context the female gender category, the ‘other’, gives
access to transgressions not accessible for a male-signed academic. ‘I’d say,’
states Robert, ‘that she got away with things, that I would – if I had said the
things she did – I would fear that they would take them as an expression of
impudence or something like that.’ But of course ‘what has to be added is that
her professional competences are indisputable,’ says Robert, ‘that is, they would
not be able to catch her on the wrong side. They can say: “All right maybe we sit
here and discuss a less serious example, but back to what it’s seriously about” –
and then she is just able to make the shift.’ Ann’s high academic performance,
or if you like her indisputable exposition of the recognizably academic, does in
this specific context work to compensate for the ‘differences’ she exhibits
(Søndergaard, 1996).

In order to understand Ann’s subject position on the basis of gender, age,
behaviour, dress and academic competences, yet another aspect has to be
addressed: the position within the discipline. Ann is positioned in the mainstream
with respect to her academic discipline. She used to work within a ‘more
marginal’ area of the discipline but has lately changed focus, so that now she is
identified and recognized as utterly competent within the indisputable core areas of that particular field so far as its present constructions work. When it comes to this particular aspect of recognition as a relevant academic she is not at risk of being read as different. Difference is in her case performed by realization of the other components. Sameness is secured by recognition as competent and mainstream positioned within the academic discipline on stage.

We may ask: would Ann have had access to respect and recognition if those two signs had also been troubled by difference, and thereby by lower access to recognition? If she had worked at the margins of the discipline and employed not only alternative examples in her presentations but also alternative research approaches and theoretical perspectives; and if she had done this through what might have been read as a more mediocre performance – what would have happened? Is it likely that ‘that much difference’ would have caused the balance to tip and her sex/gender to no longer work as an exotic teaser sharpening attention and visibility in the context, but instead to work as a sign proving ‘less relevance’, ‘less competence’ – as perhaps expected in the first place, though nowadays potentially contradicted?

AGE AND HIERARCHICAL POSITION TONES GENDER

Nonetheless – as stated in Robert’s narrative – Ann is a success. So how come Robert hesitates when asked about Ann’s career potential? If he is so fascinated by her skills and social capability to transgress borders and make herself visible in a way that opens doors, how come he is not sure that one day she will be one of the big guys in their field? Looking at the narratives in my data there seems to be a whole range of representations of young competent women, funny, pretty, lively, colourful creatures posing interesting questions and offering (relatively) alternative angles within what is described by male as well as female-signed interviewees as a more grey and rigid practice of interaction among academic men.

‘Yeah, they use it a bit, being younger women and, as it is, charming and lively,’ says Kenneth, one of the senior men in power among the interviewees while talking in a positive way about these young women and what they do to the working environment. Parallel to Robert’s narrations he adds: ‘The women are allowed to be youthful in a way that one wouldn’t expect from the men.’ I ask: ‘Neither from men the same age?’ And he says: ‘That would be seen as ill-mannered, if it were men behaving that way. But it isn’t seen that way in this case [the case of the women].’

The thing is, however, that this youthfulness in the women can only pass as an appropriate doing of difference in a particular period of the women’s career; that is, only while they are young and during their PhD studies or early in their assistant professorships. Later, it doesn’t pass as appropriate. Age and hierarchical position seem to tone the ways that are appropriate for doing sex/gender
and academic, and these are evaluated and reacted to within the accessible discourses.

Kenneth has understood the consequences of this point. He says: 'They will, so to speak, have to undergo an extra process of development,' and he proceeds to say that at the levels of late assistant professor and associate professor positions, the women would be considered immature if they were behaving the same way. That is why he, as a consequence, has taken the initiative to invite female full professors for seminars and research meetings; of course primarily for their merits and competences, but also because these persons would 'do professor' appropriately, as women.

Kenneth describes the different goals that these already different young men and women must reach to 'do academic' appropriately when, say, having reached the position of full professor: 'There are different ways even to be a highly recognized and esteemed professor, and there is a clear difference as to how female and male can be – so it is not only a local phenomenon.' He refers to a description of a particular guest professor at his department, a person who apparently 'did female professor' appropriately.

I ask: 'How do you see the difference, then, when you look at these seniors?' Kenneth, talking about the female side of difference, answers:

Well they can be, that is they maintain authority and remain professional without problems, even though they interact with people in a very lively and attentive way. In that way they are so to speak ideal academics. And also good at demonstrating that, when it is serious, it is serious. I mean nobody doubts who the person is, that you have in front of you. And then – it can be all sorts of issues, but now I repeat my favourite: they can examine abstract theory, there will be a hundred students sitting there writing with all their energy and they cannot keep up with; and then in the break they [the female professors] talk about their children and husband.

I ask: 'Without them losing authority?' Kenneth says: 'Yes, and in a way that a male professor would never start talking; at least not publicly and in that situation.' I ask: 'What would happen, if he did so?' Kenneth says: 'Yeah, the first reaction would probably be that that was great, but then it would probably still be seen as some kind of, so to speak, sign of lack of concentration or clear-cut focus – like: one thing at a time.'

So the young colourful, charming and lively women in lower positions have to undergo – compared to their same-age male colleagues – an extra development, in the sense that they need to develop a way of doing mature academic, but to do it femalewise, in order for them to become appropriate within the accessible discourses. The young men somehow seem to be 'mature' and behaving appropriately from the beginning, doing academic right from the start. Their potential deficits, according to the discourse taken up by Kenneth, concern other matters, such as being too self-assertive. This is a matter of balance within the same category, assertive, but not too assertive. Assertiveness, however, seems to be
lacking in the category of women as they are narrated in the interviews. Kenneth says:

> They [the young women] have problems there. Their self-confidence and their visions about themselves, they have big problems with that; problems that the young promising male researchers don’t have. The men are quicker to say: ‘I can do this! There must be space for me!’ That is what characterizes all men without exception in this world, as it were. This thing that: ‘Damn it, there must be space for me here! Not necessarily that I deserve it because I am better than the others, but because what I am is quite all right.’ That is not a problem for men at all!

According to Kenneth, men’s conduct will at the outset be proper conduct; only there may be too little or too much of it. Women’s, on the other hand, is different. And women’s must remain different. Only difference must mature for the women to remain appropriate.

In the discourses taken up by Kenneth and other interviewees, ‘doing difference’ at the professor level involves ‘doing male’ in the room in terms of academic performance, but ‘doing female’ in the break. And ‘doing female’ will, among other things, mean to demonstrate family engagement.

The ‘extra development’ that the young women have to engage in concerns a movement away from being so ‘young’ and from being so ‘female’ – young and female here intersected in some kind of notion of behaviour that is too lively and colourful. Young and male doesn’t carry the same connotations. Young and male is more like less of the senior male. Young and female is tolerated, even approved of, and it implies a lack of sameness demonstrated in a rather free-floating way across arenas. Coming to female maturity, however, means coming to male-connoted self-discipline as demonstrated in the capacity to split particular issues.

It means splitting personal attentiveness on one hand and on the other hand what is considered to be depersonalized/abstracted conduct. It involves splitting the ‘social’ and the ‘professional’. The difference, however, that must remain also at a mature level is contained in the capacity of the female professor to exhibit both engagements, though controlled and reserved for different arenas, whereas the male professor should only exhibit one side, namely the depersonalized/abstracted and professional one.

However this is even more complicated, since what is considered to be ‘social’ and ‘professional’ will also be toned by gender interpretations. The term ‘social’ as something opposite to ‘serious academic’ tends to be reserved for informal interactions among women, whereas the informal interactions among men seem to be the kind of ‘social’ that would not disprove academic seriousness in the same way. In an earlier study of cultural codes among academic students (Søndergaard, 1996), the informal talk among male-signed students about football, parties, drinking, friends, sex, etc., was clearly not considered to be part of the ‘social’ that might pollute ‘academic’. Whereas whatever would be narrated as typically ‘social’ among women (like drinking tea and talking to female
friends, in Danish: ‘chicken talk’) would be considered an absolute danger to
academic conduct. The same kind of differences may be observed in relation to
readings of academic seriousness: what may be understood as true expressions of
serious academic conduct may vary in specific contexts depending on the sign on
the body of the person doing academic as well as on the gender connotations of
the sub-discipline or the methodological approach that the ‘academic’ is realized
within. In a study about academic students, this would be expressed, for instance,
in gender connotations of particular disciplines. Small-scale empirical studies in
public services would be connoted feminine if positioned within disciplines also
containing studies of international politics and economics. The same goes for
methodological approaches where qualitative empirical and grounded analysis
conducted with, for instance, limited numbers of interviewees would be connoted
e feminine in the context of large quantitative surveys or pure theoretical
approaches (the last version being apparently more European than American
connoting practice).

To summarize, age intersects discursive practices of gender. Age demarcates
potential readings of appropriate doings of academic, but does so while repro-
ducing a particular code for doing appropriate gendered difference. Age outlines
pathways to be followed while changing the doings of gendered difference. But
age also outlines pathways to be followed while changing the doings of gendered
difference at differing hierarchical positions. Gender, age, disciplinary position,
conceived level of academic competences and hierarchical position make up
some of the ‘signs’ in the intertwining pathways that weave connoting networks
in these particular contexts. But that is not the final level of complexity that these
analyses have followed up. Power seems to make up yet another important part
of these networks.

Power and hierarchical position are not necessarily merging categories – you
can be a professor without maintaining a clear power position in whatever sense
power positions are read in the respective milieus. This is a clear consequence of
the initial point about ‘doing academic’ as a way of conduct that contains more
than formal achievements. For those who ‘do’ power and are recognized as
powerfully positioned, their power seems to form an important marker in the
networks of meaning-making. It may even be a marker that threatens the gender
imperative of doing difference. This is not in the sense that power resolves
gender as a basis for doing difference, or removes the effects of gender-specific
conducts of age and position in the networks of meaning/making processes. The
point is that inappropriate power positioning may render the holder invisible as a
gendered being. A female-signed individual doing power inappropriately risks
becoming invisible as woman, and thereby as a (culturally intelligible) being, as
it were (Butler, 1993). A final set of excerpts from an interview with Charles is
introduced to explain this point.
POWER SETS THE FINAL DEMARCATION

Young female-signed PhD students and assistant professors are, as already indicated, narrated as lively and colourful, charming and clever by many interviewees. Likewise there is an outspoken regret among, in particular, male interviewees when all the charm and colour disappears. ‘How come,’ some of the interviewees ask: ‘How come?’ Charles, a senior male in power, says:

I have had two good, really, really strong students among women, and they both succeeded, but it has, blast it, been tough. And they are spinsterish today, both of them. So in a way they have both sacrificed their spontaneous femininity in order to be able to assert themselves in that play there. I think it has been extremely sad, but I have had to realize that that was what happened.

Charles continues:

I don’t understand it . . . . Why is it not possible to produce these absolutely perspicacious, clever, intellectual women, without them having to sacrifice something in return? I am really sorry. And it annoys me that I cannot understand it . . . They lose femininity, because it gets so important to them to become masculine – in that sense. They don’t want to look like men, since they still look very good and all that, that is not the issue – but they have to sharpen their conduct and practices in ways that look like ours, in order to strike through . . . . These young vivacious women, they sand up. I am really sorry about it. Because, it is as if they in their will to power lose some of this femininity. It must of course be possible to maintain both elements.

Robert, Kenneth and Charles all take up the same accessible discourses about gender, age, power and the academic. But they are themselves positioned at different levels within the academic hierarchy. Robert, from his position, intuitively senses some kind of implied barrier in Ann’s doing academic when he is to consider her conduct in a longer perspective of time. Kenneth says that the young behaviour has to be altered, but he doesn’t address the implications for career potential connected with doing female difference at top levels. But Charles, being at the very top, senses the discursive border of female power very clearly, although he in the comments above also maintains sadness and lack of knowledge about the mechanisms. Let’s look a bit further into his reflections.

Charles’s narration of doing difference at the junior level is very similar to Robert’s and Kenneth’s: women are different in their charm, colourfulness, something that Charles calls attractiveness and femininity. His point is, however, that this femininity needs to be preserved in its more erotic relational potentials in order for female academics to be conceived as doing gender difference appropriately. This would be an obligation for young as for old – women, that is.

He says:

A woman aged 60 can damned well look good too, and she can do something about it. Say she brings an old purse to the meeting – my point is, she should
I try to explain to you, that those kinds of things are under consideration too – if she has an old purse with her, that is my point now: she hasn’t checked the situation! That is what is in it. I simply notice that she doesn’t understand what she is part of.

I ask: ‘And if she’d understood, what would she have done then?’ Charles says:

She would of course have put on lipstick, as a 60-year-old, and she would have joked with – instead of being ‘babe’ she would still have tried to demonstrate that she once was ‘babe’. Actually, nothing is so erotically fascinating as women, who are able to carry their age, in the sense that they can recognize that they are not the most attractive for the young man over there, and therefore they are envious – you need to consider that – envious of the young women sitting down there . . . . But if she is conscious about her means of operation in this context, then they are extraordinarily strong. I really know women that are unbelievably strong in this – not that they are going to make a date with you after the meeting– but still they have been able to flirt with you during the meeting, with a vengeance. Women that have made you speechless, that have made you take other directions than those you thought you would take, by using their kind of strength, that is their kind of seduction.

What Charles displays here and over several pages in the interview transcript is a notion of difference toned heavily with heteroerotic connotations. These connotations divide individuals into two distinct categories that are maintained and currently reworked as different and then put in mutually attractive positions. The discursive practices invite men and women to interact and communicate through always potentially erotically toned means (Søndergaard, 1996). As Charles states, there is a (to him) incredible power potential connected with this female conduct of interaction and communication vis-à-vis men. Through this erotically toned interaction, the female doing of difference draws long tracks of influence with it. Only she has to obey certain rules. She is not the one to carry suggestions and decisions through at meetings peopled by men, as Charles narrates it. She is to ‘sell’ her thoughts and ideas to men, and let them carry the ideas through. This is one among many directions offered. It is influence through men that we are talking about here, as part of the appropriate doing of difference when it comes to female doing of power.

In this discursive practice, the intersecting networks of connotations among gender, power, position and age set up taken-for-granted boundaries when it comes to the female side of the dualism and the female-signed individual’s access to increased power. This discursive practice involves a particular dilemma. Since the potential power enacted by female-signed individuals in the discursive practices taken up by Charles are closely connected with a heteroerotically toned communicational style, it leaves the female-signed persons heavily dependent on the erotic reflection of their persons by their male surroundings, subordinates as well as peers. Leaders/persons in power are, as known, dependent on subordinates to perform in ways that reproduce the power position of the leader.
That is why Charles’s next statement is quite important for us to understand the patterns of this particular discursive practice. He says: ‘Women, who progress and gain power, are not erotically interesting.’ I get curious: ‘Why is that?’ And he answers:

Because, well, I just repeat why things work out differently on their way up. Because to explain why women with power shouldn’t be erotically – well, . . . I just claimed that men with power still maintain an erotic dimension, even though they aren’t tough, and even though they aren’t exactly handsome guys – still it is the case, that women in power are per definition not erotic for men.

As interviewer I try out potential further references in this discursive practice. So I ask: ‘They just aren’t?’ And Charles says:

Men in power are interesting for women . . . . For men, however, truly powerful women are not interesting. Because there – well I shall not pretend to know this – it is outside my field, but my idea – yeah, well, you understand what I mean – it is simply – because men are not erotically fascinated by women who are dominating. I think, that it is as banal and simple as that.

This is where we find what Derrida would call the final referent, Latour the black box, Laclau the nodal point. This is apparently the endpoint of reflection and reasoning about the intersection of gender and dominance within this discourse (Haavind 1984, 2000; Søndergaard 1996, 2002). According to this particular discursive practice, this is the taken-for-granted production of power demarcation. If this border is transgressed, the female-signed transgressor becomes invisible, unsympathetic, unauthentic and altogether inappropriate.

INTERSECTIONS

If we try to address the different intersections in the network of connotations, the network of discursive practices, then we see that positions as young and not-so-young would open a gradually emerging distinction in appropriate ways of doing female difference academically. Doing appropriate female difference would under all circumstances be exposed to readings filtered by the recognition of the person’s achievements and performance within a spectrum between disciplinary core and margin. The tentative core version would be found in well-performed mainstream positioning in any specific subject field with its constructions of core and margins at the time. And the version evaluated as more marginal would be encountered where the subject discipline was somehow challenged and realized in more critical or alternative versions, thereby read as more peripheral. So defining one’s own disciplinary position within what may at the time be taken as the core fields would make it easier to be recognized as an appropriate participant in spite of an eventually more unconventional doing of gender, as is ‘female’ in the first place but definitely inappropriate ‘female’ in the second place. Likewise,
mainstream disciplinary positioning may compensate for an unconventional doing of gendered youth and gendered maturity respectively.

But then comes power. And within some discursive practices power and superiority seem to be rather strong connoters, in the sense that we here have something that conduces to close down the category of recognizable femininity in one strike: power combined with woman => non-erotic => invisible as woman, i.e. invisible as human. As Judith Butler, cited earlier, said about ‘sex’: ‘...it will be one of the norms by which the “one” becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility’ (1993: 2). Not being recognized as sexed/gendered can become fatal. So when the threads of power are woven into the discursive networks it looks like a local tornado that tends to minimize the very possibility of recognition of whatever is constructed as female. Superiority seems to erase this particular construct: femininity. And the same may go for the opposite. The category, superior woman, thereby closes down and becomes inaccessible.

TRANSFORMATIONS

This is, I suppose, a suitable moment to raise the question of transformation: which routes would an eventual transformation take, given these fairly complex and intersecting sets of discursive practices? Let me address this issue at two levels. Robert – the young male interviewee, the colleague of Ann – is actually quite interested in the different ways of doing academic exposed by the young female-signed colleagues in general and Ann in particular. Ann’s unimpressed and unorthodox approach to power relations and authorities in the field seems somehow promising to him. Although Robert closes off the possibility of taking up these non-conforming ways of conduct, he is kind of curious about the potential reading of it as not just ‘female’, but merely as ‘young’. If they could be read as an expression of ‘youth’, of a new generation coming forward, doing things differently, etc., they might carry possibilities for him, too. Read as merely feminine they do, of course, close off as irrelevant in terms of being taken up by him as a serious male academic.

When Robert considers an eventual relevance or even appropriateness of this kind of conduct, what comes to his mind is a potential intersection with hierarchy. As a young man these unorthodox approaches are, as it is now, inaccessible, but imagine a young male professor, a new generation of professors: they might, ponders Robert, be able to take on this more informal and more personal profile as part of a legitimate performance. If the conduct is toned by hierarchy and by the notion of a new generation, Robert is able to imagine the otherwise female-connoted kinds of conduct taken up by male-signed academics.

If Robert were right about this possibility, the next question would be: suppose that this change in connotations from female into new-generation-masculine actually started to happen. For how long would the female gender connotation
stick to the Ann-wise way of doing academic before the change was realized? How would the change proceed? Would it be a slow process with many small steps on its way? Would it be a dramatic and sudden change? Would it include periods of ambiguous connotations, of explicit meaning-making negotiations? Would the process breed even more diverse and, for us, unknown versions of masculinities in the field? And – as maybe the most interesting question of them all – what kinds of influence would such a change have on the balances and mixing practices of meaning-making in the more extended web of intersections? That is, the intersections of which gender connotations and gendered discursive practices make up only one aspect?

These questions will be relevant in a slightly different sense in my last example that also forms the second level at which to address the question of transformation. Here, leadership and women, new generation, male leader and maturity make up the components of a potential connotative transformation.

One of the interviewed male seniors made use of a fairly clear gender distinction when talking about leadership. Mark would narrate male leadership as characterized by an intense focus on competition, on playing the game to win and conquer other men, and on taking the always relatively more superior position in any context. Female leadership would be focused on doing things, but doing by not humiliating anyone. It would aim at making results, but always moving through efforts to coordinate, never attempting to take up a superior position.

The interesting point that this interviewee subsequently raises concerns the potential movements of these styles of leadership. He says that the new generation of mature male leaders will take up some of these female strategies and make them their own. When I ask whether this will mean a more genuine acceptance of female leaders, Mark contradicts my suggestion. He says that this won’t be the case, since male leaders do the female strategies in smarter ways:

We who climb the system, we have to learn some of that – we have to understand that: well, it is not only, when you are in those situations, a question of [using male strategies] – well, one must become more female, so to speak. And now comes the point: maybe the reason for there not being so many women on the top is because we become more female gradually as we climb.

And the ‘we’ here indicates ‘men’. ‘It is because we do the female in a smarter way,’ he says.

Now this is a really interesting point in the light of potential discursive transformation. The basic patterns in the discursive practice taken up by Mark consist of a fairly clear gender dualism concerning leadership strategies and styles. This is a well-known and widespread discursive practice. But what may awaken our attention are the gradual openings and movements that he builds into this practice. First he loosens up the firm connection between strategies and gender signs. Female strategies and styles may pass over and into male-signed individuals when male-signed individuals mature. Still, this is not quite unfamiliar. We have met this discursive practice before in everyday discourses as well as
professional psychological discourses: this talk about male aspects realized in female-signed individuals and vice versa, men talking about their female sides, and women talking about their masculine aspects. What used to be crucial in these discursive practices, however, was that these aspects maintained their gender connotations and that the opposite gendered aspects remained inferior to the same gendered aspects realized by a particular person. So, usually a man’s ‘female aspects’ would be claimed to remain fewer and relatively more inferior to his ‘true’ and ‘male’ aspects and vice versa whenever sex/gender was to be done appropriately, to be culturally intelligible. That is the way this kind of discourse used to work (Søndergaard, 1996).

It would, however, be the last step in Mark’s discursive movement that would feed our curiosity for transformative potential. In his last step, he draws upon the connotative practice that connects male-signed individuals to relative dominance, in this case to leader positions. Having foregrounded this reference as inevitable, it becomes possible to entwine the female connoted strategies realized by individuals with male-signed bodies as a – and here comes the point – confirmation of the connection between male-signed bodies and dominance/leadership. Usually female-connoted aspects are to be compensated by more masculinity when realized by a male-signed person. But in this case there is no indication of need for compensation. The female-signed strategies and styles are not to be compensated – they merely function as a confirmation of the taken-for-granted male dominance. Why? How? Simply by stating that men-do-the-female-smarter. The claim overrules the taken-for-grantedness of female aspects being more naturally connected to female-signed individuals.

‘Man’ may, in other words, consult the female-connoted characteristics and ways of conduct and pick out useful aspects, bring them into the realization of male-connoted leadership, and do all this without connotations of either practices or aspects losing their ‘original’ gender tonings. The next question is, of course, as it were in the case of Robert: if this traffic became more widespread, would the female-connoted competences and ways of conduct realized by male-signed individuals maintain their female connotations? Or would their connotations change? Would the connotations merge, would they dissolve or regenerate in new versions? So that these new versions might be central knots in the discursive networks and intersections to invite individuals into processes of subjectification – thereby inviting individuals into new identities?

Although this particular example may open into more pessimistic readings, this is actually not the point. Transformation processes of the kind mentioned here may blur contours and demarcations in ways that may or may not open new routes out of categorical fixations. Intersections among varied and mutually incommensurable categories may open potentials for individuals in the processes of subjectification to move if not flexibly, then more flexibly, and to take more or less strategic advantage of the possibilities of mutual compensations and mutual challenges that work among these categories, to invent new platforms and new life possibilities.
NOTES

1. ‘Do academic’ corresponds to the concept of ‘doing gender’ introduced by West and Zimmerman in 1987. The idea is to point out the making of academic/gender in their always context-specific processes of construction as opposed to an understanding of academic/gender as something once and for all defined, demarcated, maybe even inherited and naturalized. The ‘doing’ here also works parallel to the concept of performativity in Judith Butler’s work (1990, 1993).

REFERENCES


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