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Who achieves authentic academic career advancement and how?

Insights from longitudinal interview research

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To stay true to yourself is a frequently shared counsel in organisational settings. A key outlet through which employees can express their authentic self is the direction of their careers, a concept known as career authenticity (Shockley et al. 2016). In their recent overview study, Cha et al. (2019) reflected that authenticity outcomes were the overwhelming emphasis of studies. To fully tap into the intended outcomes of career authenticity, insights are needed on how to foster career authenticity. More specifically, as authenticity is not necessarily a fixed characteristic; it can be influenced by several conditions over time. Longitudinal studies on career advancement—and other subjective career success indicators—are, however, scarce (Richardson et al., 2021).

Our general aim in this paper is to explore whether career ambitions are revisited over time and if so, how. Creating an authentic career is a challenge that encompasses more than individual career management practices. Contemporary career scholars note that contextual elements are crucial for career advancement (Akkermans et al., 2018), and call for more prominent attention to a dynamic approach in the studies on career advancement (de Vos et al., 2020). The role of context is especially crucial in the academic setting, which is often characterized by job uncertainty, competition, and the gendered nature of organizational practices (Bleijenbergh et al., 2013; van den Brink & Benschop, 2014). Few studies have, however, considered how contextual conditions affect authenticity (Cha et al., 2019), and as such, it seems unclear how the academic context constitutes career-related behaviours and choices of academics in the mid-career phase. Our more specific aim is to explore gender-based differences in career management practices and its consequences for career advancement experiences. Current research shows that men and women tend to have different experiences towards organizational practices and that they do not have equal opportunities to share in the promises of the ‘new career’ discourse (Acker, 2006; van Laer et al., 2019). Research on experiences of both men and women academics may contribute to a better understanding of the gender gap in academic leadership positions. By adopting a longitudinal qualitative approach, this study is methodologically innovative as career advancement is often studied in a more static way by taking a cross sectional approach (van Helden et al., 2021).

In this study, we followed a cohort of mid-career academics in the Netherlands in the period 2019 – 2022 (i.e., 2-year time span). In total, 75 associate professors participated in this first round of interviews, and in the second round 71 of these participants remained (response rate: 94.6%). Of these, 37 participants were women, and 34 were men. The participants have in common that they were all appointed as associate professor at the same university between 2014 and 2018 and they worked in different academic disciplines in 2019 (baseline year). In both interviews, a biographical interview method was used, based on narratives of respondents' lives regarding the past, present, and future. The data are currently analysed using constant comparison within and between individual stories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The two-year interval in this study provides the opportunity to investigate how career ambitions and planned career activities are revisited over time due to, for example, organizational career management practices and the specific role of career shocks such as Covid-19 in this process.

As such, our longitudinal research provides more detailed insight into the role that academics themselves and higher education institutions play in creating authentic careers. The knowledge into potential different experiences between men and women is indispensable to understand how to address gender inequality in academia (European Commission, 2021). As universities are increasingly trying to improve career advancement policies towards a modernization of the system of academic recognition and reward (VSNU et al., 2019), our research provides crucial and timely important insights.

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