

## **Homosocial academics in masculinity contest cultures:**

### **A study of emergent masculinities in Swedish business schools**

Abstract for the Human Relations 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference, London, 2023. Suggested stream: Identities and Employee Relations.

by

Dr **Monica Lindgren**, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, School of Industrial Engineering and Management, Lindstedtsvägen 30, 10044 STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN.

Dr **Johann Packendorff**, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, School of Industrial Engineering and Management, Lindstedtsvägen 30, 10044 STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN.

#### **Extended abstract**

In this paper, we take an interest in emergent masculinities in contemporary academic workplaces and the consequences of new forms of homosocial cultures. A significant stream of literature suggests that academic workplace cultures - in the wake of neoliberalism and New Public Management (Kallio et al, 2016) - tend to be dominated by new forms of managerialist, individualist, performance-based hegemonic masculinities (Drew & Canavan, 2021). In these cultures, women and other minorities are still discriminated – but in new and subtler ways than through traditional patriarchal nepotism and favouritism (cf. Helgesson Svedberg & Sjögren, 2019). It happens, e.g., through invisibilisation of relational responsibilities outside work and the expectations to bring these responsibilities also into the workplace (Macfarlane & Burg, 2019), through normalizing men’s career patterns and modes of performing (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012), through organizing important academic events in a way that promotes masculine homosociality whilst allowing for sexism and harassment (Ford & Harding, 2008; Biggs et al, 2018). As noted by Armato (2013) this tend to happen through masculinities that involve ‘enlightened sexism’, i.e., men who openly supports gender equality and feminism in academic workplaces and accrue status

and privileges as a result of this, whilst enabling many existing discriminatory and sexist cultural practices to continue (cf. also Wieners & Weber 2020; Bleijenbergh, 2021).

In this paper, we employ the notion of *masculinity contest cultures* (Berdahl et al, 2018; Ely & Kimmel, 2018) in order to analyse emergent forms of masculinity and homosociality in contemporary academic workplaces in Sweden. According to Berdahl et al (2018), such cultures are based in gendered social structures in which masculine men are supposed to hold status, power and privileges exceeding those of women and less masculine men – implying that what is central in workplace cultures dominated by such hegemonic masculinities are contests for status, power and privileges. Berdahl et al note that also less masculine men also tend to partake in reproducing such cultures – due to their aspirations to be included in homosocial interactions, or to their positioning as passive bystanders. They also note that in contest cultures, masculinity is precarious (it has to be proven, over and over again); it is conditional and tenuous as it exists only insofar having been recognized and conferred by others, and it typically involves risk-taking, bullying and harassment of others. Work and careers are constructed as “zero-sum games, where men show no weaknesses, repeatedly proves enduring strength and stamina, prioritizes work in all circumstances, and engage in cut-throat competition” (Matos et al, 2018: 430).

The empirical basis of the paper is semi-structured interviews of about 50 a qualitative study of female and male academics at senior lecturer level in management departments/business schools at four Swedish universities - which implies that they are part of the same institutional environment and that several similar cultural expressions of academic work and professionalism can be found across the material. But as the four universities were also chosen to represent different categories of academic organisations (a large traditional university, a large university from the 1960’s, a small merged university from the 1990’s, and a regional university college), we are also able to find differences concerning, e.g., notions of ideal academics and excellence, gender and diversity work, individual autonomy and career patterns (cf., also Wiener & Webers, 2020). The material will be subject to a thematic analysis focussing on workplace cultures and forms of masculinity. The intended contribution is a developed theoretical understanding of various forms masculine contest

cultures in academia, and the consequences thereof for scholarly research and management in universities.

Across the material, albeit with variations between different organisational settings, we (tentatively) find that apparently contradictory academic masculinisms seem to blend well together; aggressive, competitive and self-promoting behaviours in combination with a patriarchal superiority exercised through references to reason, objectivity, quantitative merit and factuality. These are masculinities that tend to embrace and promote all sorts of formal organizational policies and values – such as gender equality, diversity and work-life balance – because it is the modern, smart, decisive, career-enhancing and transparent thing to do, but also because it is a way to retain power and professional leeway. Men aiming at successful careers in such contexts will be expected to adjust to these cultural expectations, in order not to become mobilized out of homosocial communities and rendered unfit for promotion or for academic leadership roles. At the same time, traditional structural subordination of women lives on in new forms, and the reproduction of inequalities, injustices and homosociality may well happen in new organizational spaces and through new manhood acts. Women are indeed conditionally invited to partake in the contest cultures, given that they perform as postfeminist subjects – as positive, entrepreneurial, a-political professionals who make autonomous choices in life, are always ready to improve and amend themselves, and view power structures and gender discrimination as yesterday's news (O'Neill, 2015).

## References

Armato, M. (2013). Wolves in sheep's clothing: Men's enlightened sexism & hegemonic masculinity in academia, *Women's Studies*, 42(5), 578-598,

Berdahl, J. L., Cooper, M., Glick, P., Livingston, R. W., & Williams, J. C. (2018). Work as a masculinity contest. *Journal of Social Issues*, 74(3), 422-448.

Biggs, J., Hawley, P. H., & Biernat, M. (2018). The academic conference as a chilly climate for women: Effects of gender representation on experiences of sexism, coping responses, and career intentions. *Sex Roles, 78*(5), 394-408.

Bleijenbergh, I. (2022). How change agents mobilise masculinities to support gender equality in academia. *Organization*, e-pub ahead of print.

Drew, E. & Canavan, S. (Eds) (2021) *The gender-sensitive university: A contradiction in terms?* Oxon: Routledge.

Ely, R. J., & Kimmel, M. (2018). Thoughts on the workplace as a masculinity contest. *Journal of Social Issues, 74*(3), 628-634.

Ford, J., & Harding, N. (2008). Fear and loathing in Harrogate, or a study of a conference. *Organization, 15*(2), 233-250.

Harley, S. (2003). Research selectivity and female academics in UK universities: From gentleman's club and barrack yard to smart macho?. *Gender and Education, 15*(4), 377-392.

Helgesson Svedberg, K. & Sjögren, E. (2019). No finish line: How formalization of academic assessment can undermine clarity and increase secrecy. *Gender, Work & Organization, 26*(4), 558-581.

Kallio, K.-M., Kallio, T. J., Tienari, J. & Hyvönen, T. (2016). Ethos at stake: Performance management and academic work in universities. *Human Relations, 69*(3), 685-709.

Macfarlane, B., & Burg, D. (2019). Women professors and the academic housework trap. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 41*(3), 262-274.

Matos, K., O'Neill, O., & Lei, X. (2018). Toxic leadership and the masculinity contest culture: How "win or die" cultures breed abusive leadership. *Journal of Social Issues, 74*(3), 500-528.

O'Neill, R. (2015) Wither critical masculinity studies? Notes on inclusive masculinity theory, postfeminism, and sexual politics. *Men and Masculinities, 18*(1), 100-120.

Van den Brink, M. and Benschop, Y. (2012) Gender practices in the construction of academic excellence: Sheep with five legs. *Organization*, 19(4), 507-524.

Wieners, S. & Weber, S. M. (2020) Athena's claims in an academic regime of performativity: Discursive organizing of excellence and gender at the intersection of heterotopia and heteronomia. *Management Learning*, 51(4), 511-530.