At the leading edge – does gender still matter? A qualitative study of prevailing obstacles and successful coping strategies in academia

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Abstract
Recent developments indicate positive changes for women in academia, especially for those in higher positions. Statistics on the situation in Austria show that the proportion of female academics and of women in management positions in academia is increasing slowly but steadily. The present article examines explanations for this development and analyses female biographies in academia. The analysis is based on qualitative interviews conducted with the most successful women at Austrian universities, focusing on the obstacles these women encountered and how they managed to overcome them. The findings are arranged in two sections: (1) the results point to the existence of significant impediments to female academic careers; these include informal encounters, social networks (which are usually male-dominated) and the requirement to be both geographically mobile and to cope with family issues at the same time; (2) the analysis elaborates on various coping strategies designed to overcome these obstacles in an effort to attain leading positions.

Keywords
Academia, coping strategies, impediments to careers, successful female careers, women in leading positions

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Introduction

The situation of women in the academic world is characterized by multidimensional segregation in various forms: (1) horizontal segregation due to a concentration of female academics in the social sciences and humanities; (2) vertical segregation as a result of a concentration of women in lower occupational positions; and (3) contractual segregation on account of a disproportionate number of female academics in fixed-term contracts and part-time employment (Knights and Richards, 2003). Gender inequality in academia is of course not just an Austrian problem, it is prevalent in almost all European countries as well as in the United States. This imbalance seems to suggest that the obstacles women encounter in their professional careers remain deeply embedded in the system, despite many organizational endeavours to overcome them (Martin, 1994).

Although a plethora of studies have confirmed the persistence of gender inequalities in academia (Acker and Armenti, 2004; Damaske, 2011; Fox, 2001; Morley, 2003), only slight progress – especially in terms of leading positions – has been observed recently (Morley, 2013). This incipient positive change is very well illustrated by the example of Austrian universities: the first woman to preside over an Austrian university was elected in 2007. Currently, five Austrian universities have female rectors (uni:data, 2014). The proportion of female professors improved by around seven percentage points within the same time period (uni:data, 2014). It is this development that forms the starting point of the present study. Interestingly, the majority of the existing studies in the field of gender inequalities in academia focus on the period between completion of the initial degree and being appointed to a professorship, and concentrate almost exclusively on the identification of different obstacles and barriers for women. Scant attention has so far been given to success stories in academia, and even less attention has been given to the successful strategies employed by women in an effort to overcome obstacles in their professional career and to reach the top of the academic career ladder.

Against this background, this article aims to shed light on these successful strategies by analysing the professional biographies of female academics in top leading positions in Austria. The relevant research questions are: What are the obstacles that hinder female careers? And how do female academics overcome these obstacles in order to attain leading positions? Twelve biographical interviews provide the empirical database. The interviews were conducted with the most successful female scholars in Austria (i.e. full professors) who simultaneously occupy a leading position (i.e. rector). In Austria, the academic and the management career are inextricably linked.¹

Gender inequalities in academia – need for research

At present, five out of 21 university rectors in Austria are women (uni:data, 2014). Interestingly, when it comes to vice-rectors, the proportion of females increases to 50%. This balance was achieved only recently and was largely the result of ongoing reform processes. Only eight years ago, the proportion of female vice-rectors remained at 30% (uni:data, 2014). This notable but still embryonic change has been furthered by equality programmes such as Excellentia, which was implemented in 2005 and aimed at doubling the percentage of female professors at Austrian universities by 2010 (Wroblewski and
Leitner, 2011). Its positive impact on top leading positions is undeniable and constitutes noteworthy progress, standing in contrast with the international situation in the area of gender balance (Wroblewski and Leitner, 2011). In 2010, on average 15.5% of institutions throughout the EU-27 in the higher education sector were headed by women, and only 10% of universities had a female rector (European Commission, 2013).

Positive change is also discernible at the level of the professoriate: here the proportion of women averages around 20%, indicating an improvement at the higher level of female academic careers (European Commission, 2013). Generally speaking, in the EU-27, the proportion of female academics has been growing faster than that of men (5.1% annually between 2002 and 2009, compared with 3.3% for men); the same holds true for the proportion of women among scientists and engineers (up 5.4% annually between 2002 and 2010, compared with 3.1% for men) (European Commission, 2013).

Despite this initial evidence of positive change, it is indisputable that women are still under-represented in academia, especially in senior positions, even though the numbers of female student enrolments exceed those of their male counterparts (uni: data, 2014). In line with this, research has so far focused on the reasons for female under-representation and has developed various suggestions for structural reforms. The thematic priority in existing studies emphasizes the negative side, examining the obstacles that are responsible for the lower performance of women in academia (theoretical explanations and empirical studies are referred to in a later section). Ross-Smith and Huppatz (2010) point out that there is less research on female academics who have actually spent prolonged periods in senior managerial roles; Louise Morley (2013: 15) concurs, stating that ‘[t] here is scant coverage of success stories of women accessing authority and facilitating change’. Furthermore, even less attention has been given to the very special group of female rectors or vice-rectors who have successfully managed an academic career and have reached the top of the management career ladder.

The few studies addressing leadership in academia are often limited to specific topics. First, several studies have analysed the difference between male and female management styles (Andersen and Hansson, 2011; Chesterman et al., 2003). The underlying research question frequently involves looking into whether or not women in leading positions adopt male management styles and what kind of impact can be observed on the institutional or organizational setting. Second, there is research that highlights country-specific characteristics, one example being White and Özkanli (2010), who investigate factors in the under-representation of females in the positions of rectors and vice-rectors in Turkey and Australia. Finally, there are studies that concentrate on the role of racial discrimination in filling leading posts (Knights and Richards, 2003). Still other studies are devoted to quite specific issues: for instance, Cohen and Huffman (2007), who offer the first large-scale analysis investigating whether the proportion and relative status of female managers affect inequality for subordinate non-managerial workers. Priola (2007), for her part, discusses how gender is constructed within academic institutions, concentrating on female academic managers in the field of economics.

This overview of the current state of research shows that the creditable work published so far has concentrated on different aspects of either academic or management careers (Acker and Armenti, 2004; European Commission, 2013; Knights and Richards, 2003; Morley, 2013; O’Connor, 1996; Van den Brink, 2010). In Austria,
leading functions in universities are carried out in addition to, and in conjunction with, an academic position and thus both career strands are continually influencing each other. Therefore, it seems necessary to employ a multidimensional perspective and examine both career strands at the same time. The present study is distinctive in three respects: (1) the analysis focuses on the twin burden of an academic and managerial career and their possible interconnections; (2) it emphasizes the innovative aspect of success stories in academia, which so far has been given scant attention; (3) lastly, whereas in other studies the personal biographical perspective is relatively rarely applied in this context, here the individual point of view, opinions and appraisals with regard to personal biographies and career success constitute the core research interest. The aim is thus to contribute to closing this gap in the existing research.

Theoretical framework

The term ‘career’ is explicitly conceived in terms of two main criteria (with the definition based on Rusconi and Solga, 2011). First, career means pursuing an occupation that is appropriate to one’s educational level and academic qualifications. Second, career includes advancement with regard to upward social mobility (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1969). A strategy is defined here as an action that is designed to further the pursuit of goals, intentions and wishes: ‘Acting strategically means intentionally pursuing a goal, but not acting in a calculating way in the narrow sense’ (Althaber et al., 2011: 87). Strategies can be influenced by role models and may help to overcome obstacles encountered in pursuing a career. In the present article, the successful coping strategies devised by female scholars in leading positions can be discerned in the patterns that emerge from the empirical material. To be more precise: coping refers to a behaviour that protects people from being harmed by problematic social experiences (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978): ‘The protective function of coping behaviour can be exercised in three ways: by eliminating or modifying conditions giving rise to problems; by perceptually controlling the meaning of experience in a manner that neutralizes its problematic character; and by keeping the emotional consequences of problems within manageable bounds’ (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978: 2).

From a social science perspective, dealing with leadership issues requires focusing on the sociology of elites. The literature in the field can generally be distinguished in terms of a functionalist and a conflict-orientated approach. The structural-functionalist approach deals with the function and performance of individuals with above-average qualifications, whereas the latter approach stems rather from the sociology of conflict and takes as its starting point power and the influence of elites (Hartmann, 2004; Wright, 2000). In line with this distinction, research on educational elites shows that the chances of obtaining leading positions are higher for well-educated men than for women or men with a lower level of education. From a feminist point of view, affirmative action for women implicitly contains aspects of affirmative action for elites, with most advocates seeking more than merely numerically equal rights for women and men. Rather, the objective would consist in an equal gender distribution in positions of power and influence (Kahlert, 2000).
Leading positions are highly competitive: available research indicates that ascriptive characteristics – e.g. gender or migratory background – are crucial factors in filling vacant positions (Hartmann and Kopp, 2001). A workforce is recruited in anticipation of its labour productivity (Eckel and Grossman, 2002) and these anticipations and expectations can be strongly influenced by cultural gender stereotypes. For example, women are confronted with decisive perceptions concerning the possibility of future caring responsibilities and a higher level of risk aversion (Eckel and Grossman, 2002).

Apart from this general explanation, there are theories that concentrate specifically on the academic context. Present explanations highlight the importance of differences in individual performances between male and female academics that subsequently lead to a gender imbalance in leading positions. Universities are legitimated by meritocratic principles and are therefore obliged to ensure the selection of the best possible candidates (Jungbauer-Gans and Gross, 2013). For recruiting procedures, scholarly achievement is crucial. Because the quality of scholarly work is hard to evaluate directly, ‘objective’ and quantifiable indicators are used. The total number of top-ranked and SSCI-listed publications in international journals and successful applications for third-party funding are decisive in this process (Jungbauer-Gans and Gross, 2013). Gender bias becomes an operative factor because dissemination strategies may vary between male- and female-dominated disciplines (Wroblewski and Leitner, 2011). Differences concerning the type of publication (articles in peer-reviewed journal vs edited volumes) or the type of specialization are relevant in this regard (Keith et al., 2002).

As a result, there has been growing criticism of peer review procedures ever since the publication of the study by Wenneras and Wold (1997) on nepotism and sexism in peer review. General factors are criticized, including incomplete transparency and misgivings concerning innovative work. Wroblewski and Leitner (2011) maintain that the instrument of peer review is accompanied by considerable power in defining academic quality standards. Other studies have addressed the issue as to whether a gender-specific bias benefits male academics (Bornmann et al., 2007; National Science Foundation, 2003; Sandström and Hallstein, 2008) and whether women need to produce higher quality work in order to be evaluated as equally qualified (Wroblewski and Leitner, 2011: 15). Contradictory research results have emerged, especially concerning the twin burden of work and family issues. On the one hand, it features prominently, being viewed as an important impediment to successful academic careers, especially in the phase of starting a family (Abele and Spurk, 2011; O’Laughlin and Bischoff, 2005; Rafnsdottir and Heijstra, 2011). Research shows, for example, that discontinuities due to maternity leave or reduced working hours negatively affect academic careers and productivity (Abele and Spurk, 2011). Moreover, the need to be geographically mobile – especially in combination with starting a family – also has an impact on female careers. Rüger and Ruppenthal (2010) show that women with children are markedly less mobile compared to men living under the same conditions. However, preliminary studies indicate that increasing mobility requirements and the ‘Bologna & Erasmus’ generation could weaken this gender effect and instead promote a culture of ‘multiple mobilities’ in transnational social environments for male and female scholars (Jöns, 2011).

On the other hand, other researchers (e.g. Sax et al., 2002) find childbearing is unrelated to the number of publications. Barbezart (2006) and Bellas and Toutkoushian
(1999) find that academics with children are even more productive than those without children. Similar findings have been published for Austria, Germany and Switzerland (Joecks et al., 2014). The authors attribute these findings to a high level of positive self-selection, whereby only female researchers displaying productivity that is well above average dare to pursue a career in academia and have children at the same time (Joecks et al., 2014). However, regardless of the specific impact of caring responsibilities, these authors fail to account for the reasons why single or childless women are also absent from higher education leadership (Morley, 2013: 7).

Other studies on gender inequalities focus on personal relationships. In the academic context, informal mechanisms of gender segregation and individual social affiliations are important. The concept of ‘homosocial reproduction’ (Kanter, 1997) was formulated to describe the tendency to favour individuals that resemble oneself. Since leading positions in academia are still generally male-dominated, detriments for female academics are corollaries of this imbalance (Krais, 2002). The protection of gender-related privileges – homosociality – is fundamental when it comes to the embedding of gendered asymmetries in academia. Lipman-Blumen (1976: 16) describes it as ‘the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same sex’. Furthermore, the personal relationship between a mentor and protégé is highly relevant in the academic context: it is crucial especially for attaining leading positions (Scandura and Williams, 2001). Informal mechanisms and limited access to networks are harmful to female careers as well – because male-dominated networks are still decisively important when it comes to power and resources (Kjeldal et al., 2005). In order to overcome those barriers, there are programmes that have been set up to provide support for junior female academics (mentees) from senior female academics (mentors), using new concepts of mentoring (e.g. feminist co-mentoring) (McGuire and Reger, 2003). Evidence from Australia shows that mentees were more likely to stay at universities, had a higher rate of promotion, received a higher average amount per person in research grants and produced a higher rate of peer-reviewed scholarly publications than non-mentored female academics (Gardiner et al., 2007).

**Data and methodology**

The empirical data are based on semi-structured, problem-centred interviews with female academics in leading positions in Austria (Witzel, 2000). The interviews focused on the obstacles that these women dealt with successfully. In total, 12 interviews were conducted in two successive cycles in 2012. Adhering to the basic principles of qualitative research, the time period in between was used to adjust and improve the interview questions (Lieblich et al., 1998). Direct approaches were a part of the interview process, which pursued narrative-generating strategies of communication: conversational gambit, general probing and ad hoc questions.

The sampling strategy was deliberately arranged according to two main criteria (Suri, 2011): first, the interviewees had to have successfully completed all necessary academic qualifications in order to become professors; second, the female professors simultaneously had to occupy a top leading position (e.g. vice-rector, rector, head of department) in order to meet the sampling criteria. Out of this set of female professors and managers,
I recruited interview partners with various disciplinary backgrounds (e.g. medicine, technical engineering, social science), of different ages, and women with and without children. A distinctive feature of the study is that four out of five current rectors participated. All five female rectors were contacted; one interview was not carried out due to time conflicts.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. In order to comply with principles of quality, transparency and ethics, I followed the Framework for Research Ethics (ESRC, 2012). The confidentiality of information supplied by my interviewees and their anonymity was respected (ESRC, 2012). All respondents took part voluntarily, free from any coercion (ESRC, 2012). I refrained from recording when asked to do so and excluded any sensitive empirical material from my analysis. To further enhance anonymity, all personally identifiable information was altered and/or replaced with pseudonyms. All interviewees were asked for their approval before initiating publication. In order to further enhance scientific neutrality and transparency, the main analytic steps were discussed in team sessions.

The analytical strategy applied a two-step procedure. I first used the method of systematic contrasting through case comparisons (Witzel, 2000). This method aims chiefly at working through the main topics that the cases have in common (Witzel, 2000). The initial results of the theory-generating interpretive step (with topic or biography-oriented ideas for evaluation) are case-specific core topics which are condensed into a concise statement while combining original passages, paraphrases and analytical predications (Scheibelhofer, 2009; Witzel, 2000). Therefore, I emphasized text-based as well as theory-based coding. By employing this procedure, I was able to identify various obstacles in successful female scientific careers. In this first analytic step, MaxQda® was used to analyse the passages of interest. Second, the obstacles were analysed according to the coding procedures within grounded theory, taking a constructivist stance: analysis is seen as an interpretational process in which the researchers reconstruct meaning (Scheibelhofer, 2009: 9; Strauss and Corbin, 1996). I subsequently elaborated on various individual coping strategies.

**Empirical findings**

The description of the results is organized in two main parts. The first part concentrates on the obstacles encountered in female scientific careers. Here the guiding research question is: what are the obstacles that hinder successful female careers? The second part deals with the research question: how do female academics overcome these obstacles in order to attain leading positions? In line with that, the second part focuses on coping strategies employed by women in academia and their underlying mechanisms.

**What are the obstacles that hinder successful female careers?**

My analysis reveals that top leading female academics are confronted with three major obstacles on their career path: (1) informal encounters and stereotypical profiling, (2) (male-dominated) social networks and (3) the conjunction of geographical mobility and family issues. Leading positions in academia are highly competitive. Apart from
professional qualifications, other less objectively measurable factors influence the decision-making process. Based on their experience in academia, the female academics in my study emphasize the relevance of informal communication as an impeding factor and obstacle in their careers. In this domain, informal encounters and off-the-record remarks can operate as decisive factors in social exclusion. They can be employed intentionally in order to voice disagreement without having to engage in discussion on a factual level; open confrontation or negotiation of viewpoints is thus avoided. This not only means avoiding responsibility for off-the-record remarks, it also means that such remarks are obviously less subject to reflection since they cannot be attributed to any specific individual and are thus not subject to justification. One of my interviewees describes a special mechanism of social exclusion that involves evaluating the candidate largely on a personal level and relegating professional aspects to the margins – in this case, in the specific situation of the recruitment procedure for a leading position. In this instance, the intention is to present an evaluation based on personal appearance or even physical characteristics, in order to deflect attention away from the quality of job-relevant decisions. The remarks are not so much concerned with concrete details but instead remain quite vague:

Suddenly I was confronted with discussions which I didn’t know even existed. … I learned that it is definitely impossible to discuss issues frankly … . People were talking with a lack of objectivity and in a very informal way; people who didn’t even know me. It just happened that everybody was talking about me as a person and not whether I would be able to handle my job. They talked about my clothes, my appearance and they just spread rumours about me. … The whole discussion was very emotional. In the end, it remained completely unclear whether or not there actually was a problem. (Interview 5)

This is remarkable as the statement indicates that female academics are subjected to informal, highly personalized processes of appraisal, especially when it comes to recruitment procedures for leading positions. Furthermore, my analysis reveals that this obstacle tends to be associated rather with a management career than a research career. In this area, one also observes gender-specific promotion processes.

The problematic aspect of informal encounters and processes is that they may obscure whether or not there is a real, substantive cause for concern that actually needs to be dealt with. Transparency and accountability in organizational and decision-making structures would help to counteract the effects of informal communications in everyday work, as well as in recruitment processes. This would aid in overcoming practices of inequality that have led to an under-representation of women among full professors and rectors (Van den Brink, 2010; Van den Brink et al., 2010). The interview partners indicate that women tend to be subject to informal and personalized forms of communication more frequently than men in identical leading management positions and in recruitment processes. In line with this suggestion, Settles et al. (2006) find that female academics experience structural disadvantages more frequently, thus negatively affecting their job satisfaction as well as their productivity and job outcomes. Moreover, in the opinion of my interviewees, women – especially those in the public eye – seem to be judged more in terms of their appearance or their behaviour and less frequently in terms of actual
qualifications. By doing so, visibly feminine attributes are privileged and the discourse is conducted on an emotional level.

In connection with informal communication, the interviewees outlined the importance of social and professional networks for successful careers (Bourdieu, 1985). Integration in the academic community, particularly access to formal and informal networks, has become crucial. Most importantly, the analysis of the interviews reveals various differences between academic disciplines. In the opinion of the interviewees, female academics remain disadvantaged regarding access to networks, especially in the natural and technical sciences. DeWelde and Laursen (2011: 577) provide similar results: they show that especially in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics women are excluded from ‘old boys’ clubs’ that provide access to knowledge, mentoring and opportunities. The women substantiate this perspective in that admission is partly based on informal or non-transparent rules and certain positions are often only open to male academics. The resulting negative consequences for female careers point to a lack of information regarding recruitment procedures and fewer potential cooperation partners who might positively influence either their research output or their professional progress.

Male networks frequently show a long history of traditional interrelations and still play a decisive role in terms of power, at least in specific fields of research. Interviewee number 3 points out the relevance of exclusively male networks in her field of natural science:

In my specific field of research, nearly all networks are male networks. It has always been like that. I knew that. But when you’re confronted with that in everyday life, you get to know what it really means. Networks are important in order to get acquainted with one another and for future collaboration. And when you can’t be part of a network, then it’s way more difficult. (Interview 3)

Interviewee number 3 makes clear that the problems she encountered in daily routines were even more difficult than expected. This is particularly true when access to important networks proves to be problematic or is even refused. Membership in an association is especially important since ‘it communicate[s] the values and norms of their disciplines, provides access to informal networks, and help[s] to move people along by offering useful information through unofficial channels. But this [association] was not a formal club with “girls keep out” posted on the door. Rather, membership was gained through informal, social processes of “fitting in” ’ (DeWelde and Laursen, 2011: 577–578). Non-transparent rules and social processes can significantly impede female academic careers. In order to avoid such difficulties, female academics tend to do research on marginal issues or fill obscure research gaps, at least in traditionally male-dominated fields, and eventually become experts on their special topics.

Additionally, flexibility and mobility are important factors. The analysis reveals that forming multifarious individual relationships is indispensable to obtaining career-enhancing information, to establishing contacts and finding potential research collaborators. Thus, other research in this field shows that the mobility – especially geographical mobility – of highly qualified women has been on the rise over the past years (Rüger and Ruppenthal, 2010). Mobility proves to be a central element of a successful academic career in the present study. All in all, the interviewees consider a research stay abroad not
just to be important but to be fundamental for their academic progress. One of my interview partners describes the relevance of geographical mobility in academia as follows:

A research stay abroad – it’s not just important, it’s essential. … Let’s say the desired and planned career would be to obtain a professorship. Without a research stay abroad, this is not going to happen. And without a stay abroad I certainly wouldn’t have gotten the job! (Interview 3)

Stays abroad are evidently considered crucial for an academic career. As interviewee number 3 implies, higher academic positions often include international scholarly exchange between different collaborative partners. She indicates that her experience abroad has helped her to more adequately manage certain tasks in her position. Other interview partners also mention that stays abroad are indeed indispensable for leading positions within academia.

Although the requirement to be mobile is assessed as important, it is simultaneously seen as a potential obstacle for female scholars. The need to be mobile over a longer period of one’s professional life promotes gender inequalities, especially at advanced stages of a career and when caring responsibilities become prevalent. Quantitative research in this field demonstrates a positive impact of mobility for both male and female academics. Furthermore, it also clearly indicates the impeding effect that parenting has on female careers (Shauman and Xie, 1996). In this regard, the interview partners highlight the difficulties of combining mobility with family responsibilities, and my analysis confirms that this is indeed an obstacle to an academic career. Interviewee number 8 reflects on her own career:

I have been abroad several times during my career. But when I had my child … things started to change. One’s mobility and flexibility is simply limited. … That’s certainly a great disadvantage for female careers. (Interview 8)

This interviewee describes geographical mobility as crucial to an academic career. Nevertheless, she is aware of the fact that it is difficult to manage the compatibility of occupational demands and planning one’s private life. Moreover, the analysis indicates that, when there are childcare responsibilities, women are still tied down to a greater extent than men. In this regard, Shauman and Xie (1996) show that the effect of children on the probability of migration differs by gender, with women being affected more negatively than men. In her own case, this interviewee organized research experience abroad before family and childcare issues became pressing.

How do female academics overcome these obstacles in order to attain leading positions?

The second section deals with the question of which coping strategies female academics employ to overcome these obstacles in an effort to attain leading positions. In this section, I elaborate on two antithetical types of strategies for each obstacle. The first obstacle described above was that of informal encounters. In discussing informal communication structures, I concentrate on two main coping strategies that were employed by female
academics in the sample. The first strategy is to combat malevolent talk by asserting oneself and by actively responding to insinuations.

Personally, my way of coping with [malevolent talk] is to react immediately. As soon as I hear something I try to rectify it. Sometimes it can be exhausting, but still I think that’s the best way to cope with this situation. (Interview 6)

This strategy calls for a strong character, and it also requires spending a significant amount of time and energy reacting to informal communication. This interviewee tries to respond immediately to various insinuations concerning her in order to prevent informal communication from getting out of hand. By employing this procedure, it becomes obvious that constant rectification may be exhausting and time-consuming.

By contrast, in employing the second strategy, female academics avoid informal contacts and try to devote less time and energy to combating insinuations and to defending themselves. As another interviewee points out, she would rather devote herself to the responsibilities of her leading position than be concerned with personal invective. She concentrates on her professional tasks and tries to deter and disarm potential ‘offenders’ through her professionalism.

I respond by working really hard. I am sure there is just fear behind all that talking and slandering. A woman in this position – that’s completely new. And men probably wouldn’t have to face these discussions at all. … But then I try to think of it as a compliment. If the only way to deal with me is to spread rumours and not even try to engage in a dialogue on a technical level, then they obviously must have confidence in my ability. And that’s what I’m going to do: an excellent job! (Interview 5)

She maintains that this slanderous talk is engendered by a natural fear of the new and of the unknown. The change in gender structures over the past years – especially in academic committees – is also described as a reform process which would require time for adjustment and familiarization. She cultivates a positive attitude in this situation and is thus able to empower herself. Consequently, by employing this strategy, female academics can change sides and may even benefit from an initially adverse situation. Interestingly, Salazar (2009) finds similar strategies and mechanisms for survival in academia in her study of coloured faculty members. One strategy consists in distancing oneself: ‘Some participants distanced themselves as a means of self-protection, to physically and/or emotionally insulate themselves from painful surroundings’ (Salazar, 2009: 188).

Both coping strategies involve the mechanism of distancing oneself from one’s social environment and not taking comments too personally. The approach is to keep a cool head and to avoid becoming over-involved emotionally, even when things become difficult. In connection with this, personalized statements or accusations are transposed from the emotional to an abstract and factual level, on which they are then negotiated. Interviewee number 10 encapsulates the situation in the following statement: ‘You simply have to develop a thick skin. You cannot let these things get to you’ (Interview 10).

The second obstacle described above was the difficult process of addressing the question of social networks. In an attempt to discuss these – in some instances strongly
– male-dominated networks and their effects, I again elaborate on two contrasting coping strategies. One strategy is to build up and institutionalize female networks as a way of counteracting the exclusiveness of male networks. The idea is to establish the same advantages through exclusive access as is common within male networks:

I never wanted to be a member of these male networks. … Instead, I wanted to set up something on my own – for women. My intention was to create a place where women can exchange views, reflect on decisions and support each other without losing face. (Interview 3)

Women who adopt this strategy use the exclusion of male academics in order to overcome the disadvantages they encounter which emerge from these traditional networks. Exclusively female networks not only emphasize scholarly exchange and support for professional progress but also discussions of private issues. In this coping strategy, it seems important to establish a protective space exclusively for women. As interviewee number 3 points out, women unifying in this way somehow produces a feeling of security and solidarity within an insider group.

The opposing coping strategy is to break up the traditional male-dominated networks and set up mixed-gender networks. For interviewee 5, the relevance lies in establishing new structural routines to combat rigidified habits which, intentionally or unintentionally, encourage gender inequalities:

If I do not approve of exclusively male networks, how can I support exclusively female networks? I strongly believe that it takes both sexes in mixed-gender networks … Hence it’s about breaking up old structures. (Interview 5)

With this statement, the interviewee makes it clear that the goal of academic collaboration should not rely on mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. By furthering mixed-gender networks, she believes that previous effects of exclusion can be mitigated. The underlying mechanism of both coping strategies seems to be the search for change, to accelerate innovation and set things in motion. The main focus is to alter the current situation of persistent gender inequality in top leading positions, one way or another. The analysis indicates the significance of ‘striving for a new direction’ and subsequently ‘establishing new structures’, seeking change, with the future generation of female academics in mind. Pursuing change appears to be the logical alternative since extant studies argue that leadership norms are less likely to promote values held by women, because women do not fit entirely within the male-centric paradigm of leadership (Parker and Welch, 2013: 338).

In this respect, one should mention interesting findings provided by Smith-Doerr (2004). She shows that women tend to be more successful (e.g. obtain supervisory positions) and enjoy improved career opportunities in network organizations than in traditional hierarchies and long-established bureaucracies. Smith-Doerr (2004) points out that network organizations do not focus on the feminization or masculinization of a field of work, but rather concentrate on output-driven and collaborative working atmospheres. Comparable tendencies can be observed in the present study, as mentioned above. Additionally, the analysis reveals a third coping strategy which essentially combines the previous two by employing either one of them in specific situations. While
the importance of mixed-gender networks is highlighted for scholarly and professional progress, exclusively female networks are considered to be advantageous especially for personal exchange. In this context, female networks are explicitly attributed a mentoring role.

Networks are relevant only if they are endowed with power and resources and many of those female networks are irrelevant in this regard. Therefore, as to my job, I stick to well established networks. Nevertheless, I think that female networks make sense, in particular for the purpose of female empowerment. (Interview 1)

Within this strategy, female networks are regarded as less important for occupational progress than well-established traditional networks. According to the point of view of interviewee 1, professional and scholarly success is partially connected to authority, power and resources. In her opinion, female networks still lack the ability to promote these aspects in the same way. On the contrary, she argues in favour of female networks when it comes to elements – her example being female empowerment – that traditional male-dominated networks present to a lesser extent.

The final obstacle for successful female careers to be addressed here is the challenging compatibility of work and family life and the requirement to be geographically mobile across those realms. The time-consuming work as an academic and manager in a leading position often has multifarious impacts on different aspects of life. In order to minimize the contradiction between family and work issues, childlessness is presented as offering a promising alternative. ‘To be frank, when you have children everything becomes difficult. … Yes, a lot of women do not have children. Just like me. It’s easier’ (Interview 4). In this area, research shows that Austria has extraordinarily high levels of childlessness within the group of academic women. Initial investigations in Austria reveal that the low level of childbearing is explained by the gap between childbearing intentions and childbearing behaviour rather than free personal decision-making. This gap is due to conditions directly related to the workplace (temporary working contracts) and possibly also to less favourable partnership relations (Buber et al., 2011: 24).

In terms of simultaneously managing work–family issues and geographical mobility, I will again elaborate on two different coping strategies. The first strategy can be encapsulated by the term ‘commuting’. The women associated with this group have divided their lives into two completely independent spheres. One is dedicated to professional obligations, the other is focused on private or family issues. While academic work regularly takes place between Mondays and Fridays, family life is essentially limited to weekends. Moreover, the geographic distance between the locus of family life and the workplace is usually considerable. My interviewee describes her personal situation of commuting as follows: ‘I virtually had two lives: one filled with work during the week and another with my family on weekends’ (Interview 5).

The analysis reveals that commuting becomes even more likely when family members are deeply bound to the place of origin or women have just taken up work. In cases where children are involved, the analysis indicates that female academics do not want to disrupt well-established family practices, but instead are concerned that their children grow up in a familiar social environment. Although female academics have to sacrifice time spent with their family, this strategy seems to facilitate the compatibility of family and career.
The second strategy consists in female academics attempting to integrate family matters into daily work routines. In order to reconcile the necessity to be mobile and the wish to lead a family life, they organize their family life around occupational obligations. In my interviewee’s life, work usually comes first in view of the large number of responsibilities she has to deal with in her position. Consequently, when her job requires her to move abroad, her partner follows her.

We agreed that my husband accompanies me. … It’s easier for him to find another job elsewhere than it would be for me. In academia there are just very few offerings, especially when it comes to higher positions. So you have to take what you can get. (Interview 5)

This specific strategy seems to be employed in relationships where only one person is employed in academia. This arrangement not only requires considerable support from the non-academic partner, but also the willingness to interrupt his or her personal career, at least for a certain period of time. Women who employ the second coping strategy emphasize the advantages for children: in their opinion, stays abroad facilitate learning a foreign language and becoming acquainted with unfamiliar cultural practices.

Both strategies involve the mechanism of deliberately planning and organizing the future alternatives. In mastering mobility requirements, it is thus important to plan with some foresight and to determine the next career steps. It appears to be essential to be aware of the various options and to select those that are the most appropriate for one’s career, to manoeuvre within the scope of the different possibilities and to follow up on subsequent decisions. The interviewees generally suggest that research stays are preferable early on in one’s career in order to at least minimize the difficulties of reconciling family and career. The interviewees argue in favour of carefully planning their research stays and taking into consideration the institutional affiliations and the reputation of the university. Research stays where these factors are not taken into consideration may prove to be anything but career-enhancing.

Discussion

Over the past years, gender-specific structures have slowly started to decline – at least in specific fields in academia. The current gender ratio in top positions in European universities remains imbalanced, but nevertheless shows a slight change for the better (European Commission, 2013). Especially the dynamics within the Austrian university landscape provide reasons for cautious optimism and hope for further-reaching developments. Against this background, the present study has concentrated on analysing the occupational biographies of female academics in leading management positions and how they have achieved success.

The analyses focused on various obstacles in female biographies and how they have managed to overcome them. The qualitative analysis identified the following major obstacles for female careers in academia: encounters involving informal communication, weak integration into male-dominated academic networks as well as the challenging compatibility of work and family and the remaining imperative for women to be mobile across those realms. The analysis also yields slight differences regarding the specific
obstacles encountered in management and academic careers. This twin burden is especially striking as these two career strands are inextricably linked in Austria.

In order to overcome these obstacles and to reach the very top of the academic career ladder, this article reveals that female academics are required to employ individual coping strategies. The coping strategy to deal with the first obstacle is either to respond actively to insinuations in order to prevent any malevolent talk getting out of hand or concentrating on the job and to deter and disarm potential ‘offenders’ by focusing on professionalism. Either way, both strategies encompass the mechanism of distancing oneself from one’s social environment. One way of dealing with male-dominated networks is to institutionalize exclusively female networks; the other way is to break up traditional structures, focus on mixed-gender networks and promote change. For the purpose of simultaneously managing family and mobility issues, one strategy can be described as commuting. Some interviewees have virtually two separate lives; one is focused on family issues whereas the other is devoted to professional obligations. The other strategy is to integrate family issues into daily work routines and to organize family life around occupational obligations and research stays abroad.

Considering the empirical findings, as well as currently available statistics on women in management positions in academia, it would be misleading to portray women entirely as victims of powerful patriarchal organizations (Morley, 2013: 10). Female academics are slowly but surely taking up leadership positions in academia, although the imbalanced gender relationship at the top still remains a serious concern.

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**Notes**

1. The UG (2002) states the following: §22/17(3) ‘In determining the composition of the rectorate, care shall be taken to ensure that it possesses the necessary academic, managerial and administrative capabilities.’ Paragraph §23/2 ‘Only persons with international experience and the necessary abilities to manage a university’s organization and finances may be selected as rector.’

2. A comparison of university systems reveals considerable differences. Reinhard Kreckel (2008) portrayed the characteristics of France, Germany, USA, Sweden, the Netherlands, Austria and Switzerland. In Austria especially the hierarchical segregation (e.g. the position of the head of department) and the emphasis on the academic title are more important than in other countries (Kreckel, 2011). At the moment there are no official data available for the gender profile of heads of departments in Austria. In order to provide first insights, I compiled some information for the University of Vienna: there are 15 faculties at the University of Vienna and about 147 individual departments; only 25% of these departments are directed by women (uni:data, 2014).

**References**


**Author biography**

Nina-Sophie Fritsch is a PhD candidate and junior researcher in the Department of Sociology at the University of Vienna, Austria. Her main research interests include gender inequality in academia, labour market dynamics, poverty and social inequality in Europe. Recently, in an attempt to expand the variety of available explanations for unequal gender relations, she has studied the reasons for women freely deciding to leave academia. Other publications concentrate on low-wage employment in Europe and thus analyse special risk groups as well as changes in the composition of the labour markets.
Résumé
De récents événements indiquent une évolution positive des carrières féminines à l’université, en particulier pour les postes les plus élevés. Des données statistiques sur la situation autrichienne montrent que la proportion de femmes universitaires et de femmes aux postes de direction des institutions universitaires augmente lentement mais sûrement. Cet article examine les explications de cette évolution récente et analyse plusieurs biographies de femme universitaire. L’analyse est basée sur des entretiens qualitatifs conduits auprès de femmes ayant connu de grands succès dans les universités autrichiennes, en mettant l’accent sur les obstacles à la carrière que ces femmes ont surmontés et les moyens qu’elles ont utilisés. Les résultats sont classés en deux sections : (1) les résultats révèlent l’existence d’importants obstacles aux carrières des femmes universitaires. L’analyse met en évidence parmi ces obstacles l’importance des rencontres informelles, des réseaux sociaux (qui sont habituellement dominés par les hommes) et l’obligation d’être mobile géographiquement tout en composant avec les problèmes familiaux ; (2) l’analyse élabore diverses stratégies d’adaptation visant à surmonter ces obstacles pour atteindre les positions les plus élevées.

Mots-clés
Succès professionnel féminin, université, obstacles à la carrière, stratégies d’adaptation, femmes dans des postes de responsabilités

Resumen
Recientes acontecimientos indican cambios positivos para las mujeres en el mundo académico, especialmente para aquellas en posiciones más altas. Las estadísticas sobre la situación en Austria muestran que la proporción de mujeres académicas y de las mujeres en puestos de dirección en el mundo académico está aumentando lenta pero constantemente. El presente artículo examina explicaciones para este desarrollo y análisis de biografías de mujeres en el mundo académico. El análisis se basa en entrevistas cualitativas realizadas a las mujeres más exitosas en las universidades austriacas, centrándose en los obstáculos que estas mujeres encuentran y cómo se las arreglaron para superarlos. Los datos están organizados en dos secciones: (1) los resultados apuntan a la existencia de impedimentos significativos para carreras académicas femeninas. El análisis revela que importantes obstáculos incluyen encuentros informales, redes sociales (que suelen estar dominados por los hombres) y la exigencia de ser al mismo tiempo geográficamente móvil y conseguir resolver las demandas familiares; (2) el análisis profundiza en diversas estrategias para superar estos obstáculos en un esfuerzo por alcanzar posiciones de liderazgo.

Palabras clave
Carreras femeninas exitosas, academia, obstáculos a las carreras, estrategias de afrontamiento, mujeres en posiciones de liderazgo