At the Heart or on the Periphery
Gender, (In)visibility and Epistemic Positioning in Academia
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At the heart or on the periphery: Gender, (in)visibility and epistemic positioning in higher education

Abstract

This article analyses barriers for women's careers in higher education from a theoretical perspective focusing on epistemic positioning and gendered (in)visibility. The study is based on 96 qualitative interviews with associate professors in economics, political science and sociology in Denmark. Epistemic positioning is operationalised as four distinct processes of marginalisation: reproduction of men's privileges from cohort to cohort of academics; naturalisation of men's collaboration with other men; appropriation where men's research fields and methods are defined as constituting the centre of a discipline; and bounding as the discreditation of some types of research by labelling them 'female.' Taken together, the four processes of positioning marginalise women (as epistemic subjects) and their research (as epistemic objects).

Introduction

For decades, the low proportion of women among professors in higher education has been addressed in research and at the political level (European Commission 2021, O'Connor et al. 2015). Despite an almost equal number of men and women among doctoral graduates across European countries, women only occupy a quarter of the full professorship positions (European Commission 2021). The low proportion of female professors has been analysed by using metaphors such as 'the glass ceiling' (Loden 1985), 'the leaky pipeline' (Blickenstaff

2005), 'the scissors pattern' (decreasing numbers of women and increasing numbers of men when ascending the academic ladder) (Neugebauer 2006) and 'the sticky floor' (women getting stuck in routine academic work) (Macha 2011). This invites research on the barriers women face when proceeding (or not proceeding) from associate to full professorships, an invitation that this article is an answer to.

Previous studies have analysed women's academic careers from different angles, also in a Danish setting (Guschke, Just and Muhr 2022, Utoft 2021). Research shows that women in higher education experience more problems with work-life balance than men (Baker 2012, Lörz and Mühleck 2019, Nikunen 2014, Rafnsdóttir and Heijstra 2013); that they spend more time on administrative tasks, everyday service functions and committee work, which are of little significance when it comes to promotion (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer 2024, Babcock et al. 2022, Britton 2017, Coate and Howson 2016, Winslow 2010); and that higher education is characterised by formal and informal networks dominated by men, that may be difficult for women to enter (Bandelj 2019, Coate and Howson 2016, van den Brink and Benschop 2012, van Helden et al. 2023, Westoby et al. 2021). Furthermore, studies suggest that women face a 'chilly climate' in academia, i.e. subtle patterns of inequitable treatment by both students and colleagues that in the long run affect their accomplishments in negative ways (Britton 2017). Our study builds on this research, which critically examines the barriers for women's careers in academia.

We focus on one specific phenomenon that has received limited research attention so far: gendered '(in)visibility' in academia (Kanter 1977, Simpson and Lewis 2005). We analyse the contrasting visibility of female and male faculty: women are often visible as women but invisible as researchers, while men tend to be invisible as men and visible as (respected) researchers. This dynamic is explored through four processes of marginalisation: reproduction, naturalisation, appropriation and bounding, which taken

together situate men and their research at the heart and women and their research on the periphery of academia.

The research questions of this article are: How can women's career barriers in higher education be understood in a perspective focusing on epistemic positioning and gendered (in)visibility? What are the processes through which women are rendered invisible as researchers but visible as women working in feminised research fields, while men are positioned as representatives of universal scholarship?

By 'feminised research fields' we refer to areas mentioned by male (and some female) participants as 'typical for women,' as 'female research' or 'research that interests women more than men.' Examples of such fields are family studies, gender studies, youth studies, sexuality studies, elderly research and research within certain fields of public policy and administration. This does not mean that all women in our study work within these fields or that no men do. It rather means that some research fields are conceived, especially by male participants, as being 'female' – and in parallel with this, defined as 'inferior' or 'less important/central' to a discipline.

We restrict the analysis to the categories men and women since (potential) non-binary identities among the participants are outside the scope of our research. Furthermore, we do not focus on differences related to colour since (almost) all interviewees in our study are white, reflecting the homogeneity of faculty on this issue at the involved university departments.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we present previous research on academic networks, the 'ideal academic' (Lund 2020, Thornton 2013) and performance measurement. Second, we describe the article's theoretical frame and the study's methods and data. Third, we analyse the interviewees' accounts structured in accordance with the four processes of epistemic positioning mentioned above. We end by summarising the article's theoretical and

empirical contributions and by discussing differences between disciplines.

Previous studies of networks and performance measurement in higher education

In a review of 32 UK studies on gender in higher education, Westoby et al. (2021) find that women receive less mentoring than men, and less help with career planning. They also show how career-promoting networks are harder to access for women, and how women in many disciplines lack senior role models (Westoby et al. 2021). In another review addressing gender and networks in academia, van Helden et al. (2023) differentiate between operational, developmental and strategic networks. Building on 35 empirical studies, they show that operational networks are used to manage daily work responsibilities through relationships with peers; that developmental networks function through mentorship and social and mental career support; and that strategic networks consist of contacts with high-status gate-keepers and brokers. While the reviewed studies offer mixed evidence of the impact of operational networks on academic careers, analyses of strategic networks reveal convincing evidence of career effects, and a clear gender pattern. Women experience more difficulties than men with accessing such networks and making them work (van Helden et al. 2023). These issues of gendered, sometimes invisible, networks and support systems are found in other studies as well (for a review, see Kelan 2018).

Another branch of research crucial to this article includes studies on the relationship between gender and the 'ideal academic,' described as a 'fictional construct shaped by power' (Thornton 2013: 138). When Thornton (2013) and Lund (2020) discuss the concept of the 'ideal academic,' they highlight the social privileges men benefit from in academia due to the masculine standards by which men and women are measured. Thornton (2013) describes all assessment work as consisting of objective as well as subjective elements. Academic CVs may seem neutral but make no sense without interpretation: 'how

significant and interesting is this person's research?' – and this interpretation tends to reflect gendered standards. Van den Brink and Benschop (2012) demonstrate that professors should be 'sheep with five legs,' that is, they should live up to an impossible combination of skills and experiences. They show how men are frequently chosen over women because of their 'suitability' for the job. Furthering this investigation, van den Brink and Benschop (2014) identify several explanations for the prioritisation of men in assessment committee work: male evaluators 'identifying with the similar' but legitimising their preferences with arguments about candidate quality; female evaluators aligning with the assessment criteria of men, hence reproducing a masculine success model; and evaluators of both genders considering women's 'otherness' as risky, seeing them as lacking authority, ambition and management capacities.

Many scholars, including Sandel in his book *The Tyranny of Merit* (2021), argue that merit is more closely intertwined with social privileges than with intelligence or hard work. Sandel's point is that the vision of merit as a supposedly neutral reflection of talent diverts attention from a key issue: that merit reinforces the very biases it is supposed to overcome. In a recent paper, Aiston and Fitzgerald (2024: 30) also discuss 'the illusion' of merit within elite universities. They argue that the belief in meritocracy in these institutions supports existing power structures rather than challenging them. Merit is not a neutral concept but historically and institutionally shaped. The power of merit lies in the fact that it is perceived as neutral and objective, even though it serves the interests of specific groups (Aiston and Fitzgerald 2024).

Numerous studies demonstrate how current performance measurement systems in academia contribute to reinforcing a gender bias that favours men (Blackmore 2021, O'Connor et al. 2015, see also special issue of *Gender and Education* 2015, vol. 27, number 3). These gender effects often work in indirect ways. For example, top journals tend to favour

co-authored research based in strong international networks, research within certain research fields and research based on quantitative methodologies (Lund 2020, Nygaard et al. 2022). Scholars with more diverse publication records, including books, book chapters and publications in languages other than English may find it more challenging to have their work recognised as high quality research (Jappelli et al. 2017). We contribute to these studies by showing how four simultaneous processes of epistemic positioning place men at the centre and women on the periphery of academia.

Theoretical lens

In our inductive analysis, marginalisation of women and of 'feminised research fields' appeared as two main themes. We therefore frame the article within research on gendered inequality in academia by investigating (in)visibility and epistemic positioning. We use the (in)visibility perspective, developed in organisation studies, when interpreting our interview accounts, combining it with theorisation on legitimate and illegitimate knowledge claims (Bacevic 2023). By doing this, we identify the (in)visibility processes, specific to academia, by which women and their research are marginalised while men and their research become the standard for acknowledged scholarship.

One source of inspiration is Kanter's classical work (1977) *Men and women of the corporation*. Kanter shows how women, in their position as 'tokens' in organisations dominated by men, are highly visible as different from men and how they are positioned in specific roles, formally (in terms of job functions) as well as informally. Hence Kanter, somewhat contra-intuitively, associates women's marginal status with visibility, not invisibility. In her perspective, it is women's perceivable status as women that makes them stand out as different, as non-equals and as unsuited for positions of power and authority.

Another source of inspiration is Simpson and Lewis' (2005) work on the (in)visibility vortex of organisations. They define an (in)visibility vortex 'as a flow, usually in spiral motion, around a centre, encapsulating an invisible masculine norm' (Simpson and Lewis 2005: 142). Drawing on post-structuralist thinking, Simpson and Lewis (2005) regard the (in)visibility vortex as constructed by discursive standards of normalcy ('the norm') against which difference is constituted as inferior. These standards are often perceived as universal, although they reflect the perspectives of dominant groups.

Simpson and Lewis (2005) differentiate between surface and deep processes of marginalisation, with the former referring to processes of being seen and heard (or not being seen and heard) and the latter describing more complicated mechanisms tied to images of natural leaders, authority and responsibility. In this perspective, the question of visibility/invisibility depends on where a person is situated in an organisation's hierarchy. While invisibility within the vortex is associated with privilege, invisibility outside it often signifies negation and otherness. Even though the (in)visibility vortex and the norm constituting it in principle is unnoticed, unmarked and undeclared, there is also an ongoing process of regulating and balancing visibility in the centre of an organisation. Visibility is associated with recognition: to be someone who is entitled to privileges, one has to be detectable and distinguishable as qualified (in accordance with the norm).

We use the concept (in)visibility vortex to show how men's status as ideal academics renders them invisible as men, while women 'suffer the burden of representing their category' (Simpson and Lewis 2005: 1259). We treat visibility as a 'double-edged sword' (Brighenti 2007: 335) that can be empowering as well as disempowering, depending on what expressions it takes and where in the organisation's hierarchy an agent is situated. Both genders occupy the double position of (in)visibility, but in different ways. Women may be highly visible as stereotypical women, yet invisible in terms of authority and recognition.

In contrast, men may be invisible as men, as they personify the universal, but highly visible when it comes to positions of authority and recognition. This is because men represent the standard against which women's performance is often measured, although the normalising flow of the (in)visibility vortex renders the masculine connotations of this standard opaque.

We combine the concept of (in)visibility vortex with theorisation on 'epistemic positioning' in higher education (Bacevic 2023, Fricker 2007). Bacevic (2023: 2-3) defines epistemic positioning as the evaluation of knowledge claims based on the claims-maker's stated or inferred identity. We use two of Bacevic's processes of epistemic positioning: bounding and appropriation. Bounding is a practice of reducing the value of certain knowledge claims by defining them as expressions of the claims-maker's identity, simultaneously interpreting the claims-maker's knowledge field as narrow and 'specific.' Appropriation describes a practice of associating certain (esteemed) claims with a specific person or a group of persons, although the claims have previously been put forward by others. Appropriation often happens in a series of interconnected judgements about one's own and one's group's excellence, sometimes propelled by the so-called Matthew-effect (Bacevic 2023).

We develop Bacevic's (2023) ideas of epistemic positioning by relating them to (in)visibility theory. In order to extend the theory to not only address marginalisation of certain types of research (epistemic objects) which is the main focus of Bacevic's text, we add two forms of positioning concerning the individuals behind the research (epistemic subjects): reproduction and naturalisation. By reproduction we mean the transfer of men's privileges from cohort to cohort of academics, while naturalisation refers to the self-evident character of men's collaboration with other men. With this combination of Bacevic's two processes of positioning and our own, we show how the marginalisation that Simpson and Lewis' (2005) (in)visibility vortex brings about concerns women's position in networks as

well as the perceived relevance of their research. Hence, the article highlights the double position of women and their research as being both invisible and visible: women academics are identified as representatives of their gender rather than capable researchers (reproduction, naturalisation) and their research topics are feminised rather than recognised as research of general interest (bounding, appropriation).

Methodology

Context

Nordic universities have a heightened focus on accountability processes and metrics to assess quality (Pulkkinen et al. 2019: 4). This shift is driven by the EU's modernisation initiatives and the Bologna Process, aimed at harmonising higher education policies (Pulkkinen et al. 2019). Denmark has, according to many researchers, progressed further in these university reforms than most European countries (Degn and Sørensen 2015; Wright and Shore 2022) prioritising efficiency and the production of 'excellent' research, sometimes at the expense of other values (Wright and Shore 2022). While this focus is not unique to Denmark, it is the intensity that stands out. The emphasis on efficiency is so pronounced that it overshadows key academic values like inclusiveness, equality and diversity (Rowlands and Wright 2022, Wright and Shore 2022).

Most departments participating in our study assess research performance using journal lists that specify preferred publication venues for faculty. Although there is variation depending on discipline and university, the listed top journals are dominated by US outlets. This journal-based evaluation system has developed gradually during the past 10-15 years, replacing a more pluralistic system that placed greater value on monographs, edited volumes, book chapters and publications in Danish.

Sample and interviews

The article is based on qualitative interviews with 96 associate professors with a background in economics (37), political science (30) and sociology (29) at three Danish public universities. Of the 96 interviewees, 55 are men and 41 women with an average age of 42. The proportion of women in the sample is higher among economists (48%) and sociologists (46%) than among political scientists (35%) which reflects the gender distribution at the included departments.

We sent e-mail invitations to all associate professors in economics, political science and sociology at the three universities who attained tenure less than 10 years ago. This temporal criterion was used because we were interested in cohorts of scholars having attained tenure after the introduction and systematisation of journal ranking lists at Danish universities. We chose social scientists because performance measurement is relatively new in these fields compared to STEM faculties, and because our background in sociology made it easier for us to engage in informed discussions with participants about topics such as journal lists, publication patterns, promotion and hiring procedures. The acceptance rate among the invited associate professors was 82 percent. All interviews were conducted by us.

With two exceptions, all participants are white, either Danish-born or coming from other European or North American countries. As regards social class, we did not ask the interviewees about their parents' educational level or occupation. Social class is mentioned spontaneously in a few interviews, typically by participants with a working-class background who describe difficulties they have experienced as students and young academics when navigating the norms and expectations of an environment dominated by the middle or upper-middle classes. Unfortunately, this information is too sporadic to be used for a systematic analysis. Furthermore, we have no information about the participants'

sexual orientation or potential non-binary identities because we did not ask them about this in the interviews – although it would have been highly relevant to focus on minorities in a study of marginalisation processes in academia.

Each interview began with a short introduction to the study, focusing on research ethics and anonymity. After obtaining the participant's consent (recorded electronically), the interview began. Among the topics covered are: criteria for becoming full professor, research excellence, research network, teaching and administration, competition among colleagues, work-life balance and gender. The interviews were semi-structured, ensuring the flexibility of spending more time on topics that were of particular interest for the interviewees and us. Most interviews lasted between one and two hours (four were shorter, one longer); the average length was 70 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full.

Most of the data used in the article are based on the participants' interview accounts. One type of information, however, was gathered from online sources: we obtained data on the interviewees' publication patterns (number of articles, co-authored articles, gender of co-authors) from officially available publication records.

Ethics

The project follows the American Sociological Association's Code of Ethics (ASA 2018) for informed consent, participant anonymity and secure handling and storing of data. The study received formal ethical approval from the administering university. Throughout the research process, we have done our utmost to live up to the highest possible ethical standards. Participants have been guaranteed confidentiality and we have anonymised individuals, departments and universities. No personal matters, anecdotes or events that can be tied to individuals, their departments or universities are reported. All names used in the

article are pseudonyms.

Procedure of thematic analysis

First, we conducted an open reading of all interviews, focusing on the themes central to this article: 1) networking with national and international colleagues and 2) perceptions of research excellence and key research fields and methods. We made a thematic coding in NVivo of all said on these topics (and subtopics). Hereafter, we searched for patterns in the interviews, comparing the interviews of men and women, first independently of each other and then together, discussing analytical angles. In this phase of data processing, we noted a general cross-cutting dimension in the interviews: the positioning of women as 'marginal' in relation to networks (mostly described by female participants) and the positioning of women's research as 'different,' and 'peripheral' (mostly mentioned by male participants). We therefore turned to theoretical works on women's and men's (in)visibility in organisations and on epistemic positioning, using these concepts as the theoretical lens in our further analysis. Although the interview guide had not included questions about being seen as different/peripheral/marginal or how research fields and methods should be ranked, we found the interviews to be filled with accounts providing information about these topics. The quotes presented in the following sections illuminate the patterns found in the condensed dataset concerning the chosen topics.

The first two sections address networks and the position of men and women in them, starting with local networks and moving on to international ones. The following sections show how participants frame some knowledge claims as more worthy of recognition than others and how this hierarchy is gendered. The analysis demonstrates how women's difficulties in entering central networks and their choice of research fields and methods place them outside the (in)visibility vortex of academia. Women are visible as

women, when their research is described as 'female research' situated in the periphery of their discipline (be that economics, political science or sociology). However, they are invisible as researchers when mentor-mentee relationships are established between cohorts of academics, when international co-authorship alliances are built at conferences and elsewhere, and when research excellence is defined. In the following sections, we analyse the four processes of positioning one by one: reproduction, naturalisation, appropriation and bounding.

(In)visibility and four processes of positioning

Reproduction: Local networks

Reproduction refers to the transfer of men's privileges from cohort to cohort of academics or what Thornton (2013: 130) calls 'the replacement of like with like.' Consistent with previous research (van Helden et al. 2023), our data show gender differences in how local networks with seniors (PhD supervisors, postdoc mentors, key professors and others) are perceived as beneficial for one's career. Accordingly, almost two-thirds of the men compared to one-third of the women in our study say that their PhD supervisor (and in a few cases, their postdoc mentor) has been important/helpful for their career. The same pattern applies to other central persons in the participants' local network (key professors, heads of departments); two-thirds of the men and one third of the women describe their local network as important/helpful.

This pattern shows the significance of senior-junior networks for men's careers, in terms of inclusion in research projects, introduction to larger research networks, recommendation letters and general career advice. Although women also mention senior colleagues (both men and women) as having been supportive supervisors/mentors, the most beneficial senior-junior relationships, as defined by the interviewees, are found among men.

Women are aware of these male relationships but sometimes bewildered when it comes to describing them. This is not surprising, perhaps, because 'as a woman, you cannot see the networks from the inside,' as Elisabeth puts it, continuing: 'I don't know how they can be so successful, these young men, it's not that they are more talented than women. All I know is that networking with professors plays a part in it.' Camilla is uncertain as to whether these networks actually exist or if she imagines them:

> I am not sure but there seems to be some kind of boys' club where I don't really belong. There is this pattern: those who remain at the department after their PhD are men in postdoc positions working with senior men. And there are these informal ways of being together where I sometimes feel… It's a vague feeling, is it just me thinking it up? You can insist and join them when they go out for a beer for instance, it's not forbidden but it's not really a pleasant and inclusive experience either.

Two men depict networks between senior and junior men – and women's exclusion from them – in this way:

> It's a question of having a patron, one providing you with opportunities. These are platonic, homophile relationships […] with senior people having your back, assuring you that they are going to fix something for you when the time comes. I don't think women have the same backing from powerful persons at the department. I imagine they are more left to fend for themselves (Patrick).

It's so much easier for senior male professors to become friends with junior

males. For men, women are simply not as obvious colleagues and comrades as

other men are. And once you are friends, it cannot help affecting the decisions

being made when seniors evaluate juniors. It's very much like this at our

department (James).

Patrick and James are some of the men who are most explicit about women's difficulties in

entering senior-junior networks, although they describe networks from two different angles.

While Patrick is well integrated in networks himself, James identifies himself as an 'outsider'

who has never had seniors helping him, which is why he explains he 'understands women

better than other men do.' When asked to elaborate further on the networks between men at

his department, he says he does not have 'detailed information' on them. Like many women,

James is assured that men receive help from each other but since he is not part of these

networks himself, he can only 'come up with a qualified guess about their discriminatory

character,' as he says.

What seems to be at play here (and in numerous other interviews) are the 'deep processes' of

marginalisation described by Lewis and Simpson (2012: 1254), that is, reproduction of men's

privileged position through the dynamic relationship between invisibility and 'the norm.' The

(in)visibility vortex is held in place by networks, characterised by masculine homophily

among cohorts of men, although these networks are not necessarily recognised as gendered.

Women are not explicitly excluded (Lewis and Simpson's 'surface level' marginalisation);

rather, they are seen as peripheral members who 'are simply not as obvious colleagues and

comrades as men are,' as James puts it. That these networks are gendered does not mean that

all men benefit from them or that no women do. However, none of the interviewed men

describe other men's networks as a hindrance for their own career advancement, while many female participants (and some male) regard such networks as a barrier for women's academic progress.

Naturalisation of men's collaboration: International co-authorship

Naturalisation of men's collaboration with each other is another process of positioning, closely related to reproduction. In our interviews, naturalisation is most visible when participants describe their co-authorship relations with international colleagues. In this section, we use 'top' publications as an example of how men's same-gender relationships are perceived as 'natural.'

Of the 50 'top' articles (as defined by the included departments' journal lists) published by male participants, 42 are co-authored with other men while only five are co-authored with women (three are single-authored). In comparison, four of the 26 top articles published by female participants are all-women publications, while 15 are co-authored with men (seven are single-authored). Of all 76 articles, 58 are based on quantitative methods. Furthermore, approximately two thirds of both men's and women's co-authored top articles are written with international colleagues. These numbers highlight the significant role men's networks play for publishing in the most prestigious journals, also showing the importance of collaborating with international scholars.

To judge from the interviews, men's co-authorship with other men is not 'a deliberate choice' (Matthew), 'a planned thing' (Joel) or 'some kind of masculine behaviour meant at excluding women' (Philip). In fact, many men say they had not been aware of the gender composition of their co-authorships before we asked them to name their most important collaborators. They express surprise, regret and sometimes embarrassment when 'realising' that they mostly work with other men but describe this as a consequence of

'common interests' (Matthew, Benjamin, Philip) 'parallel research projects' (William, Paul), 'spontaneous talks after conference presentations' (Joel), and as related to 'the fact that men naturally socialise with other men just as women socialise with other women' (Alex). Their embarrassment when noting that they predominantly collaborate with other men may stem from the norm of equality and the expectation that gender (and other identity markers) should not be a hindrance for entering networks.

Although some women say that it is natural for them to collaborate with other women, and in a few cases that they prefer this, most of them express an interest in working with both men and women. Of the interviewed women, some describe no barriers for establishing international co-authorship relations with men while others mention challenges of different kinds. One such challenge is related to international 'alliance building' at conferences which, according to Amber, is a 'predominantly masculine affair' which women are 'welcome to join in principle but not always in practice.' Another woman, Sarah, says this about her conference experiences:

> This is not downright discrimination. It's more this comradely thing, people having a chat, 'let's do something together.' That kind of relationship can be more difficult between men and women at conferences. Men sit down together, have a coffee or beer and then out of nowhere, they are friends and buddies. Whereas for me as a woman, and a good-looking one (laughs), it's like 'are we trying to score each other?'

These accounts show how career-promoting international networking, just like local networking, may be more difficult for women than for men. Women tend to be invisible as 'natural' collaborators in men's networks but sometimes become visible as women (and as

exemplified by Sarah, potential sexual partners) if they try to enter them. The opposite

applies to men. In the (in)visibility vortex of academia (Lewis and Simpson 2012), men's

universal status renders them invisible as men but visible as researchers and collaborators.

'This is not downright discrimination,' as Sarah puts it, it is a question of which colleagues,

men (and women) regard as obvious – and useful – collaborators. Julia describes the self-

evident character of men's alliances in this way, be that as co-authors or co-investigators in

international research applications: 'It's the most natural thing for them to seek out other men

first. Sometimes they notice, later in the process "oops, we need a woman too, this does not

look good." But it's not that she was their spontaneous choice, she was more of an

afterthought.' Women's double position as invisible researchers and visible women is

embedded in other processes underscoring their marginal status: definitions of some scholars'

contributions as central to a discipline and of others as peripheral, which is the topic of the

following sections.

Appropriation: Situating men's research at the core of the discipline

In the interviews, all participants are asked to give three examples of scholars (preferably

names of scholars working in Denmark) whom they consider to be doing excellent or top

research. In response, approximately two-thirds of the men and one-fifth of the women only

mention men. Few participants, one man and six women, only mention women. When

participants put forward both men and women as excellent researchers, men's names also

dominate, especially among men. The tendency to mention more men than women cannot be

explained by a higher proportion of men among the full professors at the involved

departments (as potential candidates for excellence nomination). Many men designate men at

their own academic level or lower (assistant professors) as excellent – often men with a

research profile reminiscent of their own. A small group of men answer the question by mentioning themselves as excellent, which none of the women do.

We use Bacevic's concept 'appropriation' to explicate the processes through which recognition and valuation of knowledge claims are related to mutually reinforcing assumptions about 'what kind of persons or bodies possess what kind of knowledge, and how they should (or should not) be acknowledged in virtue of that' (Bacevic 2023: 10). When men designate themselves or (more typically) colleagues reminiscent of themselves as excellent, it is both a question of assigning value to certain individuals and groups of individuals and of positioning some types of research as more essential than others. In this sense, appropriation is a process of carving out some fields of research and some researchers as representing universal knowledge. As pointed out by Lund (2020: 473), self-promotion (and we may add: promotion of others like oneself) is part of a struggle over which and whose contributions count most. Pursuing recognition as a valuable academic is, according to Lund (2020), encouraged and expected in today's academia but power dynamics define who is entitled to engage in this practice.

Louise explains how assessment committees (several of which she has been a member of) often see men as 'promising' or as 'potential good thinkers even though they haven't published much yet, which is something you seldom say about women.' According to another participant, Emma, this perception of men being more qualified researchers is an opinion reproduced 'by all of us. I am not blaming the men for this.' She points at a key issue, namely, that it is not individual men's aversion to or negligence of women's work that marginalise women. It is the norm of the (in)visibility vortex that defines some scholars, here men more than women, as 'ideal academics' (Lund 2020, Thornton 2013). Appropriation is not the achievement of isolated acts of positioning, performed consciously by individual scholars. It is a collection of evaluations of a researcher's value and relevance gathered from

the actions and reactions from colleagues, mentors, managers and several others (Bacevic 2023). Appropriation is an ongoing and self-enforcing process of securing that knowledge claims and knowledge claimers are valued in accordance with the standards set by the (in)visibility vortex, however contingent and defined by the interests of dominant groups these standards are.

Bounding: Inferiorisation of women and their research

Finally, bounding is a form of positioning where some knowledge claims are circumscribed because they are tied to inferiorised groups and their interests (Bacevic 2023). To a certain degree, bounding is the reverse side of appropriation (described above) where men and their research are comprehended as representing universal scholarship. Like appropriation, bounding is an unvarnished process of lumping together most research conducted by women in one category and most research conducted by men in another – regardless of the immense variation in research practices (thematically as well as methodologically) among men and among women.

In the interviews, several men talk about 'women's research areas' as 'not being seen as super relevant,' as Daniel puts it, continuing 'I say this with regret.' He suggests that there is 'some negative bias' towards research fields dominated by women and sums up by stating: 'Women do qualitative research, right. There is a clear standard for how quantitative research should be conducted; however, this does not apply for qualitative research which makes it more difficult for women to get employed.' This differentiation between men's and women's research, as presented by the participants, concerns both research methods and research fields. Another participant, Oliver explains: 'There are types of research, family studies for instance, that mostly appeal to women, and it's unfortunately not possible to have *that* many positions in one sub-field.' Other research fields described as 'insignificant' or

'marginal' by the interviewed men are youth studies (Martin), gender studies (Daniel, Peter), sexuality studies (Jonathan), elderly research (Vincent) and certain fields within public policy and administration research (Sylvester). Marc adds to the perception of 'women's research' being 'specific' by stating: 'The question is why women are concentrated within certain areas of our discipline, and why they don't, I was about to say *dare,* choose areas where you are more focused on doing something new and original' (Marc). In this, Marc positions 'female' research fields as marginal for the general development of his discipline, something he later verifies by claiming that 'for some reason, men are more courageous when it comes to posing research questions central to the social sciences'.

Approximately half of the men are convinced that the current focus on gender in higher education, and the initiatives set in motion to combat gender inequality, are important and good. However, the subtle ways in which this inequality works are not easily detectable for all (men and women alike). Aiston and Fitzgerald's (2024) describe the 'façade of diversity,' arguing that initiatives for increasing gender equality at universities may unintentionally perpetuate inequality. Diversity initiatives do not necessarily challenge established definitions of merit but may rather codify them, signalling that some applicants for academic positions need privileged treatment because they do not live up to the, seemingly neutral, quality standards that the assessment of candidates is based on (Aiston and Fitzgerald, 2024).

An example of this is when Sebastian explains that there is no bias anymore in evaluation work: 'If we end up shortlisting nine men and one woman, we correct it and that is good and fair. So, in that sense, I don't think there is any bias.' However, the opposite interpretation is also possible, namely, that women may be invisible as competent researchers in processes of shortlisting. Their inclusion is an 'afterthought,' as Julia explains above about situations where it 'does not look good' to have male candidates only.

While Kanter (1977) stipulates that greater numerical balance between men and women will gradually solve the problems with women's unequal status in organisations, Simpson and Lewis (2005: 1259) argue that women will continue 'to suffer the burden of representing their category' even in cases where they might no longer constitute a minority in terms of numbers. This interpretation is echoed by current research on epistemic injustice in academia, where numerical balance is not considered the primary solution to gender equality problems (Blackmore 2021, Rowlands and Wright 2022, Thornton 2013). In the example of shortlisting above, women are treated as unsuitable candidates in the first shortlisting round, after which they become visible as representatives of their gender and *then* included. Similar stories are told by other participants who stress the importance of gender-balanced shortlists, although they also explain that the subsequently shortlisted women are seldom hired. Numerical equality does not change women's peripheral status in academia if they are judged in accordance with the normative standards of the (in)visibility vortex. These are the standards, seemingly neutral but tacitly favouring men, against which women's otherness is constructed as representing inferiority and incompetence, as also demonstrated by Thorton (2013).

Discussion

This article extends current research on epistemic injustice in academia (Blackmore 2021, Rowlands and Wright 2022) and particularly Bacevic's (2023) work on epistemic positioning. It does so by refining the positioning processes suggested by her and incorporating theory on (in)visibility (Kanter 1977, Simpson and Lewis 2005). We use the concepts appropriation and bounding (Bacevic 2023) to analyse the processes that marginalise research areas and approaches defined as female, also identifying two other processes, reproduction and naturalisation, that marginalise women as researchers. We argue

that deep processes of marginalisation – as opposed to surface processes of marginalisation (Simpson and Lewis 2005) – can best be understood if analysed as a combined positioning of women (epistemic subjects) as outsiders in relation to men's networks and of their research fields and methods (epistemic objects) as 'specific,' in contrast to men's 'universal' scholarship.

Extending previous studies on networks in academia (e.g. Westoby et al. 2021, van Helden et al. 2023, Kelan 2018), the analysis reveals the subtle mechanisms that exclude women from men's networks: the 'naturalness' of men's collaboration with each other within and across cohorts of academics, and the positioning of women as less obvious candidates for research collaboration. The study contributes to research on epistemic injustice in academia (e.g., Blackmore 2021) by showing that certain research fields and methods (defined as female) are seen as less compatible with 'research excellence' than others (areas defined as male). Furthermore, the article reveals that 'the ideal academic' of today (Lund 2020; Thornton 2013) is a networking academic, or more specifically: a person working in larger, international groups with the purpose of improving their chances of publishing in listed journals. Because journal lists tend to favour research based on quantitative methods (Lund 2020, Nygaard et al. 2022), and because group-based co-authorship is more applicable in quantitative than in qualitative or theoretical research, the ideal academic also tends to be a quantitative (male) researcher. The study suggests that women's tendency to (more often) work with qualitative methods, along with their difficulties in entering male-dominated networks, turn the journal lists adopted by Danish universities into a new obstacle for women's career achievements. This echoes critiques by Sandel (2021) and Aiston and Fitzgerald (2024) of meritocratic systems, where performance metrics favour some groups of faculty by setting narrow standards for measuring qualifications.

The center of attention in the article is differences between men and women and not differences between men and between women. This was a methodological choice. When discussing gender with the participants, we primarily focused on how the 'leaky pipeline' (Blickenstaff 2005) or the 'scissors pattern' (Neugebauer 2006) should be explained. This focus affected the participants' accounts throughout the interviews. When they describe the significance of men's senior-junior networks and the self-evident character of men's collaboration with each other, it is in relation to women's potential exclusion from networks and not men's. There is a small group of men in the study working with qualitative methods and some of them reflect on processes of appropriation and bounding, explaining that their type of research is not a priority at their department. However, none of them say that their research methods (or research topics) are associated with exclusion from networks. Conversely, there are women working with quantitative methods who describe their research as core to their discipline and as fully respected by their colleagues. Nevertheless, several of these women also talk about feelings of otherness and difficulties in entering men's networks (senior-junior as well as peer networks). This indicates that while both men and women may be subject to certain forms of epistemic injustice, women – due to their association with 'inferior' research fields and methods *and* their status as invisible researchers but visible women – are more prone to experience all four processes of marginalisation.

The study includes participants from three disciplines, but for reasons of anonymity we do not mention individual participants' disciplinary background in the analysis. Overall, the interviews show a complex disciplinary pattern. On the one hand, more economists than political scientists and sociologists describe processes of reproduction and naturalisation; hence, women economists are the participants who most often express feelings of being excluded from networks dominated by men. On the other hand, the two other processes of positioning, appropriation and bounding, are somewhat more common among

political scientists and sociologists. One reason for this is the methodological and epistemological heterogeneity of these disciplines as compared to economics. In political science and sociology, the split between quantitative and qualitative methods is gendered, and hence an important part of epistemic positioning. In the interviews with economists, this methodological aspect is lacking (as all work with quantitative methods), and appropriation and bounding are primarily related to the feminisation of research fields.

Our research does not provide information about the relationship between ethnicity, sexual orientation and marginalisation of researchers and their research. This is a clear limitation of the study. Further research on inequality in higher education should consider intersectional (in)visibility and epistemig positioning. Most likely, the mechanisms of reproduction, naturalisation, appropriation and bounding have harsher consequences for people from racial and sexual minorities, and for women in these groups in particular.

With these limitations, the study identifies men's networks and hierarchies of research fields and methods as being important hindrances for women's career possibilities. By combining (in)visibility theory with the perspective of epistemic positioning, we tracked down four processes that position women and their research on the periphery in higher education. While two processes concern men's and women's knowledge claims (appropriation, bounding), the other two concern men's and women's status in relation to senior-junior and co-authorship networks (reproduction, naturalisation). A key message in the article is that it is the combination of the four processes – in essence, the merger of women's (in)visibility and the degraded status of their research – that is the key driver in preserving gender inequality in academia.

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