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The Silent Standpoint: How Professors Explain Gender Disparities in Academia

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ABSTRACT

Based on 77 qualitative interviews with professors in higher education, this article explores the interviewees' opinions on how gender disparities in academia should be explained. We show that male professors relate women's career barriers to family factors and women's own interests and preferences. In contrast, female professors favour explanations at the university level, for example lack of recognition of women, implicit bias in evaluations, male networks and an unwelcoming academic culture. Furthermore, we identify a 'silent standpoint' among the participating male professors: the idea that women are generally less qualified than men as candidates for full professorships. The article draws on sociological accounting theories, focussing on the 'excuses' and 'justifications' used by professors when discussing gender issues. Male professors 'excuse' gender disparities in academia by referring to women's preferences or 'justify' them by appealing to meritocratic standards. Entangled in these 'neutralising' accounts is the silent standpoint regarding women's low qualifications, a standpoint, however, that is difficult for male professors to articulate in an interview with a female colleague.

1 | Introduction

Denmark and the other Nordic countries are often considered frontrunners in gender equality. However, when it comes to the gender distribution of positions in academia, women constitute only 26% of full professors in the social sciences, which places Denmark in the lowest third of EU countries (Ministry of Higher Education and Science 2023). Although gender diversity is a declared ideal across the higher education sector in Denmark, Danish universities show only modest concern for gender initiatives (M. W. Nielsen 2014, 2017; M. Nielsen et al. 2024). In contrast to other Nordic countries, Denmark has primarily opted for policies aimed at 'fixing the women' (e.g., through mentorship schemes) and has been more reluctant to implement initiatives aimed at 'fixing the organisation', such as targeted hiring schemes or structural incentives to ensure gender balance in academic recruitment (Cecchini et al. 2019; M. Nielsen et al. 2024). One reason for this may be the widespread belief that gender equality has already been achieved in most sectors of Danish society, including academia, and that the remaining disparities will disappear with time (Borchorst and Dahlerup 2020; Cecchini et al. 2019).

This article is based on qualitative interviews with 77 professors across the broader fields of economics, political science and sociology and investigates participants' explanations for the low proportion of female professors in the social sciences. We investigate how male and female professors describe the causes of gender disparities, and how these descriptions are shaped by broader professional norms. We pay particular attention to the reactions of male professors when asked about gender disparities. In interviews that otherwise progress smoothly, gender-related questions often disrupt the flow of interaction, eliciting pauses, searching for words or expressions such as 'this is a very difficult question' or 'I really don't know the answer'. These reactions alter the dynamic between the

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two female interviewers and their male colleagues, revealing tension, awkwardness or discomfort on the part of the interviewees.

Throughout the article, we focus on how professors themselves envisage gender disparities, also showing that the explanations they put forward do not always match those presented in academic research. While all interviewees are researchers themselves, their opinions about academic careers reflect personal experiences and values and not necessarily research findings—although some participants, and female professors in particular, are acquainted with research in the field.

The article addresses the following research questions: How do male and female professors explain the underrepresentation of women in academia? How and why do discussions about gender disparities disrupt rapport in otherwise collegial interviews between a female interviewer and a male interviewee? What forms of reasoning—such as excuses and justifications—do interviewees employ when navigating the topic of gender disparities, and how might this reasoning contribute to the persistence of barriers for women in academia?

The interviewees' personal conceptions of gender disparities in academia are important to study for several reasons. Our study reveals a deep gap between men's and women's opinions on how the low proportion of female professors should be explained. While women focus on university-internal explanations (male networks, biased evaluation criteria), men prefer explanations related to women themselves (women's low ambitions and disinterest in competition). Furthermore, many male professors but no female professors share the 'silent standpoint' that female candidates for professorships (in general) are less qualified than male applicants. These differences in male and female interviewees' opinions are interesting in and of themselves. However, they are also important to focus on because they reflect— and affect—the interviewed professors' academic values and conceptions of merit and of fairness and righteousness in hiring and promotion processes. If male professors regard their female colleagues, at junior as well as senior levels, as unambitious and unengaged, and most importantly, as lacking the competences needed for an academic career, these opinions will influence whom they are willing to recruit, support and promote and in general, whom they regard as legitimate colleagues in academia. By analysing how professors in positions of power explain gender disparities, the article examines not only interpretations of inequality, but also a set of meanings that are actively involved in reproducing gendered academic careers.

1.1 | Previous Research

We focus on two areas of research relevant to this article. First, we review previous studies on barriers to women's careers in academia. Second, we present research on interactional problems in interviews, including those in which women interview men.

1.1.1 | Barriers to Women's Academic Careers

Given the large number of studies analysing gender disparities in academia, we base our presentation solely on review articles, focussing on the barriers to women's careers identified in these reviews. In the following, we present the most essential explanations identified across review articles.

One such explanation concerns women's marginal position in strategic networks within higher education—networks that advance men's careers through mentorship relations, national and international research collaboration and male friendship/comradeship in general (Cecchini et al. 2019; van Helden et al. 2023; Westoby et al. 2021). Another explanation highlighted in several reviews relates to hiring and promotion criteria, described as favouring men (Araneda-Guirriman et al. 2023; Mula-Flacón et al. 2021; Shorey et al. 2023). For instance, studies indicate that a narrow emphasis on publications in 'top' journals and a corresponding devaluation of other publications disadvantage women (Phillips et al. 2022; Shorey et al. 2023). Similarly, evaluation criteria that overlook or downplay applicants' qualifications in administrative roles (and teaching)—areas in which women tend to be more experienced than men—further contribute to this disparity (Araneda-Guirriman et al. 2023; Cama et al. 2016; Kaymakcioglu and Thomas 2024; Phillips et al. 2022; Rosa 2022). A third set of explanations described across reviews links women's career challenges to family responsibilities and difficulties in achieving a work–life balance (Araneda-Guirriman et al. 2023; Cama et al. 2016; Kaymakcioglu and Thomas 2024; Rosa 2022). Finally, some explanations emphasize the 'masculine' and 'chilly' climate in academia, where women feel unwelcome and experience a sense of 'non-belongingness' (Mula-Flacón et al. 2021; Phillips et al. 2022; Westoby et al. 2021).

Although all these review articles focus on mechanisms that may hinder women's career advancement, few studies have examined how such explanations are discussed in interview situations (exceptions are Eslen-Ziya and Yildirim 2022; Bird and Rhoton 2021; Clarke et al. 2024). Our study contributes to this field by analysing male and female professors' personal opinions about gender disparities and paying particular attention to the interactional dynamics that may emerge when women interview men about this topic. In the following, we turn to previous research on interactional challenges in qualitative interviews to frame this analytical focus.

1.1.2 | Interactional Problems in Qualitative Interviews

Previous research on 'peer' or 'insider' interviews—where the interviewer and interviewee belong to the same group and share experiences (McDougall and Henderson-Brooks 2021; Merton 1972; Platt 1981)—highlights the potential for swift access to knowledge (Perera 2021; Platt 1981). However, in a classical text, Merton (1972) notes that the insider–outsider dynamic is often complex. Interviewers are never total insiders; they share some statuses with their interviewees (in our case, the position

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as professors) and not others (in our case, gender), which may give rise to conflicting perspectives on the matters discussed.

Roulston (2014) analyses 'interactional problems' in interviews, including when interviewees provide minimal responses or react with hesitation and pauses. Silence on the part of the interviewees may serve as a defence mechanism against uncomfortable topics but also function as a means of challenging the interviewer's position and/or the study's approach to the subject under investigation (Bengtsson and Fynbo 2018; Heikkilä and Katainen 2021; Poland and Pederson 1998; Warin and Dennis 2008). Poland and Pederson (1998) assess silences in interviews as profoundly meaningful and deserving of analytic attention, whether they occur in situations where certain things are taken for granted (and, therefore, do not need to be said), situations where the interviewee or interviewer engages in 'self-censorship' or situations characterized by disagreement and conflict.

Heikkilä and Katainen (2021) focus on 'counter-talk' in interviews, distinguishing between interviewees' resistance to the situation, resistance to the topic and resistance to the interviewer. They describe the first type of resistance as common in interviews, as many interviewees feel insecure and tense when meeting an unfamiliar interviewer pursuing objectives they may not fully understand. The other two forms of resistance are less frequent but often analytically significant. Resistance to the topic may manifest in short, evasive answers, change of subject or signs of disinterest. In contrast, resistance to the interviewer may be expressed as teasing, mockery or outright disrespect. Heikkilä and Katainen (2021) interpret counter-talk as 'moral boundary drawing', a means of creating distance from the interviewer and the perspectives the interview is perceived to represent. Their study highlights how analysing unexpected behaviours in interviews can be crucial for understanding the interviewees' actual points of view.

Gender studies have shown that male interviewees may adapt their responses depending on the gender of the interviewer, presenting themselves as more progressive and critical of gender stereotypes when interviewed by a woman than by a man (Pini and Pease 2013; Sallee and Harris 2011). This does not mean that one type of response is more truthful than others. Rather, interviewees emphasise some aspects of themselves and downplay others depending on the interviewer–interviewee dynamic, framing their responses in accordance with what they assume is expected of them in a specific interview context (Sallee and Harris 2011).

Our study contributes to the two strands of research reviewed above (research on women's career barriers and research on interaction in interviews). First, by asking male and female professors what they consider to be the main explanations of gender disparities in academia, we identify the most significant *legitimate* explanations among men and women, respectively. Second, by investigating 'interactional problems' (hesitation, silences, resistance) in our discussions with male colleagues, we uncover a *tabooed/illegitimate* standpoint shared by many men: the belief that the low proportion of female professors is a natural consequence of women's inadequate academic qualifications. In this, we show, like others before us, that silences in interviews may reveal important aspects of the topic being studied but also, that questions can be posed in ways that contribute to interviewees' resistance. The silent standpoint is sometimes accompanied by participants' (implicit or explicit) questioning of many of the explanations mentioned in the literature review above. As we will demonstrate, few male interviewees attribute the low proportion of female professors to factors such as male networks, evaluation criteria favouring men or an academic culture that is unwelcoming to women.

As mentioned above, it is crucial to distinguish between the conceptions of individual professors and scholarly analyses. While there is an extensive body of research on structural and institutional barriers to women's academic careers, fewer studies (e.g., Bird and Rhoton 2021; Eslen-Ziya and Yildirim 2022; Clarke et al. 2024) examine how such disparities are interpreted by those working within academia—and to our knowledge there are no studies focussing specifically on how male academics perceive gender inequality. Similar to Bird and Rhoton's and Eslen-Ziya and Yildrim's studies, we treat interviewees' accounts not as flawed versions of scholarly knowledge, but as sociologically meaningful in their own right. Whether the opinions of professors reflect scientific knowledge or not, they influence academic practice, for instance when networks are developed, when mentor-mentee relationships are built and when decisions on hiring and promotion are made. In this sense, the article also contributes to understanding how gender shapes perceptions of merit, collegiality and legitimacy in everyday academic interactions.

2 | Methods and Data

The study is based on interviews with 77 full professors (46 men and 31 women) working within the broader fields of economics, political science and sociology at three Danish universities. The interviewees were invited by e-mail, with a brief description of the study's aims and procedures to ensure their anonymity. The response rate was 87%. All interviews were conducted by the two authors of this article. The interview guide covered various topics: promotion criteria, publication patterns, conceptions of research excellence, work/life balance etc.—with gender disparities being a theme discussed relatively late in the interviews but mentioned in the invitation and introduction. Typically, the interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min, with an average duration of 75 min. All interviews were recorded in full and transcribed verbatim.

In line with the ethical guidelines of the American Sociological Association (2018) and the Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (Ministry of Higher Education and Science 2014), we obtained informed consent, ensured the anonymity of the participants and managed all data with the utmost security, storing and sharing data only in encrypted form. Confidentiality was maintained by carefully excluding any information that could reveal the identity of individuals or their departments, using pseudonyms when quoting participants and avoiding reporting of experiences or anecdotes that might be locally recognisable.

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TABLE 1 | The interviewees' explanations of the low proportion of female professors (one interviewee may mention several explanations).

	Family-related explanations[a]	Individual explanations[b]	Explanations internal to academia[c]	Difficulties/unwillingness to answer[d]
Men	32 (70%)	20 (43%)	10 (22%)	25 (54%)
Women	19 (61%)	10 (32%)	30 (97%)	1 (3%)
All	51 (66%)	30 (39%)	40 (52%)	26 (34%)

Note: $N = 77$ (46 men, 31 women).
[a]Women's family responsibilities, problems with work-life balance, career breaks due to maternity leaves.
[b]Women's lower ambitions, dislike of competition, lack of self-confidence.
[c]Lack of recognition of women's qualifications, hierarchy of research fields, unwelcoming academic culture, men's networks, women's 'over-involvement' in academic service, 'sexist' culture, 'implicit bias' in evaluations.
[d]Interviews characterized by palpable insecurity and hesitation, uneasiness or reluctance when asked how the low proportion of female professors can be explained.

All interview sequences analysed in this article stem from two specific questions: 'In your opinion, how can the relatively low proportion of female professors be explained?' and 'Have you witnessed situations where men and women were treated differently, for instance, situations where one gender was favoured?' In many cases, the first question was accompanied by a statement clarifying that we did not expect the interviewee to be an expert in research on this topic but were interested in their 'personal opinions' or 'immediate thoughts' about the matter.

For the analysis, we coded all answers to the two central questions, generating three categories that covered the explanations put forward by the interviewees: (1) family-oriented explanations (women's family responsibilities, career breaks due to maternity leaves); (2) 'individual' explanations (women's lower ambitions, their dislike of competition and/or lack of self-confidence); and (3) university-internal explanation (e.g., hierarchy of research fields, men's networks, 'implicit bias' in evaluations). For the second part of the analysis, we identified a subset of interviews characterized by significant hesitation or resistance on the part of the interviewees. Although we had noticed these 'interactional problems' (Roulston 2014) when conducting the interviews, we were surprised to see how widespread they were in interviews with male professors (Table 1). After re-reading the interviews several times, also comparing the participants' answers to the questions about gender disparities to their responses in the rest of the interviews, we decided to use sociological accounting theory (Austin 1956–57; Scott and Lyman 1968; Sykes and Matza 1957) to analyse them. This two-stage approach allowed us to first, analyse dominant lay explanations for gender disparities among male and female professors and second, identify more ambiguous, silenced standpoints embedded in complex interview interactions.

2.1 | Analytical Approach

In the analysis, we use classic sociological texts on accounting (Austin 1956–57; Scott and Lyman 1968; Sykes and Matza 1957). 'Accounts' are, according to Scott and Lyman (1968), devices employed when a phenomenon in which a participant is directly or indirectly involved is subjected to critical inquiry. Building on Austin's (Austin 1956–57) seminal text, *A Plea for Excuses*, Scott and Lyman (1968) differentiate between two types of accounts: excuses and justifications. *Excuses* arise when participants agree on the wrongness or inappropriateness of a phenomenon but explain it by attributing it to factors beyond their control. Examples of excuses include 'scapegoating' (blaming others), appeals to biology (the phenomenon in question is biologically rather than socially conditioned) or 'accidents' (the phenomenon is an unintended consequence of otherwise legitimate action) (Scott and Lyman 1968). *Justifications* refer to interactions where participants acknowledge the *existence* of a phenomenon but deny its pejorative qualities. Unlike excuses, justifications—referred to as 'neutralisations' in parts of the literature on accounting (Sykes and Matza 1957)—are used to defend and legitimise the phenomenon discussed by stressing its normalcy and positive values.

We start by presenting an overview of all interviewees' responses to the question of how they think the low proportion of female professors should be explained, highlighting differences between men's and women's perceptions (see Table 1 and Supporting Information S1: Appendix A). These responses represent the legitimate explanations preferred by each gender. We then apply the accounting perspective (Scott and Lyman 1968) in a focused analysis of a tabooed explanation—the silent standpoint—expressed exclusively by men. This section of the article examines sequences of men's interviews characterized by hesitation, caution and silence/'speechlessness'. In many cases, male interviewees show ambivalence when defining the low proportion of female professors as a *problem*. They perceive the skewed gender distribution as a natural consequence of academia's meritocracy and the 'fact' that women are less qualified candidates (less excellent, less original, less talented) for top academic positions.

2.2 | Explanations Provided by Male and Female Participants

In Table 1, we present three types of explanations put forward by the interviewees (see also Supporting Information S1: Appendix A, where the explanations provided by all 77 interviews are summarised).

The first category of explanations suggested by the participants attributes the low proportion of female professors to women's family responsibilities. This is expressed in several ways in the interviews. For instance, children are described as a 'considerable career obstacle' for women ('Oliver'), and women are portrayed as 'unwilling to sacrifice their family' for their careers (Nick). The interviewees point out that the 'fight for tenure' happens at a time when 'the family burden is toughest' (Sylvia): 'It's during the years when we have small children that we have to qualify ourselves publication-wise' (Johanna). Family-related

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explanations are raised by an equal proportion of men and women (around two thirds), although with a clear difference in prioritisation: men often mention this as their first or only explanation, while among women it is typically mentioned after (one, two or three) other explanations (see Supporting Information S1: Appendix A).

The second category of explanations put forward by the participants attributes the low proportion of female professors to individual-level factors such as women's dislike of competition or lack of self-confidence. Such explanations are suggested by about one third of the participants (more men than women). Male interviewees more frequently mention women's 'lack of competitive drive' or 'low ambitions', while female participants focus on women's 'lack of self-confidence'.

The third category of responses attributes the low proportion of female professors to barriers within academia—and here, we find a striking gender pattern: 30 out of 31 women, but only one-fifth of the men, suggest this type of explanation. Female interviewees echo all the university-related factors identified in the literature review above. For instance, they point to a lack of recognition of women's qualifications: 'Men tend to see the qualities in other men and not in women, and the things they regard as genial in men are only irritating in women' (Marina); 'It's a question of taking women seriously. It's difficult to pinpoint, but women must walk the extra mile before they are recognised' (Annette). Female interviewees also highlight a hierarchy of research fields: 'The more women there are in a research field, the less prestigious it is' (Isabella); 'Women are situated in the margin of what is considered mainstream research, which means they have to fight harder' (Clara). They also mention male networks, 'There are some subtle mechanisms, you are not invited into the networks' (Josephine); 'You know this Huey, Dewey and Louie effect where men help and support each other' (Beatrice)—in combination with an unwelcoming academic culture: 'There was a time when women were not allowed to become researchers, whereas now, we are allowed, but are we really welcome?' (Marina). Furthermore, female interviewees draw attention to an unequal distribution of academic service work, which reduces women's research time: 'I have said this to our management: "Don't abuse women's willingness to help, don't let men flee from administrative duties"' (Matilda).

Among the male interviewees, some explicitly question this type of university-internal explanations. For instance, one man references international studies showing that women undertake more academic service work than men. Still, he says, now referring to his own experience: 'I think these results cannot be applied to Danish conditions' (Benjamin). Another man discusses 'gender biases in evaluations', adding, 'I don't know, there are so many claims about these things' (Noah)'. A third man mentions 'some bro or macho culture' before asserting that he does not believe this culture 'has much to do with gender' (Nick). These responses show the differences between the opinions of individual professors and general research findings (Araneda-Guirriman et al. 2023; Mula-Flacón et al. 2021; Shorey et al. 2023; van Helden et al. 2023; Westoby et al. 2021). They also reveal that many participants are acquainted with international research on gender and academic careers but that some men (but none of the women) dismiss such findings, defining them as 'claims' that are irrelevant for Danish conditions.

Another notable gender difference in the interviewees' responses to the question of gender disparities in academia is the dominance of men in the category of participants being unable or unwilling to answer the question (see Table 1). Thus, half of the male professors (compared to only one woman) fall into this category, either failing or refusing to explain the low proportion of female professors or only answering after significant hesitation and prolonged pauses. In the remainder of the article, we focus on the interviews with these men, using the accounting perspective (Scott and Lyman 1968) to interpret their 'excuses' and 'justifications' and demonstrate how 'interactional problems' (Roulston 2014) and hesitation and ambivalence on the part of the interviewees can offer meaningful insights into the subject matter studied (Bengtsson and Fynbo 2018; Heikkilä and Katainen 2021; Poland and Pederson 1998).

2.3 | Excusing and Justifying Gender Disparities

2.3.1 | Pauses and Hesitation

In this initial interview sequence, the participant, William, exhibits considerable hesitance in offering explanations for the low proportion of female professors in Denmark. As one of relatively few men, he cautiously, and only after some probing by the interviewer, hints at explanations within academia—though he cannot specify them further. The conversation gains momentum only when the interviewer poses the second question on gender from our interview guide, and especially when she suggests that women might now receive preferential treatment.

Interviewer: How do you think the relatively low share of female professors can be explained? What are your thoughts about that?

William: [long pause] I think we need to look back in history because I believe there are some historical barriers... [pause] There used to be significant barriers.

Interviewer: What barriers are you thinking of?

William: [long pause] I believe there were some general hurdles in society that made it hard for women to make a career. Gender roles in the family had a lot to say. But I also think there were criteria at university level that made it harder for... I believe there was a gender bias in the criteria for obtaining professorships and other positions. Whether the barriers are still there, I don't know.

Interviewer: What criteria could those be?

William: [long pause] Hmm, it's hard to pinpoint. I wasn't part of the assessment system back then.

Interviewer: What about now? Have you witnessed situations where men and women are treated differently, situations where one gender is favoured?

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William: Hmm [pause] I'm not sure I have examples. I am certain that men and women are treated differently but I don't have concrete examples of discrimination. It's a topic of much discussion in our department. We always look at gender distribution when hiring people, wondering if it's balanced and if we're fair in our approach. But I don't know if I've seen women being treated differently.

Interviewer: It could also be the other way around, with women being favoured?

William: Yes, yes! That happens [no pause, the answer comes promptly]. Sometimes, to maintain gender balance, women get certain positions before men. In that sense there's a kind of gender quota.

Before the gender-related part of the interview, William answers questions effortlessly, and the atmosphere is relaxed and collegial. However, when the topic of gender is introduced, a prolonged sequence unfolds in which he struggles to provide answers. Initially his response, after a substantial pause, relates gender disparities to historical barriers. This can be seen as an excuse: he removes the explanation from present-day issues while admitting that there 'used to be a problem' (Austin 1956–57), aligning himself with the female interviewer and her question about gender differences being an issue in need of explanation. He then continues, after another lengthy pause, by suggesting both university-external and -internal factors, such as 'gender roles in the family' and 'gender bias in university criteria', again anchoring these explanations in the past, stating that he 'does not know if the barriers are still there'. These explanations may be seen as 'routinised accounts', meaning that they are legitimate and 'anchored to the background expectations of the situation' (Scott and Lyman 1968, 52–53).

In the final part of the sequence, William's tone shifts noticeably when asked about the possibility of reverse discrimination. Here, he returns to the original rhythm of the interview, responding with enthusiasm and sudden certainty: 'Yes, yes! That happens'. This response sheds light on his earlier hesitation. If women are not discriminated against in today's academia, there is no need to delve into present-day 'excuses'. Instead, the low proportion of female professors may be *justified* by describing their poorer qualifications, which is why 'gender quotas' are perceived as discrimination against men.

2.3.2 | 'I am Completely Speechless'

In this sequence, another male professor demonstrates hesitation and indecision when invited to discuss gender-related issues in academia. Again, his 'speechlessness' emerges suddenly during an interview characterized by collaboration and openness, with most of his previous responses being articulate and expansive.

Interviewer: Why do you think we don't have more female professors in fields where the number of women and men is roughly equal at the lower levels, such as in your own discipline?

Philip: Well... uh... and that's uh... That's really an intriguing and important question. And I... I have... I have tried to find an answer to that too because it's something we discuss a lot. There's a huge imbalance in my department. And... I really don't know, to be honest. I truly don't know. Uh... [pause] So that's my brief answer: I don't really know. I could elaborate on why I... uh. You're welcome to ask more specifically.

Interviewer: I can try to ask more specifically. Considering your department, when you look at it from a gender perspective, perhaps you haven't given it much thought, but looking back, do you think there's a difference in how men and women are treated in various contexts? Have you noticed a difference?

Philip: Well, it's... [long pause]. I find it difficult to answer because in a way, I don't know if I've experienced it. But it may be something I can't see due to various blind spots or biases. I mean, perhaps... uh... [pause]. I mean I can... [pause]. Yes, I find it hard because... because when I think about what it means for something to be gendered, I wonder if it's just some stereotypes I'm thinking of, or if it's something I've heard. But there is... uh... [long pause]. At least, uh... now I'm completely speechless, but there's an example of a colleague who I think should have been promoted to a professorship but she wasn't. And I think gender may have played a role there because her research wasn't regarded as independent enough which I think it was. And I am not sure if it played a role but there were women involved in the assessment. But this is all speculative. There are also instances where women have been promoted because there is a goal of increasing diversity, which may be legitimate enough. I find these gender issues challenging. There are certainly also discussions about whether something might be too competitive or too ambitious, and whether this is something women may not like, and that may be true.

Philip begins by complimenting the interviewer on a 'really intriguing and important question', noting that it has been frequently discussed in his department, after which he concludes that he 'really does not know' the answer. The interviewer then poses the second gender-related question from our interview guide, revealing (as in the sequence with William above) a specific logic within our study. This logic, which we were only partly aware of when conducting the interviews, links the low proportion of female professors to one specific category of explanations: the unequal treatment of men and women *within* academia. This does not make it easier for Philip, who

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may have preferred other explanations but now struggles to adapt his answer to the 'repertoire of accounts' suggested by the interviewer (Scott and Lyman 1968, 53).

Like the interview with William, this interview contains a combination of excuses and (partly implicit) justifications. Philip acknowledges that gender disparities in academia are problematic, for example when he compliments the interviewer for raising this 'important' topic. He attributes the low proportion of female professors to gender stereotypes, biases and other people's wrongful decisions, including those of female assessors whose evaluations he does not agree with. Later in the extract, he offers another explanation, suggesting that women leave academia because they are less ambitious and competitive than men—an argument he puts forward cautiously. Again, he refers to other people's opinions ('there are certainly also discussions') but this time he expresses agreement ('that may be true'). This second explanation is sensitive because it suggests that gender differences in academia stem from women's own choices ('women might not like it'). With this move, Philip's explanations/excuses proceed toward justifications: academia is not discriminatory but shaped by people's inclinations and capacities—a justification reinforced by his statement that some women are promoted for diversity reasons.

The following sections unveil other patterns of interaction. While these interviews feature fewer pauses and hesitance, they still exhibit tension and ambivalence as interviewees struggle with presenting socially acceptable accounts or, more specifically, accounts they believe are appropriate for our study.

2.3.3 | The Silent Standpoint

The following sequence illustrates the delicate balancing act that Mark undertakes when discussing gender disparities in academia:

Interviewer: In your view, how can the relatively low proportion of female professors be explained? What do you think the main explanations are?

Mark: I believe this is an extremely important agenda. I have a negative experience, though, that I would like to share with you, and I would also say that I don't really have an answer to the question. But my negative experience stems from when I was part of some assessment work at our department, and we hired a woman although she wasn't the best candidate. And I must confess I didn't protest, I didn't climb on a stool declaring we need to stick to meritocratic rules. [...] But this decision had an unfortunate backlash on the female colleague. She subsequently struggled to prove she was good enough because there was a rumour in the system saying that she only got the professorship because of her gender. And that is not true, because she *is* talented, she is *very* talented. But I feel it was an assault on her that she received this so-called privileged treatment, as it really wasn't in her best interest.

Here, Mark refuses to align with the interviewer, who asks him to *explain* the low proportion of female professors in academia. His account primarily serves as a justification for 'meritocratic rules', which he believes were violated in hiring a specific (unnamed) female professor in his department. However, his response shows significant ambiguity. He seems to contradict himself when first asserting that his female colleague was hired 'because she was a woman' and then stating that this was merely 'a rumour in the system' and 'not true'. He simultaneously criticises and defends his female colleague, initially dissociating himself from her hiring (describing it as a decision made by others, to which he somewhat cowardly, agreed) before affirming her qualifications ('she *is* talented, she is *very* talented').

In the following interview, the ambivalence takes a somewhat different form, although the main message is the same: the low proportion of women in academia is a consequence of meritocracy, and increasing female representation threatens this system.

Interviewer: Currently, there is a relatively low proportion of female professors in Denmark, also at your department. What do you think the main explanations are?

Jonas: I don't think it's due to a lack of willingness on the part of our head of department. *X* [female professor colleague] is an excellent example; she came to us from another university. She's particularly good at dutiful work but became professor regardless. [...] She is diligent and quick to take on work for the collective good like other female professors in my department. [...] This may affect their research, which might not be at the same level as their male colleagues'.

Interviewer: So, you think these female professors' research isn't at the same level as that of male professors?

Jonas: No, I didn't say that. I was speaking more generally. They are just examples of dutiful women. [...]

Interviewer: Have you observed other situations where men and women are treated differently?

Jonas: No, but I also believe I am a bit tone-deaf on that account. It's also a question of differences in research interests. My research field is characterized by advanced theory and hardcore scientific thinking. I have tried to recruit some female PhD students, but they are not interested.

In this interview sequence, Jonas offers two explanations for the relatively low proportion of female professors in his department. His first response presents women's propensity for 'dutiful work' as a positive attribute but also as a hindrance to their research progress. In doing so, he allies himself with many

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female interviewees who mention an unequal distribution of service work as a career hindrance for women. However, unlike his female colleagues, Jonas describes this as related to women's inclinations and interests, and not as an expression of an unfair division of labour. Later, he suggests 'differences in research interests' as an explanation, also linking men's research interests to 'advanced theory and hardcore scientific thinking'. Both explanations, however, are a form of justification for status quo. In the first case, women's 'interest' in academic service effectively renders them weaker researchers than men. When pressed on this account, however, he retreats, suggesting that the interviewer's interpretation is a misunderstanding. In the latter case, women are described as uninterested in research of the highest academic standards, despite his efforts to support them ('I have tried to recruit some female PhD students').

A final interview sequence summarises many of the opinions surveyed so far. When Carl is asked about possible explanations for the relatively low proportion of women in professorships, he mentions 'gender roles in the family that make it difficult for women to qualify themselves research-wise' and women's lack of interest in competition (the two most common explanations suggested by men, see Table 1 and Supporting Information S1: Appendix A). The interviewer then asks if he has witnessed situations where men and women are treated differently, to which he hesitantly responds: 'No, I don't think so [pause]. If anything, it's the other way around, you know, women are sometimes favoured'. The interview continues as follows:

Carl: Yes, in reality, I've experienced the opposite, that there's a large pool of men, and we haven't always chosen the most qualified candidates [...] for reasons of diversity.

Interviewer: So you're saying that women are sometimes favoured. Have you seen any negative reactions to that?

Carl: Yes! Definitely.

Interviewer: What situations are we discussing? Who is protesting?

Carl: It's typically the male colleagues who could have been considered themselves for this or that role [referring to different privileged positions]. I think people usually accept that it's the right thing to do, but then you might get comments like 'there we go again, is she really the best choice' and so on. And there are differences between disciplines. Some are very focused on merits and publications, and voice opinions that, I think, people from my discipline would be too polite to express.

Interviewer: So in some instances, women are appointed even if they are less qualified than men?

Carl: No. It's not a question about qualifications. It's a question of which criteria you use.

In this interview, as in many others, gender differentiation in academia is perceived as discrimination against men. Carl's response 'Yes! Definitely' clearly asserts that women receive preferential treatment and that men find this frustrating. By quoting other men, 'there we go again, is she really the best choice', Carl problematises the 'favouring' of women while distancing himself from the implicit assumption that women are less qualified. He attributes the low proportion of female professors to factors outside academia (gender roles in the family, women's lack of interest in competition). In doing so, he reinforces the belief that academia is a meritocracy and that the preferential treatment of women compromises quality standards. However, he also positions himself as representative of a discipline in which people are 'too polite' to acknowledge this view openly.

3 | Discussion

Our findings expand upon existing research on gender inequality in academia by analysing male and female academics' opinions about the low proportion of women among professors. We show that both men and women point to family-related explanations and individual-level explanations but that women much more than men put forward university-internal explanations. In this sense, female participants are more in alignment with research on the matter which typically stresses the importance of *both* university-external factors, most importantly, family responsibilities (see reviews by Araneda-Guirriman et al. 2023; Cama et al. 2016; Kaymakcioglu and Thomas 2024; Rosa 2022) *and* university-internal factors (Araneda-Guirriman et al. 2023; Cama et al. 2016; Cecchini et al. 2019; Kaymakcioglu and Thomas 2024; Mula-Flacón et al. 2021; Rosa 2022; Phillips et al. 2022; Shorey et al. 2023; van Helden et al. 2023; Westoby et al. 2021).

One reason for many male professors' avoidance of explanations internal to the university may be that some of these explanations can be read as accusations against men; it is men's networks that make women feel marginalised (Cecchini et al. 2019; van Helden et al. 2023; Westoby et al. 2021); it is men who are said to be favoured in hiring and promotion processes (Araneda-Guirriman et al. 2023; Mula-Flacón et al. 2021; Shorey et al. 2023) and it is men who are responsible for a 'masculine' and 'chilly' climate in academia (Mula-Flacón et al. 2021; Phillips et al. 2022; Westoby et al. 2021). This (implicit or explicit) critique of men's role in women's career barriers may also constitute the background for many male participants' hesitation and silences when discussing gender disparities in the interviews.

To some extent, both men and women use *excuses* (Scott and Lyman 1968), attributing the low proportion of female professors to factors beyond their control. Female professors focus on a male-dominated university and unfair evaluation criteria, whereas male professors choose explanations related to women's own inclinations and/or family responsibilities. Regarding *justifications* (Scott and Lyman 1968) or the tendency *not* to regard gender disparities as a problem, we found them only in men's responses. When justifying the current gender distribution of professorships, men highlight 'meritocratic rules', claiming that a higher proportion of female professors would threaten research quality in their departments.

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Furthermore, several men express the opinion that some female colleagues have attained professorships through unjustifiable ways, indicating that the current proportion of female professors is too high rather than too low.

These conceptions among male professors can be related to the general unwillingness to introduce diversity initiatives at Danish universities, where the focus has been om 'fixing the women' rather than 'fixing the organisation' (Cecchini et al. 2019; M. Nielsen et al. 2024). If hiring and promotion processes are regarded as following meritocratic rules, as the majority of our male professors think they are, there is no need for organisational changes. Rather, the options are either to 'fix the women' (by providing them with role models, making them more ambitious and interested in 'advanced theory and hard-core scientific thinking') or accept women's underrepresentation among professors as being in the best interest of academia.

In Austin's (1956–57) and Scott and Lyman's (1968) descriptions, excuses/explanations and justifications resemble one another and sometimes overlap. The main difference is that excuses are employed when people admit that a phenomenon is problematic while simultaneously avoiding or negotiating responsibility. In contrast, justifications are accounts that 'neutralise' a phenomenon (Sykes and Matza 1957). Hence, using justifications entails asserting the naturalness or necessity of a phenomenon 'in the face of the claim to the contrary' (Scott and Lyman 1968, 51). One way to do this is by 'appealing to loyalties', meaning that the issue under discussion is regarded as serving other, more important interests (in our study: meritocracy). According to Scott and Lyman (1968), justifications are challenging because they may cast doubt on the image of the self that people seek to present. As an 'account is expected to be socially suited to the circle into which it is introduced' (Scott and Lyman's 1968, 57), a person offering justifications may fear condemnation from others. In this sense, excuses are more effective than justifications for 'throwing bridges' in interaction (Scott and Lyman 1968, 46), allowing interviewees to acknowledge a phenomenon's troublesome nature. Conversely, justifications reflect disaccord and controversy in a more straightforward way.

In the interviews characterized by interactional challenges, we were allies and collaborators in the main part of the interaction but became representatives of opposing perspectives when the topic of gender was introduced. This shift in positioning was supported by our use of two specific interview questions in tandem: the first question being open (In your opinion, how can the relatively low proportion of female professors be explained?), the second linking gender disparities to university-internal explanations (Have you witnessed situations where men and women were treated differently, for instance, situations where one gender was favoured?). In a group of male interviewees who generally distanced themselves from institutional explanations (see Table 1), this (implicit) perspective within our study contributed to the tension in the interviews.

In a detailed analysis of the most awkward sections of the interviews with male professors, we identified 'the silent standpoint' about women's disqualifications. This standpoint is pivotal. It is an implicit premise that dismisses other explanations of gender disparities and questions the promotion/hiring of women in general, as this is perceived (or suspected) to constitute discrimination against men. By all accounts, this implicit premise also influences the interviewees' opinions and actions in other settings. The participants in our study are people in power in their departments, not the least in relation to junior colleagues. They function as gatekeepers for recruitment to academic careers, they are supervisors and mentors, they take part in assessment work and decision-making when it comes to hiring and promotion. Their work in all these capacities is affected by their opinions about women's and men's position in academia, and whether they regard women as facing specific challenges (difficulties in entering networks, criteria that favour men) or regard them as unambitious, uninterested and, as an a priori assertion, less qualified than men. The fact that the standpoint about women's poor qualifications is implicit makes it difficult to discuss, in interviews as well as in academic life in general.

In conclusion, men and women differ in their views on gender disparities in academia. In our study, male interviewees were reluctant to regard the low proportion of female professors as a university-internal problem, a type of explanation that almost all female interviewees put forward—and which is documented in much previous research cited in this article. In focus of the article were interviews characterized by interactional problems. We conducted a detailed analysis of sequences where interviewees paused and hesitated, contradicted themselves and referred to other people's actions and opinions instead of their own. Drawing on sociological accounting theory, we identified excuses, justifications and combinations of both. Most importantly, we uncovered a silent standpoint: the belief that women are generally less qualified for full professorships than men. This silent standpoint can be related to the enduring resistance to gender equality initiatives in Danish academia. As long as male academics believe that women (in general) are less qualified for professorships than men, every step toward increasing the proportion of female professors will be seen as a threat to meritocracy.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

More detailed data are available on request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical reasons.

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