

Patterns of career development and their role in the advancement of female faculty at Austrian universities: New roads to success?

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Abstract As a result of various reforms carried out in the last decade, the academic sphere has undergone perceptible change, with redevelopment and reshaping at different institutional levels. These reforms have had an effect on gender relations, especially within the past several years, with an increasing proportion of female academics now in leading positions. This article investigates the ways in which female academics reach leading positions, the different patterns of career development exhibited by the women in question, and the role of these patterns in the advancement of female faculty. The study is based on qualitative interviews with female academics in leading positions. The analysis yields three main patterns of career development, consisting of the following characteristics: (1) individualistic, output-driven, (2) political-sustainable and (3) adaptive-flexible.

Keywords Academia · Gender · Austria · Female academics · Patterns of career development

Introduction

The academic world has experienced change, particularly over the past decade (European Commission 2013). In Austria, renewal has been brought about by reforms at various institutional levels (Bösch 2004; Pechar and Pellert 2004; Pellert 2003; Pellert and Gindl 2007). The effects of these reforms include changes in gender relations (uni:data uni:data 2014). This development points to an incipient change in traditional gender arrangements more generally at Austrian universities. Morley (2003, 2013) has found that these dynamics are particularly noticeable at the upper and lower ends of academic professional trajectories. Accordingly, the present article focuses on the changes that have taken place

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in recent years at the higher end of academic careers examining women in leading positions at Austrian universities.

Against this broader background, this article aims to shed light on the ways that female faculty advancement is facilitated and which career patterns are decisive for this advancement. The key research question is thus: *Which patterns of career development can be identified in connection with the advancement of female faculty?* The database consists of twelve qualitative, problem-centered interviews with female academics in Austria (i.e., full professors) who simultaneously hold a leading (administrative) position (e.g., rector, vice rector), these two career strands—research/teaching on the one hand and academic management on the other—being inextricably linked in Austria (UG 2002).¹

The empirical study was conducted in Austria, which serves as interesting case for the following reasons: The Austrian university system—more so than higher education systems in other European countries—has undergone various reforms over the last 15 years (European Commission 2013; Pechar and Pellert 2004; Pellert and Gindl 2007). Due to the implementation of the University Act of 2002, the reorganization of academic institutions has included initiatives in efficiency, internationalization, competitiveness, an orientation toward economic interests and the implementation of a new public management process (Pechar and Pellert 2004; Pellert and Gindl 2007; Weiskopf 2005).

Need for research: academia in Austria

Traditionally, the world of higher education is a comparatively male-dominated sector of society (Benschop and Brouns 2003; Blickenstaff 2005; Ecklund et al. 2012; Knights and Richards 2003; Probert 2005). Recent statistics have confirmed generally unequal gender relations in higher education, but also show evidence for the comparative advancement of women over the past several years (Bukowska 2009; European Commission 2013; Morley 2003; Morley 2013). This change will be illustrated with numerical data relating to academia in Austria.

The proportion of female students in higher education in Austria has stood at levels exceeding fifty percent for quite some time, yet it is only in recent years that there has been an intensified trend for women to accede to higher-level positions in academia (see Fig. 1). The first woman to head an Austrian university was elected as recently as 2007, and since then a further seven women have been appointed to the position of rector (uni:data 2014). In addition, statistics show that only since 2012 have gender ratios at the level of vice rector been balanced (uni:data 2014). Compared to other European countries, these developments in Austria and the concomitant legislation (University Act 2002) are quite unique (Bösch 2004; European Commission 2013; Pellert 2003; Weiskopf 2005).

These dynamics have been accompanied and promoted by ‘Excellentia’ and other equality programs (Lang and Sauer 1997; Wroblewski and Leitner 2007). ‘Excellentia’ was initiated as an instrument to encourage the current re-structuration at Austrian universities and to exploit the potential to provide financial support for women, with the goal

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

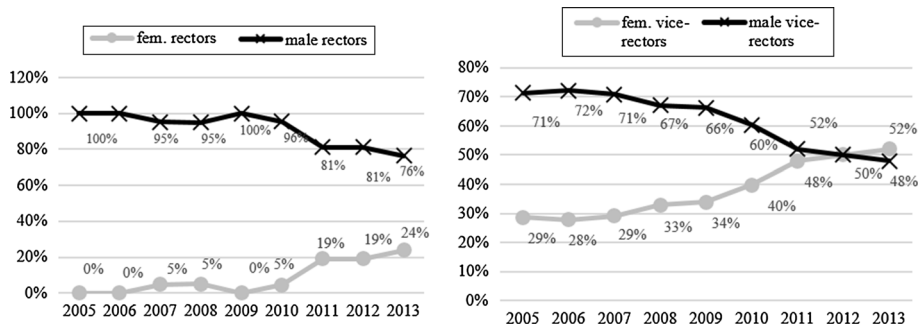


Fig. 1 Gender ratio among rectors and vice rectors at Austrian universities (winter terms 2005–2013). *Source:* uni:data (2014); own calculations

of doubling the proportion of female academic staff within six years (Wroblewski and Leitner 2011).² Although the objectives were not accomplished in full, the improvements in international terms are nevertheless considerable (European Commission 2009, 2013; Wroblewski and Leitner 2007, 2011). The improved gender ratio and the changes that have taken place within the academic sphere are relatively new phenomena in Austria, and they constitute the starting point for the research underlying the present paper.

In spite of these recent dynamics, researchers have focused more on the barriers and obstacles encountered by female academics in various positions in the university system (Benschop and Brouns 2003; Damaske 2011; Kjeldal et al. 2005). Success stories and analyses of the progress made in the area of women's careers have been less prominent (Morley 2013; Fritsch 2015), particularly with respect to female academics who have spent prolonged periods of time in leading positions. Research on this topic has remained sporadic in Austria and other countries as well (Wroblewski and Leitner 2011), and little is known about the driving forces and dynamics at work in the careers of female faculty at the uppermost end of the career ladder. This gap in the research is all the more glaring since knowledge of the professional characteristics of academics is fundamental to effective professional growth (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981, p. 599). The present article addresses this research gap and examines the professional biographies of female academics in leading positions at Austrian universities, focusing on the patterns of career development that are linked with and have fostered their advancement.

Theoretical considerations and review of empirical evidence: patterns of career development and gender inequalities in academia

The general definition of the term career includes a profession that corresponds to one's formal educational achievements and implies professional advancement in terms of higher levels of qualification, higher occupational rank, or upward social mobility (Rusconi and Solga 2011). From a conceptual perspective, career is conceived as an evolutionary course and a developmental process (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981; Gianakos 1999). Career development is a very complex process which is stimulated by the interactive effects of internal and external forces (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981, p. 602). Researchers who have

² The Federal Ministry of Science and Research has allocated a total of € 6 m over 6 years to support women in leading positions at Austrian universities (Wroblewski and Leitner 2011).

examined the process of career development hypothesize that adults proceed through a series of sequential life stages and that these stages are characterized by stability in some areas and by changing interests and experiences in others (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981, p. 599). More precisely, theories of career development also endorse the notion that the adult (professional) years are themselves not a static phase of life (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981, p. 599; Super 1957). An initial phase involving experimentation with a variety of occupational and vocational options is followed by a phase in which a clear and specific professional direction is pursued; in this process, of course, individuals experience a series of successes and setbacks in the development of their careers (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981).

The academic career is likewise conceptualized as a process and also follows an evolutionary course. Each individual has to pass through different occupational phases (pre-doc and post-doc) and gain his or her ultimate qualification. Failures, successes, challenges and difficulties are also an inevitable part of an academic career. Consequently, it should be possible to gain valuable information about academics by studying them at successive ages and stages of their careers, in particular through a retrospective investigation of the less successful and more successful elements of a career (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981).

Since I am using development theories in order to conceptualize an academic career, it is necessary to take a closer look at different patterns of career development. In his theory of life patterns and patterns of career choice, Donald Super conceives an entire career as a sequence of work positions (Super 1954, 1957, 1980), describing the following four career patterns which reflect the influence of self-concept: (1) stable, in which a career is decided upon and embarked on early and permanently; (2) multiple trial, which involves moving from one stable career path to another; (3) conventional, involving experimentation with more than one choice before selecting a permanent one; and (4) unstable, involving a series of trial career choices with no idea of permanency.

According to Super (1988, p. 351), self-concepts are the product of interactions between inherited aptitudes, glandular factors affecting physical energy, opportunity in the form of chances to observe and try out a given type of activity with a given kind of competition, and impressions of the extent to which the results of trying something meet with the approval of superiors and fellows. In short, a self-concept is an individual conception of himself or herself. Moreover, the self-concept formation is a process which starts in infancy and goes on throughout the entire course of life, developing a sense of identity as a person distinct from but at the same time resembling other persons (Super 1963). This formation process includes phases of exploration, self-differentiation, identification, role-playing and reality testing (Super 1963, 1988).

Against this theoretical background and taking into account additional research on career development, studies are often focused on or limited to explaining dichotomous career decision-making events, resoluteness, or career trajectories and career transitions. In contrast to most available research, the present paper does not attempt to explain short-term or singular decision-making activities or the modality of various career patterns. Instead, the focus is on the life-span processes that guide the patterns of career development among female faculty, in the framework of crucial contexts of action (e.g., social networks, faculty work) within academia (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981; Gianakos 1999).

Apart from these conceptual arguments, there are a number of empirical studies of note that deal with gender-specific differences. In spite of the reforms of recent years, the male–female faculty ratio remains unbalanced, particularly at higher occupational levels. Many studies have explored this inequality and the reasons for women’s underrepresentation, one central cause being the difficulties in reconciling occupational and private obligations

(Acker and Armenti 2004; Althaber et al. 2011; Hess and Pfahl 2011; Metz-Göckel et al. 2009). These studies point out that important levels of qualification (including the doctoral degree) coincide with the phases of starting a family and thus have an impact on women's professional advancement (Krimmer et al. 2004). In line with this, female academics, in particular, may experience difficulties in terms of geographic mobility, which is becoming increasingly necessary.

Institutions of higher education are more dependent than ever on international collaboration and continuous exchange (Ruppenthal 2010), with flexibility and geographic mobility playing an essential role for both women and men. However, empirical research has revealed disadvantages in this area, especially in terms of family obligations (Becker et al. 2001). Based on data from six European countries, Rüger und Ruppenthal (2010) have shown that women with family responsibilities are clearly less mobile than men in comparable situations.

Social networks are equally crucial for successful careers in academia (Bourdieu 1983; Burt 1998; Granovetter 1973; Ibarra 1997; Sonnert and Holton 1995). They are important not only in terms of formal research cooperation and international projects, but also in terms of recruitment and junior staff development (De Welde and Laursen 2011; Hadani et al. 2012; Van den Brink 2010; Van den Brink et al. 2010). Unfavorable consequences for researchers may arise due to barriers that hinder access to the (informal) male-dominated networks (De Welde and Laursen 2011), which persist, especially in technology and the natural sciences (Sagebiel 2010; Wane 2013). As demonstrated by several studies, however, targeted mentoring may help in overcoming such barriers (Gardina et al. 2007; McGuire and Reger 2003; Turban and Dougherty 1994).

Faculty work is yet another important element of academic careers, especially in leading positions. Link et al. (2008) have investigated the allocation of time in top US research institutions in the areas of teaching, research, grant applications and administrative work, the latter including tasks such as administering grants, advising students and institutional service at all levels. Their regression models show that men are more research active and less involved in university services. Detrimental consequences for female faculty are conceivable, since women continue to be a minority in leading positions and take on ever more tasks in service and administration.

Methodological considerations

For the purposes of the present article, social reality is conceived as constructed by individual interpretive action (Charmaz 2000; Scheibelhofer 2009). The cognitive framework of the article is derived from constructionism—'linking the process of perceiving reality to communication and our embeddedness in differentiated collectives' (Froschauer and Lueger 2003, p. 183)—with social reality understood as a social construction in various contexts (Berger and Luckmann 1969). Thus, the interpretive performance of social actors becomes crucial, together with their specific structures and generation of meaning within structured social processes (Bohnsack 1999, p. 13; Flick et al. 2003; Froschauer and Lueger 2003; Lamnek 2005; Rosenthal 1995). The hermeneutic approach used here is based on the assumption that there is a relational connection between the empirical material (the text) and its interpreter, a relation which can be identified and analyzed in the research process (Diekmann 2009; Flick et al. 2003; Kromrey 2002; Schnell et al. 2008).

In line with this, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to investigating the occupational experiences of women in academia. The empirical data are based on semi-structured, problem-centered interviews with experienced female academics, who hold leading positions at Austrian universities (Witzel 2000). The interviews focussed on their occupational and academic biographies and on the ways these women successfully dealt with challenges in order to reach leading positions in research/teaching and academic management.

Altogether, 12 interviews were conducted. Purposive sampling was applied to recruit female academics in the professorate and in leading positions (Suri 2011). The sample criteria set two priorities: The women had to have an excellent academic career (i.e., to have reached the rank of professor) and simultaneously hold leading administrative positions (e.g., rector). The sampling selection criteria are based on the relevant statutes in Austria (UG 2002). Since leading functions are conceived as obligations in addition to academic positions in Austria, both career strands exercise a constant reciprocal influence. Leading positions in academia have traditionally been characterized by a male-connoted ethos, which means that women in leading positions are confronted with ‘bifurcated’ roles, functions and challenges (Billing 2011; Mavin and Bryans 2002, p. 239). Moreover, the group of women selected for the present study has been confronted with challenges that result from both the academic and the management context, making it harder for them to move up the ladder in higher education (Eggin 1997). They have also been confronted with unique issues that serve to educate and prepare new generations as a result of a broader understanding of women’s roles in academic organizations (Mavin and Bryans 2002).

In order to cover a broad spectrum of different biographical characteristics and biographical pathways, the present study incorporates academics with different disciplinary backgrounds (i.e., natural science, engineering and social science). This is intended to take into account the fact that different disciplines tend to produce different professional careers in varying contexts. In this regard, Lindholm (2004, p. 605) has found that members of faculty in “hard” disciplines such as chemistry tend to take comparatively more direct paths to the professorate than those in “soft” disciplines. Female academics of different ages, and women with and without children were recruited for the study.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The analytical strategy applied a two-step procedure. I first used the method of systematic contrasting through case comparisons (Witzel 2000). This method chiefly aims to work through the main topics the cases have in common (Witzel 2000). Therefore, I particularly emphasized text-based coding. By employing this procedure, I was able to compile the varying situations in academia that the interviewees have successfully dealt with. In this first analytic step, MaxQda[®] was used to analyze the relevant passages; in a second step, I examined the ways in which the interviewees had managed to cope with their situations. The focus was thus on consolidating the materials, in order to bring out the different patterns of career development. In this step, the axial coding technique was applied in order to evaluate the responses (Flick 2009; Kendall 1999; Strauss and Corbin 1990). I subsequently elaborated three patterns of career development that promote the advancement of female faculty at Austrian universities. These patterns of career development amount to a description of the condensed contents of career decisions and actions taken when dealing with different situations in academia, over the entire course of a professional career. These patterns are formed by contrasting the case-specific core topics with the topic-oriented ideas for evaluation and interpreted with respect to the underlying self-concept.

Findings

The empirical part of this article elaborates on different career development patterns that serve the advancement of female faculty. The analysis brings out the following patterns of career development and their associated characteristics: (1) individualistic, output-driven, (2) political-sustainable and (3) adaptive-flexible. While summarizing the essential characteristics of each pattern, the description of the results proceeds in relation to three contexts of action that have proven to be crucial in professional academic careers (Elg and Jonnergard 2003; Mavin and Bryans 2002; Morley 2013): faculty work, social networks and (geographic) mobility. Since women in top positions remain comparatively under-represented, they are expected to engage in faculty work and serve on committees in order to ensure the respective organization's gender neutrality and balance. The management of and access to social networks are equally challenging (De Welde and Laursen 2011; Hadani et al. 2012; Parker and Welch 2013). Benschop and Doorewaard (1998) emphasized personal networks and especially the role of the 'old boy network' as crucial for strategic decisions within organizations. Lastly (geographical) mobility has become an essential asset or 'must-have' in acquiring leading positions, often interfering with personal and family-based life plans (Guillaume and Pochic 2009; Musselin 2004). These contexts of action are important elements of an academic career (networking and mobility) and of an administrative career (faculty work). They therefore serve as criteria in differentiating and comparing the main patterns of career development. The overall purpose of this paper is to map different patterns of career development that reflect the influence of self-concept (Super 1954, 1980).

'And I somehow struggled through all of this!': first pattern of career development, comprising individualistic and output-driven characteristics

The first pattern of career development emphasizes individual academic progress and personal professional development. Excellent research output (i.e., highly ranked publications, prestigious, third-party-funded research projects) is just as important as broadening and adding to existing knowledge bases (Lindholm 2004). The point is to take initiative and pursue ways to promote personal advancement. At times, "struggling through" seems legitimate in order to achieve one's individual goals. Therefore, a self-centered, tenacious, active and autonomous self-concept is necessary, with assertiveness thus being an essential feature. In this regard, one interviewee stated that female academics (in leading positions) need to draw on their own skills and competencies rather than using male methods or leadership skills:

'And you have to assert yourself. With the means at your disposal. [...] For me, emancipation is achieved by asserting yourself as the person you are, and not by applying men's methods.' [Interview 11]

Different organizational contexts or settings are explored in order to assert one's own interests and advantages. The career pattern comprising individualistic, output-driven characteristics encompasses an urge for autonomy and a strong 'spirit of individuality.' Lindholm (2004, p. 611) finds this to be crucial in terms of why individuals decide to pursue academic careers in the first place. Personal skills and distinctive competencies are used in order to increase one's professional visibility.

In terms of dealing with social networks, the first pattern of career development aims at establishing exclusive female networks. The interviewees emphasize that such networks should be more strongly institutionalized in an effort to counteract male-dominated networks.

Advantages similar to those experienced by the members of male-dominated networks should also be available to women in their own collectives. The exclusion of the opposite gender is a deliberate action, as is implied in the following statement:

‘I never sought to belong to these male networks [...]. My approach is rather to get things going on my own – for women. Create space, exchange experiences, reflect upon decisions and give mutual support without losing face.’ [Interview 3]

This passage also shows that such an exclusive space serves to establish a feeling of security—decisions and resolutions can be reflected upon ‘*without losing face*.’ Consequently, professional benefits or advantages might arise for participating female academics. McGuire and Reger (2003) and Gardina et al. (2007) present similar results. They have shown that affiliations exclusive to women—for example, mentoring programmes—are crucial for the success and the advancement of female faculty. Mavin and Bryans (2002, p. 243) also conclude that support for a career is a key function of the network and serves to encourage career development.

Apart from commitment to and within exclusive female networks, the analysis also indicates how the pattern of career development comprising individualistic, outcome-oriented characteristics deals with faculty work. The interviewees were not only involved in university policy committees, commissions or task forces but also department-specific agendas. Faculty work is principally described as an obligation connected to management careers. Such involvement is frequently associated with a lack of time for research activities and other professional responsibilities. As a result, faculty work tends to be taken on with more reticence:

‘When I [...] arrived, this is what happened: so, we’ve got a woman in this position, that’s why she has to do this, that and the other thing. [You] also get talked into things that have nothing at all to do with your job. You just have to learn how to say, ‘Sorry, I’m not interested’. The fact that I’m a woman doesn’t make me qualified for a committee.’ [Interview 5]

In the context of this first pattern of career development, the purpose consists in questioning and, if necessary, rejecting prospective obligations in order to have more time for other tasks. The key issues are a stronger personal contour as to the professional environment and the courage to say ‘no.’ This interview partner made it clear that gender is not a genuine qualification for committee work. Other interviewees mentioned increased participation in task forces that were decisive for one’s own future areas of work or teaching.

In terms of (geographic) mobility, stays abroad are seen as a way of advancing one’s academic career (e.g., by way of a post-doc grant abroad), by enhancing one’s academic profile and acquiring specific competencies.

‘There’s no use in going abroad just to go abroad. You have to consider where you’re going and why you’re going there. What do you want to learn and what are the skills you want to add to your profile’ [Interview 12]

Most importantly, studies abroad need to be planned with foresight, in a purposeful manner. University affiliations and target countries have to correspond to one’s individual

requirements. In this regard, decisions are largely governed by the reputation associated with the respective institutions or the opportunity to acquire new methodological competencies. The objective is to acquire additional distinctions and thus potential advantages for future job opportunities.

***‘Even if you only think politically from time to time, you’ll just have to bite the bullet’*: second pattern of career development, comprising political-sustainable characteristics**

The most important theme of the second pattern of career development in relation to the advancement of female faculty involves bringing about and accelerating sociopolitical change in terms of gender equity in academia. Political commitment is therefore seen as a necessary step, even though immediate advantages for one’s career cannot be guaranteed or are even unrealistic. The second pattern of career development almost always refers to the next generation of junior academics and advocates a sustainable improvement in university structures that are marked by gender differences. This pattern often proceeds by challenging existing boundaries and breaking up traditional structures in order to help and support early-stage academics. Therefore, a self-concept is decisive, including predictive planning skills, codetermination or participative approaches, as well as great personal effort, support and confidence. The general goal is to achieve sustainable improvement—especially for female faculty.

Applied to social networks, their purpose is to support gender-heterogeneous networks and oppose the exclusivity of male networks (and exclusive female networks, for that matter), since *‘duplicating [existing structures] is useless’* [Interview 3]. The objective here is to break open persistent patterns of segregation, generate new structures without gender exclusion and to more strongly focus on content.

‘I believe what we need are mixed networks with both genders. The issue is that these old structures are broken open, that there are other options.’ [Interview 4]

In this connection, the interviewees emphasize the importance of mixed networks—especially for general academic and epistemological progress—and of a holistic development of knowledge bases. Challenging existing boundaries and mainstreaming their experience to support early-stage academics are on the agenda (cf. Mavin and Bryans 2002). The dissolution of traditionally male-dominated networks—which at times are compared to youth movements or alliances—is considered to be increasingly important, especially in technology and the natural sciences.

Involvement of female leading executives in representative bodies, working parties and university boards is another descriptive characteristic of the second pattern of career development promoting the advancement of female faculty. The interviewees emphasized that above-average participation is essential to break open the established traditional structures at universities, to improve the status quo for the following generation and proactively to counteract discriminatory patterns. Additional input in terms of time and labor resources is considered to be an indispensable contribution to societal change.

‘I believe it’s always the same when systems change. Those involved have to participate to some extent. So that things change. I don’t have the right solution either. But I don’t think we should simply forget about it completely.’ [Interview 2]

Although this respondent pointed out that above-average commitment is not an ideal approach and may have an impact on one’s own research output, it remains indispensable.

‘Yes, that’s right. If there are not many [women] around, it will concern individuals more frequently. [...] On the other hand, I guess we will never change anything if we, the few of us who are around, don’t do the job. If we don’t march into the committees, if we don’t make the decisions there, nothing will change. So I think each one of us bears responsibility so that things may change. So we’ll bear the burden and make it happen. For the benefit of the following generations.’ [Interview 4]

The few women in leading positions are called on to show above-average commitment in order to affect change and especially to bring about sustainable improvements for female faculty. On account of their positions, the respondents in part felt obliged to assume responsibility and accelerate change in the present structures of gender-specific segregation. Some of the interviewees expressed concerns that a lack of personal involvement would lead to stagnation.

In dealing with (geographic) mobility, research stays abroad were organized at an early stage of academic life in order to avoid incompatibilities with private commitments or other professional obligations. Moreover, sustainable scholarly exchange between institutions and universities is seen as being of great importance:

‘And it’s just a fact now [...] while studying. It’s so simple today [...] So if you’ve got a family or a partner, then it’s much more difficult. That’s why it would be clever to take care of it during your student years. While obligations are not yet all that binding.’ [Interview 4]

For the pattern of career development comprising political-sustainable characteristics, forward planning is similarly necessary. Here, however, additional attention is paid to maintaining contacts and cooperative partners established through stays abroad. The goal is to nurture international cooperation on an institutionalized level, e.g., in terms of partner universities or institutes. This again may result in decisive advantages for young academics and others (such as exchange of teaching staff), thus serving the advancement of female faculty. Moreover, mobility and international exchange are seen as an opportunity to present—and position—one’s own institution within the international research landscape.

‘There are enough possibilities. You just have to seize the opportunity!’: third pattern of career development, comprising adaptive-flexible characteristics

The third pattern of career development can be described as ‘drifting between different opportunities’ and choosing the best alternative. This pattern requires a very dynamic and occasionally even variable self-concept in order to handle exploration and adaptability. The decisive factor is to recognize which option is the best or most advantageous in any given situation. A given situation may actually require self-effacement in order to achieve success. In another context, self-advocacy may be indispensable and a further method for achieving success. In short, achieving progress is substantially influenced by adequate reactions to externally induced situations. Additional skills (i.e., self-confidence, self-assuredness) are presented as welcome supplementary outcomes.³ One interviewee described her approach to handling specific challenges as follows:

³ Parallels can be observed to Lindholm’s (2004) study: Serendipity was found to influence professional career decision-making processes. Lindholm (2004, p. 618) referred to this group as ‘accidental academics’ who show little recollection of any sort of well-delineated, intentional path to the professorate.

‘There’s such an abundance of possibilities today, the world is yours for the taking, and that has two sides: Either you play along, you feel good in the game, in a space with a lot of elbow-room, then you’ve got an enormous advantage. But if you’re rather timid and you don’t know, you’ll probably be in trouble. But you shouldn’t be too worried but rather follow your intuition.’ [Interview 12]

This career pattern provides a large number of choices, which my interviewees were able to exploit to their own advantage. Confidence is considered to be a necessary precondition, yet it is also an asset that is achieved over time in academia. The ability to exploit unanticipated circumstances is decisive. Chances for development have to be recognized as such and used for the benefit of professional advancement. In this connection, planning and foresight are less crucial than ‘seizing the opportunity’ [Interview 2].

Regarding social networks, my interviewees are involved in both exclusive female associations and gender-heterogeneous networks. In contrast to the pattern of career development comprising political-sustainable characteristics, this pattern does not focus on breaking open traditional structures, but rather on exhaustively exploiting advantages within both contexts. While the importance of gender-heterogeneous networks is emphasized for academic progress, exclusive female networks are described as especially beneficial for exchanging personal experience. In this connection as well, women’s networks facilitate decision-making within a protective environment and the exchange of experience.

‘I really believe you have to be generally well networked as a female academic. And as broadly as possible. But I also believe that women’s networks have proven their worth. Because female careers are altogether different to normal academic careers. I’d almost see it as complementary. So I think exclusively female networks – they’re not enough to rely on. Because there aren’t enough women yet in leading positions who would be able to help in word and deed. So it would be naive to rely on them exclusively. But I personally find it encouraging to participate in female networks. There are specific issues, backgrounds as to experience. Because they offer the opportunity to reflect. [...] To exchange experiences. And sometimes, they may help with your career. But I don’t think it’s sufficient. I try to use a parallel approach.’ [Interview 2]

Additional tasks or functions (e.g. chairing a committee) are assumed in the area of faculty work if it seems advisable in light of one’s immediate professional environment, if nobody else is eligible, or if there is a major shortage of personnel.

‘[I] also repeatedly committed myself whenever a case was assigned to me. [...] I just acted practically.’ [Interview 11]

The application of such a practical approach focuses less on actively and regularly involving oneself in one or more working parties, but rather on deciding on a case-by-case basis whether to participate or not. Faculty work is seen here not as a personal responsibility toward future generations of early-stage researchers, but rather as an additional task that is inherent to the university system and that everybody has to take on at one point or another.

With regard to mobility, the analysis of the interview material revealed in this case that stays abroad are less deliberately and providently planned. Still, it is nevertheless seen as an important component of successful academic occupational trajectories. Looking back at her professional biography, one interviewee explained that she had interrupted her

academic career and gone abroad with her partner. She still saw this interruption as an opportunity and was able to use it in terms of her own professional career. Parallels can be drawn to Baldwin's and Blackburn's (1981) "critical events": These are important occurrences that have a positive effect on a professor's career development (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981, p. 607). One of my interviewees describes her situation as follows:

'I certainly could have continued my career here [in Austria]. But I went [abroad] with my husband. The first critical rupture [in my career] – but you can also see it as an opportunity. [...] In retrospect, I'd claim that the interruptions in my career were always opportunities and I was able to make use of them by and large.' [Interview 10]

Without being able to anticipate further steps in her career, this respondent positively "designed" her interrupted career as a new situation. In this connection, soft and social skills—including organizational abilities, confidence and emotional strength—are used for further career development. The fact was emphasized that dealing with unknown working structures and different forms of organizations proved to be helpful in practical academic activities. Overall, the opportunity to gather new experiences, problem-solving skills and social competence was highlighted.

Synopsis: patterns of career development promoting the advancement of female faculty

The kernel of my analysis encompasses three patterns of career development that reflect the influence of the self-concept and serve the advancement of female faculty. Table 1 presents a synoptic summary of the empirical findings. The first pattern of career development comprising individualistic, output-driven characteristics focuses on personal professional advancement and primarily on academic progress. Decision-making is goal-oriented, assertive and active, the intrinsic focus being on reinforcing and consolidating one's career. The self-concept is oriented toward tenacity, personal occupational improvement and autonomous decision-making processes. The second pattern of career development comprising political-sustainable characteristics spotlights the general amelioration of the next generation of female faculty. Proactive behavior is executed on the micro-level in an attempt to counteract gender-specific patterns of segregation on the macro-level.

In this connection a shift in time sets in, conceived with a perspective on subsequent generations of women in academia and their working conditions. My interviewees attribute a role-model effect to universities that would also be relevant to social-policy reforms beyond the university context. A lack of time resources or deficient research output is tolerated as consequences that are inherent in a process of change. The focus is on the academic system at universities and the change in gender-specific structures. The underlying self-concept can be defined by a will to change and (self-) confidence. The first and the second patterns of career development both display an intrinsic basis.

The third pattern of career development comprising adaptive-flexible characteristics shows a slightly different alignment. The goal is to abstain from taking any sort of proactive role, but to benefit from possible advantages. The reactive approach is strongly influenced by the professional and private environment. This pattern of career development is substantially influenced by appropriate reactions to externally induced situations.

Table 1 Patterns of career development that promote the advancement of female faculty

Contexts of action	Individualistic, output-driven (active) Intrinsic focus	Political-sustainable (proactive)	Adaptive-flexible (reactive) Extrinsic focus
Social networks	Institutionalization of exclusive female networks for individual academic progress	Challenge traditional gender-based structures Emphasize contents	Exclusive female networks for personal support Mixed-gender networks for academic progress
Faculty work	General hesitation toward faculty work Occasional engagement in task forces concerning personal field	High individual commitment to faculty work necessary for sustainable improvement Placing female academics on the agenda	Practical approach Cooperation in case of personal request Cooperation in situations of major shortage
(Geographic) mobility	Stay abroad is providently planned and exclusively for personal scientific advancement Gaining additional skills Skills used for distinctive characteristics between competitors	Stabilize and institutionalize contacts Stay abroad is providently planned at a very early stage of career Use mobility for representation purpose of one's own affiliation	Stay abroad might occur accidentally Stay abroad as possibility for personal development Gaining additional personal skills (e.g., self-confidence)
Self-concept	Autonomous, tenacious self-concept improvement of personal career	Confident, supportive self-concept Sustainable improvement for female faculty	Dynamic, variable self-concept Best possible adjustment to externally induced situations

Source: Own illustration following Baldwin and Blackburn (1981)

Decisions within this pattern are made reactively, in response to specific situations. Hence, this pattern of career development shows an extrinsic foundation. In this case, the dynamic and variable self-concept is marked by exploration und adaptability.

Conclusion

Gender-specific structures with a segregating effect in academia are on the decline, albeit slowly. While the current gender ratio in Austria remains imbalanced, it is marked by change, with an increasing proportion of female academics to be found in leading positions, especially over the past few years. Austria therefore serves as interesting case study, since the dynamics within the university landscape (especially in higher occupational positions) and the statutory reforms are quite remarkable in comparison with other European countries within this short period of time.

Against this background, the present paper has aimed to shed light on the ways the advancement of female faculty is enabled and which patterns of career development are

decisive. The empirical findings are based on semi-structured, problem-centered interviews. The analytical strategy applied a two-step procedure, combining the method of systematic contrasting through case comparison (Witzel 2000) and analysis according to the coding procedures within grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

The findings present three patterns of career development elaborated from the empirical material comprising the following characteristics: (1) individualistic, output-driven, (2) political-sustainable and (3) the adaptive-flexible. The first pattern is mainly focused on individual professional progress and research output. It implies targeted planning in terms of future career moves and acting with a view to personal advancement. The most important theme within the second pattern of career development consists in a sustainable improvement for women in academia. Above-average engagement is seen as necessary contribution for initiating and promoting further change in gender-specific, segregating structures. The purpose of the third pattern of career development comprising adaptive-flexible characteristics lies in adequate reactions to externally induced situations. Here, my empirical findings show at least some parallels to other studies on this topic, one example being Baldwin and Blackburn's study on academic careers (Baldwin and Blackburn 1981).

Keeping the empirical findings as well as currently available statistics on the advancement of female faculty in mind, it would be misleading to portray female academics entirely as victims of powerful patriarchal organizations (Morley 2013). The typology precisely highlights varying effective patterns of career development and provides insights how female academics make their own progressive path. These findings could also serve as basis developing new practical measures for the promotion of women in academia. One promising implementation may involve fostering and institutionalizing exclusive female networks at each university in order to promote the advancement of female faculty.

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