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## Women, know your limits: cultural sexism in academia

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Despite the considerable advances of the feminist movement across Western societies, in Universities women are less likely to be promoted, or paid as much as their male colleagues, or even get jobs in the first place. One way in which we can start to reflect on why this might be the case is through hearing the experiences of women academics themselves. Using feminist methodology, this article attempts to unpack and explore just some examples of ‘cultural sexism’ which characterises the working lives of many women in British academia. This article uses qualitative methods to describe and make sense of some of those experiences. In so doing, the argument is made that the activity of academia is profoundly gendered and this explicit acknowledgement may contribute to our understanding of the under-representation of women in senior positions.

**Keywords:** feminism; women; academia; cultural sexism

Jocelyn Bell Burnell was made a Dame in 2007. In 2008, she became the first ever female President of Institute of Physics. She is an astronomer and as a 24-year-old Ph.D. student her discovery led to her being awarded the Nobel Prize; this was awarded to her jointly, along with her male supervisor. Many commentators pointed to the unfairness of this prize being shared by said male supervisor. As Al-Khalili notes (2011), some feel so strongly about this they have re-named this the ‘No-Bell’ prize. As an undergraduate in the male-dominated world of science in the 1960s, she described how she was jeered, wolf-whistled and subjected to feet stamping as she entered the lecture theatre, but would not we hope that we have moved forward sufficiently that this kind of experience is a thing of the past? This article argues that a lack of open discussion of this issue may in fact compound women’s under-representation at more senior levels in academia. I would suggest that by restoring women’s voices to the debate, we can render visible and therefore engage with and make sense of the obstacles that are in place for female academics. As such, the focus of this article is on the way in which women are marginalised through what I term ‘cultural sexism’; rendering this explicit provides a mechanism through which this sexism may be challenged.

Dale Spender argues that historically women’s contributions to literature and knowledge more widely have been commonly denied (Spender 1982). We might like (or hope) to think of that kind of cultural practice as anachronistic. Indeed, two of

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the leading scientific journals *Science* and *Nature* have in the last two years carried articles which headline ‘overt sexism is no longer the norm’ (Dickey Zakaib 2011) and that there are ‘equal prospects for both sexes in science’ (Gilbert 2012), the latter based on a quantitative study of women in American science. (Although how findings about science as a profession in the USA can be generalised to claims about science as a profession globally is an unquestioned assumption made by Gilbert.) In the UK, the story has been very different: the British Medical Association, for example, has shown that the achievements of women have to be greater than those of their male counterparts to achieve the same professorial status (2006). A more recent edition of *Nature* (without reflection on earlier issues) concurs that the gender gap in science needs to be tackled and details how women in science continue to face discrimination, unequal pay and disparities in funding (Shen 2013). At the same time, academic research also highlights the ways in which sex discrimination is no stranger to UK academia (Acker 1990, 2006; Benschop and Brouns 2003; Knights and Richards 2003; van den Brink and Benschop 2012).

This article is driven by the question: despite years of advancement in feminism in theory and in practice, why are women still under-represented at senior levels in British Universities? Analytically and ontologically, how do cultural norms and practices feature in women’s structural disadvantage? While there are clearly numerous layers of complexity within these questions, my focus is on the cultural norms which shape the way in which women experience and are positioned within the structures of the academy. It is argued elsewhere that women may be structurally disadvantaged by organisational University structures (cf. Bird 2011) and their positioning in organisational male-dominated cultures which reinforce hegemonic masculinities (Pacholok 2009). I present an argument that claims originality through rendering these institutional power structures visible in the UK, through the expression of women’s own experiences. I begin with an overview of the positioning of women across the academy, a current ‘state of play’. Since my argument rests on cultural understandings of institutional structures, there is a brief discussion of the term ‘cultural sexism’ as deployed throughout the article. I then move forward to locate the work in a feminist methodology to give an overview of the two methods, oral histories and readers’ theatre, which I adopted to collect and analyse the data. I use the accounts given by the women that I spoke with to provide a sense of the experiences that some female academics have. This manifested itself in what I term ‘cultural sexism’ and it is this, I argue, that is a significant, invisible, normalising barrier to women’s progression within the academy. Rendering this cultural sexism visible also reminds us that the status quo can be challenged, as has been done before us. Although as the statistics and experiences below suggest – there is still work to do.

### ***Current ‘state of play’ in British academia***

In Europe, only 18% of full professors are women (Vernos 2013). In Britain in 2012 across HE, only 14.2% of Vice Chancellors were women (Counting Women in 2012). In 2012, the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency reported that out of 18,465 professors only 20.5% (3790) were women. This is only a marginal increase from 2010, when the Equality Challenge Unit (2010) reported that across British academia while 56.6% of academic staff were men, 81% of professors are male (85.5% in STEM subjects) and only 10 female professors were from black and minority ethnic groups. At this rate of increase (0.75% per year), it will take 119 years for women to

achieve equal numbers in the professoriate (and that is assuming the total number of professors stays the same!). The pay gap between men and women in British academia is 13.5%, despite over 40 years of the Equal Pay Act. Research and reports exist more widely on the status and experiences of women in universities across the world (see, e.g. Martinez et al. 2007; Al-Ali et al. 2012), in the USA (Bannerji et al. 1991) and the UK (McAuley 1987; Brooks 1997) and in European research contexts (Linkova and Cervinkova 2011) as well as the ways in which the construction of academic knowledge is gendered (Benschop and Brouns 2003; more widely see Wacjman 1991). As Bird observes despite much research ‘complex systemic barriers to women’s opportunities and advancement in Universities remain’ (2011, 203). Existing literature has focused on women themselves, as disadvantaged in research and managerial careers (Park 1996; Raddon 2002; Priola 2007; van den Brink and Stobbe 2009; Parsons and Priola 2013). Academic work has used feminist theory to advance the understanding of the role of women in leadership (Blackman and Sachs 2007). The contemporary under-representation of women in senior positions still reinforces the masculine ‘norm’; female academics may still be positioned as the ‘other’ located in the ‘ivory basement’ (Eveline and Booth 2004). For Knights and Richards (2003), masculinised discourses are at the root of sex discrimination within the academy. Pacholok (2009) points to the importance of occupational cultures reinforcing hegemonic masculinities. van den Brink and Stobbe (2009) term the ways in which gender is ‘done’ in academia the ‘paradox of visibility’: women are perceived to be less employable, despite their over representation, and higher achievements at undergraduate and graduate level. Gendered structures matter (van den Brink and Benschop 2012); as Bird (2011) argues institutional structures erect systemic barriers which disproportionately disadvantage women.

The empirical data within this article are focused around women who have spoken about the ways in which these barriers manifest themselves through their own experiences of sexism in British academia. This reminds us that despite the advances of feminism as a movement and academic literature, women’s experiences in academia are still profoundly gendered. The contention is that recognition and discussion of this issue may in turn provide insights into the cultural norms which exist within and constitute institutional, University organisational structures, thereby providing the basis for change.

### ***Cultural sexism***

Clearly one way to explore women’s under-representation at senior levels would be to describe and detail the legislative and institutional structures within which academia is practised. However, the focus of this article is upon the cultural practices, norms and values which through their expression frame women’s experiences within the academy. Sociological theory draws our attention to the interaction of individuals with their structural contexts and the way in which culture shapes this interaction (cf. Archer 1996). This cultural shaping of experience in turn, it is argued here, provides a context which does not render it impossible for women to be as visible as their male colleagues, or as well remunerated or promoted, *but it does make it more difficult*. The under-representation of women and their status in the academy has a history (Acker 1990, 2006) and the gendering of women’s experiences as academics still has deleterious effects according to the statistics at the start of this article. Understanding and making sense of women’s roles and positions in institutions point to gender as

central to organisational practice (Acker 1990; Gerhardi 1994; van den Brink and Benschop 2012). The way in which gender is ‘done’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987) negotiated, contested, renegotiated and re-enacted in organisations through local and collective practices (West and Zimmerman 1987; Acker 2006; Connell 2009) forms the conceptual basis of this article. If we want to understand how organisations (for the purposes of this article, British Universities) work we need to ‘take women seriously’ and explore the cultures within which their experiences are situated (cf. Enloe 2013).

The empirical data I collected came from women across British academia, from natural and non-natural sciences, arts and humanities. In short, there were a set of non-discipline-specific common experiences of women across the academy. I term these experiences ‘cultural sexism’. Bates’ (2012) popular website ([www.everydaysexism.com](http://www.everydaysexism.com)) provides a space where women can provide examples of ‘everyday sexism’ as experienced on a daily basis. From here I draw the notion that sexism is something that has become ‘normalised’ rendered ordinary through its regular expression. This recognition is combined with the recognition of the existence of a culturally ‘chilly climate’ for women in academia. This phrase was first used by Hall and Sandler (1982) highlighting the way in which seemingly inconsequential practices can become cumulative, failing to recognise women’s contribution, devaluing their contribution, resulting in loss of confidence and marginalisation. This then provides a context and culture where women are marginalised: the ‘chilly climate’ (for discussion of contested nature of this phrase see Prentice 2000). At an analytical level, the phrase ‘cultural sexism’ combines the notion that sexism is an everyday, *ordinary*, occurrence, which takes place within masculinised hegemonic structures which interact with and create cultural norms and values (which have an iterative, interactive and reconstitutive relationship with said structures). At an ontological level, it gives expression to the cumulative ‘drip drip’ effects which impact on women, as gender is culturally and structurally ‘done’ to them. Positioned in this way, women may be disempowered or marginalised. However, as will be noted below, within this positioning the roots of women’s agency and autonomy are also contained. Rendering dominant power structures visible provides the basis for reclamation of agency and autonomy. In what follows this reclamation takes place through the expression of women’s experiences of these cultural norms as a mechanism to challenge and disrupt dominant power structures within academia.

### Methodology and Epistemology

While writing this paper, I have on a number of occasions been asked ‘why anyone would really be interested in listening to a load of middle class women whinging’. [Cultural sexism in situ?] I would pose the question: why should female academics be subject to the levels of sexism that are apparent within the profession? Is this perhaps one reason why women are less likely to continue on through the profession? This also raises broader questions about the nature of what we ‘do’. We might ask whose interests are reflected in the subjects we teach and research. For example, if our research is judged by funding bodies comprising mainly men (e.g. at the time of writing according to their website, ESRC membership comprised 13 men and 1 woman) how likely is it that women’s interests will be represented in and through our institutions? If there are few women in senior positions, what kind of message does this send to younger women about their prospects for success?

Although not all, much research about women's issues is done by women. The feminist movement was articulated by women. Research done by women is concerned with the theorisation of gender (e.g. as informed by Butler 1999); the development of 'post-feminism' (Gill 2006; Tasker and Negra 2007; McRobbie 2009); the representation of women in popular culture (Tasker and Negra 2007; Douglas 2010; Brooks 2011); in the media (Byerly and Ross 2006; Gill 2006) and across cultures (Spivak 1988; Atakav, *forthcoming*). At the very heart of the idea of the academy is a relationship between society and the production, discovery or construction of knowledge (dependent on your vantage point). And it tends to be women academics who research women's interests and issues (although, again, not exclusively). What is being exposed in this article is not 'whinging'; the real experiences of women in the academy and the barriers which cultural sexism engender and some women may internalise remind us there is still a need for cultural change. (It also raises the question as to why responses to women voicing their experiences are constructed as 'whinging' in the first place; a further process of 'disarticulation' [cf. McRobbie 2009]?)

Giving voice to experience is a key mechanism through which feminist and critical theories seek to challenge existing power structures. A feminist epistemology seeks to deconstruct the power relations which underpin the production of knowledge (Doucet and Mauthner 2007). Code's questioning the significance of the sex of the 'knower' gave rise to a wide-ranging debate within philosophy about the relationship between feminist thought and epistemology (for summary see Code 2000, 173). 'Feminists start from a realization that epistemologies, in their trickle down effects in the everyday world, play a part in sustaining patriarchal and other hierarchical social structures, both in the academy and throughout Western societies' (Code 2000, 176). Feminist methodology analyses the epistemological assumptions which highlight that there are different ways to know, understand and analyse women's experiences (Cook and Fonow 1986, 4) and in what follows I use two differing methods to shine a light on these experiences. Feminist approaches see its subjects as active, interaction with the 'object' or subject of research is a necessary condition of knowledge (Longino 2010, 734) and my own subjectivity is acknowledged in my discussion of the handling of the data and my reflective choice of methodology.

The methods that are used and described below sit within this epistemological position. Oral histories and readers' theatre can provide a way in which women's experiences are rendered explicit; opening or contributing to a space where existing power structures may be challenged.

### ***Method: telling stories as a form of politics***

The methods employed below are grounded in the notion of narrative. The use of narratives as a means of practising or expressing politics can be identified clearly in literature. This can happen in the way in which stories about politics are told (as in Orwell's [1998] *1984*; *Animal Farm* [1989]) or the way in which politics shapes that which is a reinforcement of dominant norms and values (see, e.g. Millett's [1969] 2000 stringent critique of Norman Mailer's normalisation of sexual violence) or as a challenge to dominant norms and values (as in Atwood's [2011] *The Handmaid's Tale*, Morrison's [2004] *Beloved*). In research terms, storytelling can also be political (in its emancipatory aims). It can be non-fictional, as with oral histories, or fictionalised as in readers' theatre.

The empirical data which inform the use of both methods were gathered over a five-year period. Women were self-selecting and I began collecting stories at first through informal discussions at conferences and through presentation of my work at conferences, departmental seminars and through networks of contacts which spread as others were recommended to me. These took the form of women responding to my work and offering their own experiences (the issues which arise from this I discuss below). While I do only talk about women who have described their experiences to me, I have not actively sought women who have not had this experience within the academy. However in the talks, seminars and conferences where I have presented, I have made it clear that there is opportunity for this kind of reflection to be considered within my work; had it been in evidence it would have been included below. As a post-structuralist feminist in methodology, I am not seeking to make generalised claims; rather I am looking to understand the experiences of those women with whom I have spoken.

In my collected data, there was a cross-section of hierarchical representation from postdoctoral researchers to senior female professors. There was also a cross-representation from arts, humanities, social science and natural science. There were women from across the sectors: Russell Group; the (now disbanded) 1994 Group; former polytechnics and 'new' universities. Perhaps one of the most noticeable features of these interviews was that approximately half of the women, while happy to share their story with me personally and despite assurances of anonymity, did not want their stories to be included in any academic article for fear of reprisals and/or repercussions. This in itself is perhaps an indictment of some of the more pernicious effects of this kind of cultural sexism. In what follows through the oral histories names have been changed, institutions and disciplines anonymised. However, this also left me with a wealth of data which could not be detailed through oral histories. Women had asked me not to directly use their stories, as they were anxious about repercussions, however anonymised the data were. Despite my view that the data would not reveal identities, nonetheless I wished to respect respondents' requests not to use direct quotations. So I looked for a method that enabled me to describe the emergent themes from the data while maintaining the confidences of the women who had spoken to me. Readers' theatre provided a mechanism through which I was able to maintain complete anonymity yet at the same time through the use of fiction and highlight one of the most common issues that I came across: the 'fear' of speaking out. These two methods are detailed later in the article.

### *Oral histories as storytelling*

It is often said that history is written by the winners. Clearly this enables the victor to be prominent in historical accounts; those who were exploited as a basis of that victory tend to be written out. The restoration of those previously ignored or marginalised in such accounts, for the likes of E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm was described as history from below (with reference to the working classes). This is a mechanism to hear 'ordinary people's' voices (Bhattacharya 1983) or to provide 'her side of his story' (Mitchell 1992). In the feminist movement, the way in which history became herstory was inspired through Morgan's observation that the acronym of the feminist WITCH movement could stand for... 'Women Inspired to Commit Herstory' (Morgan 1970, 539). Feminism's contribution to historiography is thus interesting and insightful, concerned both that history should be the history of the people not

elites (Morgan 1970, 541) and that there is a gendered dimension to its telling. A 'view from below' provides insights that those in existing positions of power may not have heard, or may prefer not to hear. Oral history, therefore, provides a site where voices not heard in existing documents and written records, or official accounts of events. Thus, the point of oral history is to provide a place where a 'written record of the interviewee's life is recorded from his/her perspective in his/her own words' (Reinharz 1992, 133).

Methodologically, oral history also highlights the intersubjectivity of the relationship between the researcher and that which is being researched. As Reinharz observes, the writing of women's biographical, oral history is 'a circular process: the woman doing the study learns about herself as well as about the woman she is studying' (1992, 127).

My own intersubjectivity is perhaps reflected in the way in which I came to this project empirically, through the experiences of other women in academia<sup>1</sup>. But that has a history of experience, for me personally, that reaches back to the days of my first degree. Each time I progressed, from undergraduate through postgraduate to lecturer I was made conscious of my gender, both in terms of sexual expectations and ways in which I was (and other women were) marginalised or rendered invisible (at conferences and in the workplace). For years, I thought much of this was because of me, indeed that I was the only one who was experiencing this (which in part I attributed to my class background and my role as a single parent). And for several years I did not really talk about my experience as a 'female' academic beyond a small circle. But over time, as I started to talk about this at conferences and in workshops, it became more apparent that it was not just me. The comfort I drew from that recognition as well as providing for me a platform to think about how this might be changed, be challenged, meant that for all these other women around me, and for those who may become academics in the future, these were stories that, I felt, needed to be told.

As a method, oral history has also been referred to as 'life histories', biographical interviews and 'personal narratives' (Reinharz 1992, 129). They may be used quantitatively to establish empirical patterns or qualitatively to provide a cultural analysis which considers the way which conversations take place, the myths and social norms which are embodied and included (Reinharz 1992, 129).

### **Women academics and their oral histories**

The oral histories below give rise to a number of themes. These are located around gender as a mechanism through which career progression may be rendered more difficult, or not possible; the cultural chilly climates which point to the ways in which women may be 'marginalised' in practice; the way in which childcare is positioned as a women's issue; and the overt sexualisation of women colleagues. These oral histories paint a complex set of cultural structures which women may have to negotiate in their daily working practices.

#### ***Career progression***

Research has pointed to cultures of gender bias that exist within organisations. A recent experiment demonstrated that selectors who explored candidates with identical CVs would generally conclude that the male candidate was the better one (Moss-Racusina



et al. 2012); and research has shown that women fare better in gender-blind evaluations of their CVs (Goldin and Rouse 2000). And Jane's story bears this out:

In my department, the deal has always been – monographs are the route to promotion to SL. You can sometimes get SL with 1 book + articles + all the rest, but before me – 2 books was \*always\* enough for a lecturer to get promoted. No exceptions. When my second book came out (both were with very good University presses) I was on maternity leave. There was no question of putting in for promotion.

Two years later, my head of department thought I was ready. By this time I had published my third book, and he advised me to apply for Reader, on the grounds that 3 single-authored monographs with good presses was a research output above and beyond what is usually expected for SL (indeed, there is no precedent in our department for needing three books for a promotion to SL). But the internal promotions committee turned my application down for reasons that were never explained. I did get the promotion to SL – 3 years after my second book came out.

I was the first person in my department to ever go on maternity leave. I am also the first and only person in my department who has ever needed to write 3 books to get an SL. This isn't a story from the distant past. It all happened in the last five years.

For Jane to watch her male counterparts promoted on lesser criteria than she was turned down with is clearly disturbing. But this story reflects the experiences of many of the women I spoke to where women's achievements were deemed to be of lesser 'worth' than those of their male counterparts. Another woman described her interview experience where turned down for the position (by an all-male interview panel) she was told that her publications were not up to standard. Fair criteria, we might reason, except that the interview Chair had publications in the same journals as her. It is the *cultural* raising of the bar which is problematic for women in these stories not only as they are judged by higher criteria, but also as one female professor observed, *women may well internalise this which in turn can lead to excessive pressures that male colleagues were not subject to*. This suggests that these cultural settings and experiences have longer-term implications and effects, as Sarah's story below illustrates:

Sarah's story:

I was thrilled when I had an interview for a lecturing post at [this University]. However, I was 'warned' about rumours that the department was not good for women. Perhaps naively, I took no notice – thinking that these were the result of professional jealousies or simply idle chatter. Upon accepting the post, it became very apparent that the rumours were true. I witnessed firsthand the strategies used to keep the women locked out of any meaningful decisions in the department. I felt like I had gone back in time and was witnessing the sort of 'battle of the sexes' more frequently associated with the 1970s. I avoided getting caught up with all this at the beginning.

However, things changed when I asked about career prospects and working toward a possible promotion. From this point onwards, I was a target for both covert and overt attacks on many levels. Initially, attempts were made to undermine my confidence as a teacher, researcher and administrator. I see myself as an 'all-rounder' and think I'm pretty strong in all these areas. When I successfully defended myself, the strategies seemed to change. While the standard of my work was no longer in question, there were repeated suggestions made about the state of my mental health!!: I seemed depressed; I was working too hard; I was not working hard enough; I was paying too much attention to detail; I was not paying enough attention to detail ... Nevertheless, I was persistent in my queries about promotional prospects and when I was not given

clear information, I read anything I could find on the kinds of things taken into consideration. Even when I asked direct questions about where there might be gaps in my experience or what I needed to do in order to be considered for promotion, I was given the brush-off. I went ahead with my application and expected that when it was, inevitably, turned down I would at least receive information about what needed strengthening for the future. Even then I was simply told I did not fulfil the criteria. I don't believe I was being judged upon what I had done or what I was willing to do in the future. Instead, my application was not supported because I was not part of the 'in crowd' – looking around, the majority of this 'in crowd' seem to be white, middle class, heterosexual men. Unless I stopped applying for promotion, I had the impression that all I had to look forward to was round upon round of unfair criticism aimed at eroding my confidence and ambition.

Sarah's story reinforces the ways in which culturally the way in which gender is 'done' (cf. West and Zimmerman 1987) and it reminds us again of the kind of ways in which gender stereotypes in the workplace persist: ambition in a man is to be applauded; in a woman ambition in terms of discussion about promotion is constructed as a negative feature. What is quite striking here is the longer-term effects that may also follow from this; in organisations it can often lead to women internalising these assumptions and lowering their own expectations. At times this may also lead to the feeling that they have had little choice but to 'leave before they leave' (cf. Sandberg 2013).

### ***Chilly climates and marginalisation***

Sarah's story also contains aspects of her marginalisation and increasing isolation and this was a common experience for many of the women I spoke to.

Leanne's story: *The body language of my male colleagues makes it clear my voice is not worth listening too, I am made invisible in meetings. If I do get to speak, then people look out of windows, or hold their hand up to shut me up (while not making eye contact with me).*

And Victoria's account: *My male colleagues are regularly congratulated for their research achievements. My head of department does not know what area I research, does not know I have an REF return. He actually recently told me that I needed to develop a research reputation.*

And more subtly with a lack of role models:

Lydia *I have been told overtly that I will not be considered for promotion, women leave and are replaced by men. Over the years I think I have simply internalised the idea that promotion is not an option, I also don't see senior women around me*

These stories highlight ways in which women are positioned as invisible, or marginalised, which serves to contribute to a broader 'chilly climate' which culturally serves to disempower women in two primary ways: first in the sense that women may internalise this marginalisation and 'chilly climate', so then women do not put themselves forward for promotions and or senior positions. This can then become a downward spiral of loss of confidence producing a self-fulfilling prophecy; and, second, in the sense that this kind of 'chilly climate' becomes, or exists as, a cultural 'norm' – whereby women are not expected to progress, or even play a full part in academic life.

### ***Childcare and child bearing***

It is fairly uncontroversial to say, that in society, as well as within academia, childcare is often positioned as a women's issue rather than a parental one. Structurally, societally this is embedded through existing legislation which disproportionately allocates paternity and maternity leave. Conflating child bearing with child care produces the assumption that child *care* is a woman's 'problem'. This is an issue which is regularly played out within the academy to women's disadvantage in their everyday experiences.

*Joanne's story: I was told when I got this job that the only reason I had been offered it was because I had children, so it was assumed I would stay. I was also told that I wouldn't get promotion for the same reason; there was no need, as having children meant that I wouldn't leave.*

*Naomi's experience: After returning to work, following postnatal depression, I was told that I had caused enough problems, I needed to pull my weight and not be off again.*

*Sandy describes how I feel excluded from much of the research culture that takes place within this institution; research seminars are often held in the evenings, or at the end of the working day. I can't attend as I have to collect my daughter from childcare. I miss out on a lot here, and I know it will hold me back.*

These stories highlight the ways in which women may have to negotiate not only their own internalisation of their social positioning as mothers (indeed many academic mothers also spoke of the 'guilt' associated with trying to juggling burgeoning academic life with home), but also the expectations of those around them. Women I spoke to described the ways in which these cultural assumptions took structural form and expression; for example, the holding of research seminars in evenings meant not only that some women felt they missed on developments in their fields (as these provide handy 'shortcuts') but it also meant that women may miss out on the networking opportunities that can often play an important cultural role in career progression. Moreover, these stories also highlight some of the problematic stereotyped assumptions that may be made about women. As Joanne's story indicates, to assume a woman will stay in a post because of children is not an assumption that would be made about a male colleague. Cultural assumptions that women will stay and do not need promotions, whereas men might move irrespective of their offspring) and therefore must be promoted, disproportionately disadvantage women. And where childbearing becomes cultural, as highlighted in Naomi's story, is in the very real lack of understanding of what women need on return to academia following maternity leave, and complications or illness that may follow.

### ***'Ordinary' sexualisation***

Research demonstrates that even when women do experience sexual harassment in the workplace, they are unlikely to report it (Dickmann 2013). What the women's experiences below highlight are the ways in which their colleagues' performativity of their gender renders this kind of sexualisation an 'ordinary', normalised experience, rather than something exceptional, extraordinary, something that when observed which should generate comment and pause for thought.

Rebecca told how *meetings are regularly addressed to my chest. Comments are made about my appearance in a way that just simply doesn't happen with my male colleagues. I feel it really undermines my position here. At first I found it astonishing that this was my experience, on good days I find it laughable. But I also feel undermined by it, my research contributions aren't regarded as having any status. I was told by my head of department that they were conscious of gender issues, at a previous round, there had been this 'really stunning girl', but they didn't appoint her as that would have been too distracting for the men in the department.*

What we see then is a crossover between the narrow construction of women in public life as sexualised (Banyard 2010) and the way in which this plays out for these academic women in an era of 'enlightened sexism' (Douglas 2010) where comments are directed at women 'ironically' with a knowing wink or leer.

Common to the oral histories which were collected were issues around overt sexism, childcare, lack of promotional opportunities, fear of the consequences of challenging the status quo and the way in which this treatment and behaviour served to position women themselves as the problem (rather than an awareness that structures and cultures needed to be tackled). There were also implicit feelings of disempowerment, marginalisation and invisibility and the damaging impacts which this kind of environment and behaviour had upon women. While I was presenting preliminary findings of my research, quite often I would find women would approach me and tell me their own personal story. When I asked them if I could use their story in confidence and anonymously, the answer was often 'I would really prefer that you didn't, I am too afraid of the consequences'. Or 'let me tell you what has happened to me, but I can only tell you off the record'. Fear of being identified and the consequences of this was an overriding response to the research I have been undertaking. Clearly, there are potential ethical issues that may arise here. At the same time I was concerned to reflect the paranoia and fear that women felt when describing their experiences of sexism. The fear expressed about speaking openly seemed so entrenched, and a common feature of the stories I was told that the question I began to ask was how would it be possible to map this 'fear' if I could not tell stories of women's experience directly? I was alerted to the approach called 'readers' theatre'. This is an approach which enables a fictionalised account to be constructed. It provides total anonymity (as there are no direct quotes). It constructs a fictionalised rather than an actual account which reflects themes and issues that emerged from conversations. It is illustrative of themes, concerns and fears that women academics expressed, rather than using any direct quotations, where I had been so asked not to do.

### ***Readers' Theatre as storytelling***

Readers' theatre is derived from and informed by theatre theory (see, e.g. Abel and Post 1973). While its origins may lie in the theatre, its usage extended to other areas in the arts – photography, painting, music and dance, as well as to film; it has subsequently become a prominent pedagogical tool in schools and education programmes as a mechanism to improve reading fluency (Martinez 2000; Tyler 2000; Worthy 2002) and writing (Stewart 1997; Liu 2000) and speaking as a mechanism to facilitate critical thinking (Ketch 2005). And it is this emphasis upon the method as a mechanism to facilitate conversation and critical thinking which is of interest here.

The uniqueness of readers' theatre is in the interaction of three aspects: attention to the literary text itself, the interpreter and the audience (Abel and Post 1973, 442). The listener

(or audience) has a function, which is to not simply witness the experience, but participate in it (Abel and Post 1973, 230). The reader is asked to ‘walk a mile in my shoes; to experience the world as “I” experience it. It is designed to provoke an “empathic” response, comprehension, and ... attitude change’ (Valentine and Valentine 1983, 303).

In order to construct a text for readers’ theatre, data are collected, emergent topics and key themes identified (Donmoyer and Yennie Donmoyer 1995, 408) and rather than produce a ‘scientific’ report this approach provides the opportunity for active engagement and reflection upon research findings. The fictionalised account presented in this article thus draws out some of the emergent themes, with particular respect to the ‘chilly climate’, in particular the marginalisation and subsequent disempowerment which women experience.

It happens so slowly that I don’t notice it at first. Then I become aware that my emails are not being replied to. Then I start to realise that I am excluded from meetings and committees. Most events and decision making bodies are made up predominantly of men (often exclusively). Sexist jokes and comments are part of my daily experience. At the same time I am told that my research really isn’t any good (despite some of it being in top journals). My male colleagues are publicly and widely praised. Career progression are not two words that will ever be used in the same sentence to me, and I watch men around me be promoted over me, with a much lesser CV than I have. If I express dissent I will be told that I have fundamentally harmed, or destroyed my career opportunities. I’ll be told that women’s survival strategies are to disengage with the department; and this is a strategy that women are actively advised to use. Well I’ve already been excluded anyway, so what difference does it make? Except that my male colleagues are still part of the decisions that are made; they support each other and collaborate to raise each other’s profile. My non attendance at events means that I am constructed as uncooperative, or a trouble maker, or in some cases as depressed or mentally unstable. And while my confidence is being systematically stripped away, men around me flourish and enjoy successful, celebrated careers, with great opportunities ahead. And at the same time, many of my male colleagues are also angry about this systematic marginalisation of women. They feel disenfranchised, they too cannot speak out lest the same fate awaits them.

This fictionalised account is one which I have used in conferences and in presentations in University settings. When asking for a volunteer to perform the piece – I have sometimes had men reading out the above piece, sometimes women. Interestingly, I have observed a general shock in men who read this out; they reflect that it has enabled them to empathise with their female colleagues where they had not realised what an issue this was for them before. Female colleagues have tended to simply nod as they recognise the experience being performed. This recognition and understanding is important in consensus building. Both men and women can be liberated if systems oppressing women are removed (cf. Hooks 2000). Many men also feel uncomfortable and unhappy in patriarchal systems. The larger issue which remains is that the audiences for my talks tend to be self-selecting. People attend largely because they are conscious that daily sexism is a problem within the academy. Many want to do something about it. The wider issue of course is how to reach those who remain convinced that women simply do not do academics that is just the ‘natural order of things’.

## Conclusion

In a 1980s skit called ‘women know your limits’ Harry Enfield satirised the way in which women were expected to behave in accordance with the standards and desires of men.

This was intended as a spoof however, not an instruction to the academy. This article began by questioning why women are still under-represented (or men over-represented [cf. Murray 2012]) at senior levels across the academy. I have sought to make sense of this through exploration of the cultural norms and values which situate women and where gender is ‘done’ within hegemonic masculine structures within the academy. The argument here being, once we can identify limits, we can challenge and tackle them.

This analytical focus thus provides us with an understanding of the ontological hurdles, barriers and structures in place which women academics negotiate in their daily working practices and which may hinder career progression (in myriad forms).

Giving expression to these experiences can be not only cathartic for women, but it can challenge that isolation that many of the women in this study have expressed that they feel. The feminist approach adopted within this article has provided a site where stories can be told and heard, both in their own words (through oral histories) and in thematic fiction (through readers’ theatre). In providing a site where the structural and cultural limits placed on women are discussed, feminist methodology asks questions about power and in so doing opens up space for women’s empowerment and agency to be rendered visible. This article has drawn attention to the symptoms (women’s cultural experiences) in order to render explicit underlying causal power structures (which gain expression and embodiment in hegemonic masculinised structures). Women’s experiences around childcare, career progression, marginalisation and ‘chilly climates’ and sexualisation have been made visible through the use of oral histories. The sensitive nature of the data, for some women, meant that an alternate method was needed in order to give expression to the ‘fear’ that some women experienced in their professional lives.

Feminism as praxis enables women to ‘speak out’ and have their voices heard, and in so doing question existing structures of power. This in turn provides a mechanism through which change and agency are possible. If we are to think about the knowledge that we impart to our future students, our future societal leaders and workers, and if we are to think about the conditions of our own workforce, the cleaners, the admin staff, the secretaries (who tend to be disproportionately women) this article argues we need to reflect on and challenge the hegemonic patriarchal space in which knowledge is created, and work is conducted, one in which currently ‘cultural sexism’ may be a feature of ordinary academic life.

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1. The author thanks the reviewer for the need to make this point.

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