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One of the things I've noticed about women students is that many have much less understanding of what is expected of a research student to 'get ahead'. I'm not referring to the actual work required, but rather that women tend to see that as perhaps the only thing needed. So they are much less likely to speak up, they seem less likely to choose a 'territory' and then defend it, they are much less likely to see themselves as being 'judged' on matters peripheral to the work at hand. And so they are 'failed' while unaware they are being tested at all.

(former vice-chancellor)

As an undergraduate I studied natural science at an elite university and certainly had no idea of what was needed to get ahead. Later I did a PhD in anthropology in Wales while not much the wiser, and I then moved into sociology partly because I was impressed by the liberatory work of C. Wright Mills. His famous book *The Sociological Imagination* starts with the phrase: ‘Nowadays men often feel that their ... lives are a series of traps’; and he goes on to argue the need to understand our personal difficulties in the context of social structures and public issues (Wright Mills 1970: 12 and 14). This guided me when I finally wrote up my own doctoral work on courtship, weddings and setting up home in South Wales (Leonard 1980) and in my subsequent involvement in the women's movement, in my research on gender and education and in teaching women's studies. But it was only recently that the profound changes in higher education in Britain led me to apply it to my own and my students' location within universities to understand how best to react. In higher education, understanding 'what feel like a series of traps' now seems essential.
Introduction: using this book

At the same time, two colleagues asked me to write a chapter on gender for a collection on Working for a Doctorate which they were editing (Graves and Verma 1997). When I started to look at the literature, I realized just how little recognition there is of the differences between the experiences of men and women students in mainstream research and policy on higher education in the UK. It is also absent from most of the textbooks addressed to research students - despite all the work that has been done on gender and the labour market and on the differences between girls and boys in schools. Moreover, even less attention has been given to differences among women and men postgraduate students: between those who study full and those who study part-time, between those in different disciplines, between those who do their doctorates immediately after their first degree and ‘mature women returners’, between those who have lived all their lives in Britain and those whose ‘domicile’ is abroad or whose first language is not English, between lesbians and heterosexuals, who are single or in couples, with and without children, with and without disabilities, and so on.

I had by then worked with twenty of my own students who have successfully completed their PhDs and was starting to teach on a professional doctorate, which led me to interesting questions about the nature of the PhD itself. I knew there had been research on gender and higher education in the USA since the late 1960s and in Australia and New Zealand since the 1970s, and so I sought out the work specifically on doctoral students and added it to what I already knew from work on pedagogy, curriculum and assessment in schools, on women staff in universities, and from teaching women’s studies, for example on violence against women and the sociology of the family. This produced a reasonably rich, if speculative, article which I was later asked to develop in relation to students from abroad (Leonard 1998). However, both these articles are largely about doctorates in the social sciences and (like the studies on which they were based) from the perspectives of faculty and policy makers rather than of students. They are also full of references so as to try in a typically academic way to convince people about the importance of gender. They are therefore not particularly easy reading.

I hope in this book to speak more directly to any woman who is going to undertake a doctorate and to giver fuller information on the ‘series of traps’ you are likely to encounter with either a traditional PhD or a new, ‘professional’ (‘vocational’, ‘taught’) doctorate. The book gives research-based information on how women are positioned inequitably within the supposedly liberal, cerebral world of postgraduate studies, and suggests how best to push back or move around problems and come out in front - without selling out. It is not a basic beginner’s text on ‘how to get a PhD’ because these already exist and also because I presume doctoral students can cope with complexities. You need to consider the full picture to understand your own gendered situation and to work out your own answers - which are not
easy ones. Also while the book is aimed mainly at women, it has a lot in it of interest to men since many problems are common to both sexes, though with a gender dimension. It should therefore be of interest to anyone sympathetic to feminism, especially men who try to be reflexive about their own masculinity and their position as men.

The book starts with a chapter which gives an overview of the recent changes in higher education, and in doctoral studies in particular, in the UK (and in various forms, in most other advanced industrial countries). This is important in helping you to make sense of your location and to understand the mysterious events and acronyms: the ‘RAE’, ‘Subject Review’, ‘massification’, ‘HEFCE’, ‘ILT’ and others which haunt your supervisor. If you want to plunge straight into discussions more directly related to your own experience, skip this chapter and start with Chapter 2, which discusses making the decision to do a doctorate, and Chapters 3 and 4 on choosing where to study (or later chapters if you are further on in your course). But do return to Chapter 1 later on and keep it to hand for reference. You can’t understand the ‘traps’ fully without it; and one of the well-documented differences between men and women students is precisely that women are less likely to recognize ‘the rules of the game’, as the opening quotation suggests.

The University of California at Berkeley graduate school has done some excellent work on gender and graduate studies. One study of undergraduates found that even women who intended to carry on to higher degree work had no clear knowledge of how graduate school worked and what they should study. ‘Men, however, knew precisely what their emphases in graduate school would be and could name concrete steps by which they hoped to succeed’. A subsequent study of doctoral students revealed a similar striking pattern among students who were well advanced in their studies. The majority of women interviewed felt alienated and isolated in their departments. They did not know the informal rules and conventions of the dominant culture in their department. They interpreted their negative departmental experiences as personal failures, not as a reflection of a ‘cool’ departmental climate. They attributed any success to luck, rather than to personal competencies. They found solace only in the graduate student peer culture. In contrast, men described the factors contributing to their progress in terms of well planned strategies and personal achievements. They explained their negative experiences in terms of insufficient guidance, faculty aloofness and departmental factions. In addition, those men who felt alienated and who saw themselves as peripheral to the department... attributed this to their family conditions or their minority status. They were divorced and had to take care of a child, or married with children, or they were Black or Hispanic students. (Nerad and Stewart 1991: 15–17)
This finding, that women often lack confidence and are too inclined to attribute success to luck or hard work, and our negative experiences to our own shortcomings (rather than to institutional failings), has been well documented elsewhere too. Women are known also to be slow to put our personal development to the fore and while most men are flattered when someone suggests they should think about doing a research degree, not only are fewer women invited to do so, but those who are, seem almost to brush off the recognition.

I hope this book will encourage you to take the possibility of doing a doctorate seriously, to negotiate your way through the process of doing one, and to be successful in your own and other people's terms. It may be that some who read it decide that now is not the right time for them to do a research degree, though they would like to do one later. Promising women may decide realistically that they have other priorities - that they want a more rounded life or that they are not prepared to give up other activities, especially aspects of their relationship with partners and/or children, for this particular exercise. (Men, of course, may also decide not to do a doctorate. But in my own and other people's experience, men explain their decision mainly in relation to employment pressures, and they decide against it much less often. Large numbers of men in fact get kudos for doing part-time doctorates, especially in business or other vocational studies, while a large group of supportive wives bring up children virtually as single parents.)

If you do want to go ahead, however, it really is important to understand fully what is involved and to face up to the informal rules and homosocial cultures of universities. Otherwise you will be implicitly positioned and disadvantaged by them. Women need to make careful and clever career choices, whether or not you are willing to be associated with or involved in the competitive, self-promotional behaviour traditionally associated with dominant masculinities. If you don't know what you are doing, and especially if you come from a relatively under-privileged background, you may well have an unhappy time along the way, and end up in a low status institution and a low status position, as either a teaching or contract research foot soldier, on a short-term contract and possibly part-time, shortly thereafter ending up outside academia altogether. Moreover, if you are coming to study in Britain from abroad, you need also to find out about and keep in mind the same sorts of informal rules for the situation to which you will be returning.

Facing up to informal structures and recognizing what actually counts in academic life (understanding its micropolitics) and when and how gender is salient, and how women and femininity are devalued, can however be a painful process.
Coming to have a feminist consciousness is the experience of coming to see things about oneself and one’s society that were heretofore hidden. This experience, the acquiring of a ‘raised’ consciousness [has its] disturbing aspects [but it] is an immeasurable advance over that false consciousness which it replaces. The scales fall from our eyes... We begin to understand why we have such depreciated images of ourselves... Understanding, even beginning to understand this, makes it possible to change. Coming to see things differently, we are able to make out possibilities for liberating collective action and for unprecedented personal growth... Moreover that feeling of alienation from established society which is so prominent a feature of feminist experience may be counterbalanced by a new identification with women of all conditions and a growing sense of solidarity with other feminists. It is a fitting commentary on our society that the growth of feminist consciousness, in spite of its ambiguities, confusions and trials, is apprehended by those in whom it develops as an experience of liberation.

(Bartky 1990: 21)

Gender is certainly not given adequate attention in any of the guidebooks for students which have popped up as the numbers of graduate students have increased. In most texts there is in fact no mention of gender – or other – differences among students. At best there is a short section on women and one on overseas and one on part-time students. Gender is added on, not threaded all the way through and the interaction of systematic social differences is missed. This is also likely to be true of the courses run for research students by your university and of documents issued to you. They will cover some of the basic information/cues you need as a research student, but they are unlikely to cover any of the gender specific angles which fill this book. This is despite the fact that, as I have stressed, everything has a gender dimension; and women need (have a right to) more intellectual and personal support until the system which disadvantages us is changed. At present we are likely to be overtly or subtly ‘othered’ and alienated by the culture of the department or laboratory where we work; and have less or different access to financial support. All of which applies more strongly and in specific ways to working class, minority ethnic, lesbian, disabled and older women.

These biases and limitations in textbooks, induction and mainstream courses, and welfare offices are largely due to deficiencies in their own sources of information. The big names in UK higher education research are, and have long been, quite unaware of (and indifferent to) gender issues, so there is not the material for textbook writers and others to draw upon. A vicious circle exists whereby the obvious keeps not being seen, despite attention having been drawn to gender in higher education (HE) by feminists for
Introduction: using this book

thirty years and despite Equal Opportunities (EO) issues having been put (back) on to the universities agenda in the 1980s. However, the major changes associated with the ‘massification’ and ‘marketization’ of HE in the late 1980s and 1990s knocked such work for six, and it has only recently begun to return (though focused on class rather than on gender, and with a simplistic analysis).

What this book provides is not a self-help/improvement account. I shall not be suggesting that the problem is women’s ‘low self-esteem’ and that what we need are specialist training courses for women in assertion, self-presentation (clothes and body language), communication and leadership skills so that we can acquire something we lack. Nor is it in the women’s magazine mould of saying you can get ahead (get a doctorate quickly, and then a better job) while improving your marriage/partnership/sex life – and all without losing your femininity: your lipstick, orgasms, pleasure in shopping and other enriching ‘differences’ from men. I shall not (principally) be discussing what to wear and what body language to wheedle in. Nor does this book support the idea that men and women are different, and that this difference can be problematic (because it can cause misunderstandings) but it can also be enriching if both sexes practise mutual tolerance and adjustment; however, in science (or professional life, or academia, or management) ‘masculine’ ‘rational’ values must hold sway because of the nature of the field, and therefore, here at least, women must and can emulate men.

Rather, this book has a critical, inequality approach, seeing existing social structures as giving men advantages, and masculinity as actively reconstructing these structures, with women having to interact with men from less powerful positions in both public and private institutions. It responds to the self-help, Cosmo and Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus approaches (sometimes self-described as ‘postfeminist’) by asking critically ‘what sort of difference?’ and ‘is it enriching?’ and ‘in what ways is a field “masculine” and should it continue to be so?’ That is to say, I seek to politicize gender, not to ‘other’ or pathologize or to glorify women; and I look to collective awareness and action for change. (Though I am happy to include assertion and leadership training, careful use of clothes and body language, and arguments for less masculine cultures and mutual enrichment, as useful tools. They are just not enough and at times can be problematic.)

I am certainly not going to suggest there are easy answers, because the power involved in gender relations is more complicated than 1960s and 1970s analyses of male dominance suggested – important though the early sense of outrage in the Women’s Liberation Movement was in bearing witness to oppression in all aspects of women’s lives. Feminism has moved on to develop new conceptualizations of the relations of men and women, and of what it means to talk of ‘men’ and ‘women’ in the first place. This book is therefore not written from a perspective of just uncovering instances
Introduction: using this book

of direct discrimination against women and deep-seated conflicts of interest between the sexes. Nor does it see gender as something laid down in our psychology in childhood: a fixed attribute at the core of every person’s sense of self. Rather it sees gender as fluid and constantly reproduced (or challenged) through social practices. Gender is the effect of participating in particular social practices, rather than the other way around; and change and instability are always present. But so is inequality. It is not a question of socially constructed/performing differences giving rise to inequality, so much as inequalities in a binarily divided society giving rise to constructed and reconstructed ‘differences’.

Moreover academia itself is not an institution which just reflects (or exacerbates) pre-given gender identities which people bring into it. Rather it is a place (yet another place) that actively constitutes gender: a site within which individuals construct and reconstruct themselves as gendered subjects by engaging in masculine and feminine ways of thinking and talking, and sexual and other social interactions. Its own social structures and discourses constrain, but do not dictate, individuals’ possibilities. To take a concrete example, I shall argue that the very concept of ‘being an academic’ (or a ‘professional’, or a ‘research student’) is gendered and classed: they are built around a number of divisions of labour and attributes associated with middle class masculinity, which construct femininity and working classness as ‘other’, but which actually require and use the labour of women and the lower classes. Such ways of thinking constitute a fundamental challenge to customary ways of thinking. But they do explain better why it is so difficult to change.

There are also no easy answers because gender is not the only power relation in play. There are also issues of class and race and physical and mental capacities and age, and while we may disentangle these heuristically, in practice they are overlapping and interconstructed with gender. I shall try to keep the nuances. For instance, the going is tougher and there are fewer women in certain subjects and in more prestigious universities. There are also rather different problems for minority ethnic and working class women and lesbians than for white Anglo-Saxon Protestant heterosexual women from middle class backgrounds. While there are sometimes major problems (such as violence or harassment or discrimination) for women in universities, more often what we experience is an invisibility or ‘trivial’ put-downs, which we cope with, though they can accumulate so that at times and places they really get us down. As they do in the rest of life. (Some of the 1970s work does acknowledge this, but I think underplays it.) Also women fight back individually and collectively and enjoy the warmth of women’s support and the joys and excitement of feminist research; and sometimes, of course, women use femininity to get ahead and/or personally contribute to their own or other women’s subordination. More of such ‘queen bees’ later.
Introduction: using this book

Whether you follow me through the more theoretical arguments or not, I hope the book fulfils its purpose of providing women (and men) with essential information and creative insights about gender and about change in higher education, on the basis of which you can draw your own conclusions and plot your own paths. I hope it is supportive and hopeful without being Pollyanna-like. It would be nice if the book also made people in higher education generally more aware that women matter. There are certainly problems for women (indeed for everyone) in higher education today, but pointing them out is not the same as saying women are simply victims, or that the whole enterprise is (now) intrinsically fraught and flawed. Rather it stems from a belief in the importance of reflecting on the issues so that newcomers can maximise the intellectual pleasures to be gained. Like Sara Delamont and colleagues’ (1997) guide for supervisors, my basic philosophy is that good, useful, pleasurable doctoral studies are based on self-consciousness, not on intuition or flying by the seat of one’s pants. Also that women’s support for other women, formally and informally, is essential, and that women and sympathetic men must actively contribute and rejuvenate organizations, not just take what they need from them while looking backwards to the now faded legacy of the 1930s or 1950s or 1970s.

The advice provided is, as it is fashionable to say nowadays, ‘research based’, with references so that you can follow up particular points, and picky readers can contest them. There is a short list of suggested further reading at the end of each chapter.

Nadya Aisenberg and Mona Harrington (1988: 58–9) suggest the following ‘rules of the game’:

- Find out what’s going on. You need an inside line.
- Gain practice in political skills, like how to run meetings and how to present proposals.
- Assume some opposition. You can’t please everyone all the time.
- Be persistent. Keep pushing and people will often end up agreeing.
- Learn to say no and keep your eye on what is in it for you as well as others.
- Don’t spend all your time servicing other people.
- Use contacts. The old boy network really works, so use the ‘old girls’.
- Choose your fights – those that are really important.