



Transparency in Academic Recruitment: A Problematic Tool for Gender Equality?

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Abstract

Gender research has made a call for more transparency and accountability in academic recruitment and selection in order to overcome the inequality practices that have led to an underrepresentation of women among full professors. This paper provides insight into the multiple ways in which the notions of transparency and accountability are put into practice in academic recruitment and selection, and how this has enhanced – or hindered – gender equality. The methods employed consist of a qualitative content analysis of seven recruitment and selection protocols, interviews with 64 committee members, and an analysis of 971 appointment reports of full professors in the Netherlands. Our analysis contributes to the study of organizations in three respects. First, it shows that recruitment and selection processes are characterized by bounded transparency and limited accountability at best. Second, it explains that the protocols that should ensure transparency and accountability remain paper tigers, because of the micropolitics and gender practices that are part and parcel of recruitment and selection. Third, it contributes to gender equality theory in organization theory by showing how a myriad of gender practices simultaneously increases and counteracts gender equality measures in academia.

Keywords: gender equality policies, micropolitics, recruitment and selection, transparency, accountability, universities

Shifting the gender order in academia towards a more balanced representation of men and women in all academic ranks has been on the agenda of universities and governments for some decades (e.g. European Commission 2008; Bailyn 2003; Özbilgin and Healy 2004). Enhancing the transparency of academic recruitment and selection is one important aspect of achieving gender equality. The academic appointment system is often described as an opaque process in which an inner circle of elites selects new professors in an informal, closed decision-making process (e.g. Evans 1995; Fogelberg et al. 1999; Husu 2000). The call for more transparent procedures and more accountable decision-makers has its origins in gender research: women would benefit from more open and transparent procedures, since (gender) bias is more likely to occur when assessments are based on obscure criteria and the process of evaluation kept confidential (Ledwith and Manfredi 2000; Rees 2004; Academy of Finland 1998; Allen 1988; Husu 2000; Ziegler 2001; Martin 1994). The calls of gender researchers have largely been integrated into policies of universities, and transparency and accountability have been advocated as key instruments with which to promote gender equality.

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Efforts to enhance gender equality by increasing transparency when hiring senior staff correspond with demands for greater transparency in many areas of the activities of organizations (Neyland 2007), including universities. The new 'managerialism' in academia (Borum and Hansen 2000; Deem 2003; Webb 1999; Kitchener 2002) has put more pressure on university organizations to enhance their transparency and the degree to which they are accountable for their policies and practices to their internal and external stakeholders (West et al. 1998). However, insufficient attention has been devoted to the problematic implementation of these policies, to the actors involved, to the micropolitics and gender practices that can distort these policies, and to their unintended side effects.

This paper focuses on the concepts of transparency and accountability as tools for gender equality, and examines the application of these policies in recruitment and selection. We draw on empirical material constructed in a research project on professorial appointments in the Netherlands. Our methods include a qualitative analysis of actual university policies and protocols, interviews with 24 women and 40 men who held different functions in selection committees, and an analysis of 971 appointment reports sent by selection committees to university boards to account for the recruitment and selection decisions. Our analysis contributes to gender equality theory in organization theory by critically assessing the significance of transparency and accountability to gender equality. While much has been expected of such policies, we show that transparency and accountability cannot be the ultimate remedy for gender inequality. In fact, there is a myriad of unintended gender practices and micro-political processes involved in the selection of elites. Transparency policies can even be counterproductive when actors attempt to implement these policies strategically for their own benefit.

Our theoretical framework is informed by 'social construction feminism' (Lorber 2005: 241), which sees both organizations and gender as social practices and connects face-to-face interaction with institutional structures and cultural symbols (Martin 2006; Poggio 2006). Within this epistemological tradition, we use the notion of *gender practices* to refer to the complex, multi-layered everyday social practices of distinguishing between men and women, masculinity and femininity. These involve both informal and formal power processes. We introduce an analytical distinction, in line with Chia and Holt (2006), between conscious and deliberate actions that are designed to foster care (gender equality practices) on the one hand, and, on the other, the intentional or unintentional and often unreflexive way of distinguishing between women and men, femininity and masculinity in daily practice (gender practices) that can lead either to gender equality or to gender inequality. Greater insight into the ways that gender equality practices and gender practices interact with, conflict with and anticipate each other can further our knowledge and understanding of the slow rate of change that gender equality policies have managed to achieve. The next section will start by exploring the academic debates on the concepts of transparency, accountability, gender equality and power.

Transparency, Accountability, Gender Equality and Power

Although the terms ‘transparency’ and ‘accountability’ can seem ubiquitous these days, they are rarely defined with much rigor. The vagueness that surrounds these terms stems partly from the fact that they are used in relation to so many different issue areas (Florini 1999: 4). However, the roots of most definitions of transparency and accountability are found in the literature of political sciences and governmental institutions (Neyland 2007; West et al. 1998; Siklos 2003). These studies stress that governmental organizations should be transparent, meaning that organizations are called upon to make internal aspects of organization activity externally visible. The idea is that openness will reduce the scope for corruption or unethical practices. In this study, we define decisions or practices as ‘transparent’ when information about how they are carried out is accessible to insiders and outsiders in an accurate and comprehensible form. The purpose of transparency is closely connected to enabling outsiders to hold organizations to account for their policies and performance (Florini 1999; Levay and Waks 2009). Institutions can be said to be transparent when they release information that is relevant to holding them accountable. We employ Giddens’ definition of accountability; he states: ‘to be accountable for one’s activities is to explicate the reasons for them and to supply the normative grounds whereby they may be justified’ (Giddens 1984: 30).

There are good reasons to believe that increased transparency and accountability in organizations would be generally beneficial, and often indispensable when public finances are involved. Openness to the public means that procedures and decision-making can be scrutinized by the members of the organization concerned, external observers, journalists and other interested academics and citizens. This will reduce the likelihood of any suspicion or speculation with respect to the proper handling of decision-making and public funds. It also encourages objectivity within the process, and discourages nepotism and other inappropriate behavior (Svensson 2007: 127).

Gender equality programmes frequently emphasize the importance of transparent appointment processes; transparency is seen as a way of increasing the likelihood of a fairer process and reducing bias. Studies on gender mechanisms in organizations emphasize that transparency enhances women’s chances of promotion and decreases the chance of gender-related bias (Ledwith and Manfredi 2000; Rees 2004; Academy of Finland 1998; Allen 1988; Husu 2000; Ziegler 2001; Martin 1994). All these studies argue that bias is more likely to occur if assessments are based on obscure criteria and the evaluation process is kept confidential. Transparency and accountability are thus advocated as key instruments in achieving gender equality. Yet, it is striking that hardly any of these studies provides empirical evidence or comprehensible guidelines on what constitutes transparency in the appointment of academic staff, and nor do they suggest how academic organizations might make recruitment and selection more transparent. This paper will critically examine the claim that transparency and accountability can remedy gender inequality.

Gender Equality Theories

Gender equality is a contested concept. Different conceptualizations underlie gender equality programmes and those conceptualizations can be traced back to three analytically distinct perspectives within feminist theory (Booth and Bennett 2002; Verloo 2005; Squires 1999; Nentwich 2006; Calás and Smircich 2006; Walby 2004). The first perspective has been named the 'equal opportunities' or 'equal treatment perspective' and is based on liberal feminism: the idea that women and men are equal and therefore have equal rights, as well as equal access to and equal representation in public life (Calás and Smircich 2006: 290). From this perspective, the aim of gender equality is to enable women and men to compete as equals in the workplace and the labor market and to create equal opportunities by eliminating structural and procedural barriers to women's success (Meyerson and Kolb 2000: 560).

The second perspective on gender equality has been called the 'difference perspective' and is based on standpoint feminism (Harding 1986; Smith 1987). It is based on the notion that men and women are different from each other, but that this difference should be celebrated instead of read as inferiority. Masculine and feminine identities are ways of being that are shaped by the different life experiences and social roles of men and women. Whereas equal opportunities theorists argue for women's integration into the world as it is, the aim of feminists who subscribe to the difference perspective is to lessen the power of the male order, rather than to 'join the ranks' (Squires 1999: 117–118).

The third perspective is called the 'post-equity' (Meyerson and Kolb 2000) or 'transformation' (Squires 1999) approach and originates from post-structuralist feminism (Butler 1990, 1992) and social constructionist feminism (Lorber 2005; West and Zimmerman 1987). According to this approach, gender is not a characteristic but a social practice that constructs norms with white, heterosexual, class-privileged men as the neutral and objective standard. It is the whole gendered world itself that represents the problem, not simply the exclusion of women or the existence of the masculine norm (Verloo and Lombardo 2007). The goal for change is to challenge this gendered world.

These three perspectives are not mutually exclusive (Squires 1999; Verloo 2005), and all contribute to gender equality in their own way. In this study, these perspectives are used as an analytical frame to indicate what kind of approach underlies universities' endeavors to increase gender equality. We use the notion of gender equality practices to refer to the intentional, formalized policies that aim to bring about gender equality, as well as their actual application in recruitment and selection. Gender equality is one way of practicing gender, but there are many other intentional and unintentional gender practices, some of which go against these efforts to create equality. Our interest lies in how gender equality practices intersect with, conflict with and anticipate gender practices, as gender practices can lead to outcomes of either gender equality or gender inequality. The use of the term 'practice' for *both* the policy (norm) *and* the implementation of that policy may cause some confusion, but we hold that the articulation of a norm in a policy plan is as much a practice as the application of that norm.

Micropolitics

Studying gender practices that are shaped through interaction requires a specific theoretical conceptualization of power which focuses on how people actually use power in professorial recruitment and selection. We draw upon the concept of micropolitics to explain the role of power in shaping and implementing transparency, accountability and gender equality. Notably, there is more to gender than power (Davis et al. 1991) and not all gender practices involve micropolitics, since other, more hegemonic power processes are intertwined with gender practices. Micropolitics are the strategies and tactics used by individuals and groups in an organization to further their own interests (Morley 2006; Hoyle 1982; Thomas and Davies 2005). We use Blase's (1991: 11) working definition: 'Micropolitics refer to the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations.' Micropolitics do not refer exclusively to tension and conflict but also to cooperation and coalition building. They include a broad range of activities – how people exert influence, network, challenge, lobby, resist or use other personal strategies in order to effect or resist change or assert their own interests (Morley 1999: 4). We argue that a micropolitical perspective is particularly relevant to the study of gender practices in recruitment and selection because recruiting and selecting new professors is not a purely technical endeavour which involves judging which academics are the best. It is also a political endeavour, involving negotiations between multiple actors.

Methodology

The Dutch Case

To illustrate how the norms of transparency and accountability are put into practice in the micropolitical environment of professorial appointments, we draw on empirical material gathered in a research project on professorial recruitment and selection practices in the Netherlands (Van den Brink et al. 2006, Van den Brink 2010). Following Calás and Smircich's argument (2006) that societal particularities and transnational processes must be considered in studies of gender and management, we will briefly describe these contextual factors.

The university sector in the Netherlands includes 13 public universities; private universities in the Netherlands are rare. The universities vary considerably in size according to the maturity and range of the disciplines they teach. There is a tendency for universities to stress their distinctive features, but there are no significant differences in terms of academic standards or achievement (De Weert 2001: 80).

International benchmarks have repeatedly shown that the Netherlands trails behind the rest of Europe when it comes to the percentage of women professors (12%), even though Dutch women students outnumber and outperform men students (European Commission 2009; WOPI 2008). Although this low number suggests some peculiarity in the Dutch case (see Bosch 2002), the underrepresentation of women in senior academic positions also persists at the international

level, regardless of the variation in history of science in different countries and despite the variety of equality policies (European Commission 2000; Etzkowitz and Kemelgor 2001; NSF 2009). The average proportion of women full professors across the EU as a whole is 20 percent, and even those countries with the highest proportion, such as Finland (23%) and Iceland (34%), are not even close to reaching gender equality in higher education (European Commission 2009).

The Dutch academic career system differs slightly from the Anglo-American model. Although we have translated the Dutch ranks as if they corresponded directly with the US system (i.e. assistant, associate, and full professor), this is not in fact the case. There is no promotion system to progress from one rank to another. Traditionally, an upward career trajectory to the highest academic position in the Dutch system depends not only on the individual merits of an academic but also on the number of positions vacant. Each move upwards requires a vacancy and a recruitment and selection process. In that process, similar criteria are used to evaluate candidates to those used in the Anglo-American system: bibliometrics are leading in assessing the work of academics, with an emphasis on international publications in A-rated journals.

Data Collection

The research study used qualitative and quantitative data collection methods and included an analysis of 64 interviews with committee members and/or candidates, policy documents from seven universities and 971 appointment reports. For the purposes of this paper, we compare the recruitment and selection protocols with interview material from the actual recruitment practices to understand the multiple ways these protocols were used, and how they enhanced, counteracted or stimulated gender equality. All 13 Dutch universities were invited to participate, but due to privacy issues and limited resources among auxiliary personnel, only seven universities agreed to co-operate. However, these seven universities represent a broad cross-section of Dutch universities and include some of the largest, the most prestigious, and also a university of technology.

In total, 24 women and 40 men were interviewed in their function as chairpersons, members and HRM advisors in appointment committees. The respondents were working in one of the four major academic subfields – humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and medical sciences. The analytical focus of the interviews was recruitment and selection practices – that is to say, what people say and do in their social interaction within organizations (Yanow 2006: 1746). The interviewees were asked to describe the recruitment process and highlight the arguments used by committee members to explain their choice of the nominated candidate. We encouraged the respondents to talk about concrete cases and incidents on the basis of anonymity, rather than in generalities. In an attempt to capture as much detail about the appointment process as possible, we asked the respondents to focus on the most recent appointment procedures they had been involved in.

Selection protocols were examined by analysing the content of documents from seven participating universities. Some of these protocols are publicly available on the internet while others were obtained from HRM managers at participating

universities. Information from 971 appointment reports in the period 1999–2003 was used to gather background information about the number of women committee members and the number of closed and open recruitment procedures. These reports contain information about the profile, the applicants and the final nomination, and are written by the selection committees for the university board which is ultimately responsible for the appointment of candidates.

Data Analysis

To analyse the interviews and protocols, we used qualitative content analysis (Lieblich et al. 1998). The content analysis was carried out by splitting the text into relatively small units of content on the basis of areas of interest. Initially we began by scanning the text and isolating the words and phrases connected to ‘gender’, ‘gender equality practices’, ‘micropolitical activities’, ‘formal policies’. By giving open codes to different sections in the text, the first descriptive coding revealed the common patterns and themes of relating to these research areas. We then shifted to a more holistic method of content analysis, interpreting parts or categories of the text in the light of the rest of the text (Ollerenshaw and Creswell 2002). In this way, we were able to find ambiguities, differences and paradoxes within and among the stories of the committee members. We used the computer program Atlas-ti to systemize, code, compare and explore our data since this mapping method is appropriate for interpreting large numbers of interviews.

Formal Practices of Transparency and Accountability

The increasing prominence given to transparency and accountability within public organizations and within the scientific debate has led to a more urgent awareness of these issues at Dutch universities (VSNU 2008). As the protocols indicate, many university policy-makers have taken suggestions on board and argued for more transparent appointment procedures for academic staff. One significant difficulty in achieving transparency in appointment procedures in Dutch universities is the issue of privacy. Increasing transparency requires disclosing information about the agents, criteria and decision-making process involved. At the same time, departments need to ensure the confidentiality of information pertaining to professorial candidates. Proceedings and appointment reports are not available to the academic community at large, but remain in files marked ‘confidential’. Only the faculty dean and the university board will receive appointment reports. The selection of professorial candidates is clearly, then, a matter of ‘bounded transparency’, since access is limited and only available to a very narrow section of elite academics.

Rather than allowing the general public access to documentation and decision-making procedures, universities have sought to enhance transparency primarily through the use of professorial chair plans and appointment protocols. A professorial chair plan is a guidance document for decisions relating to continuing, reorienting or creating new professorial chairs. Appointment protocols prescribe how recruitment is to take place and which – regulated – steps are to be followed.

Our analysis of the selection protocols indicates that there are four main ways in which universities are seeking to achieve greater transparency and accountability. Firstly, all the university protocols analysed strongly encourage open recruitment as a means of filling vacancies. This entails placing advertisements so that all potential candidates have the opportunity to learn about and/or apply for the professorship. Committees need the explicit permission of the dean or university board if they wish to deviate from this policy. Secondly, the protocols stress the importance of clear criteria to assess the candidates. Selection criteria describe the skills, knowledge, qualities and experience needed to do the job and are the basis for developing interview questions, evaluating candidates and short-listing applicants. Thirdly, some university protocols suggest the presence of a HRM advisor to professionalize the appointment process. A fourth means of enhancing accountability is the requirement that the appointment report must be submitted to the university board for approval. The protocols require informative and unambiguous appointment reports from the selection committee in which the proceedings of the process and decisions made are set out for the benefit of the university board.

Gender Equality Practices in Protocols

All protocols combine the call for transparency and accountability with a call for gender equality. Specifically, some protocols stress that special attention should be devoted to the search for women applicants. Most protocols mention that at least one woman should be appointed to the selection committee. Four universities have developed a 'protocol for gender-neutral selection procedures', a checklist to urge appointment committees to clarify their selection criteria and justify their selection decisions in relation to gender. Each committee is required to fill in the checklist and deliver it to the university board.

When we analyse the protocols from the three perspectives on gender equality, we observe that gender equality is conceptualized principally from the 'equal opportunities' perspective. The emphasis is on equal access for and equal representation of women and men in senior academic functions. The approach is based on the premise that there are barriers that obstruct the advancement and success of women and that women candidates need help to overcome these barriers. The intentional gender equality practices in the protocols are based on the presence of more women committee members, however, which would suggest a different perspective which stresses the special contribution of women. The protocols for gender-neutral selection procedures developed by four universities could indicate a post-equity or transformation perspective which targets apparently neutral organizational practices in order to disrupt gender inequality practices. These protocols address not only the numbers of women candidates and members on the appointment committee, but also possible gender bias in the criteria and the method of recruiting candidates.

To summarize, universities have developed a range of formal practices to foster transparency, accountability and gender equality. Many of these are laid down in official protocols. How these intentional practices are put into practice in actual recruitment and selection practices is taken up in the next section.

Practising Transparency and Accountability

For all the expected benefits, practising gender equality by enhancing the transparency of the recruitment and selection process is hard to accomplish. In this section, we analyse the accounts of the respondents and appointment reports to investigate how norms on transparency, accountability and gender equality are actually realized.

The Establishment of the Chair

In the first phase, the establishment of the chair depends on the professorial chair plan. However, this plan is not always followed and professors can be appointed even when there is no official vacancy. The formalized professorial chair plan is, then, less important as a guideline for future vacancies than may be supposed, and also less transparent. It is not remarkable that the chair plan serves more as a guideline than a blueprint, and is subject to change. What is interesting, however, is under what conditions and circumstances the plan can be altered. The accounts of our respondents illustrate that adherence to the plan depends on the financial resources available, the status of the department and, thus, on the lobbying skills of the head of the department, the division chairs or managers of research institutes. They can lobby the dean or the university board directly if they wish to nominate an (internal) candidate outside their chair plan.

Respondents state that it is necessary to use strategic skills and the ‘right’ connections to establish or reorient a chair. This would indicate various types of micropolitical activity such as cooperation: ‘I suggested renaming the chair and combining the expertise of those two chairs, which was an easy solution’ (social sciences, man); competing interests: ‘There was only money for one chair in the department, and everyone wanted it so we had to argue that our group should have it’ (humanities, woman); conflicts: ‘The university board did not want to approve our proposal for a chair because it was a internal candidate’ (humanities, man); and speedy action: ‘We had to act very quickly and I consulted and convinced the dean personally’ (natural sciences, man). Below, two women professors illustrate how they used their political and negotiating skills when establishing a new chair.

I had to lobby quite a lot to bring this particular chair in. I talked about it with the dean at all sorts of social gatherings and receptions. Finally, the dean presented a proposal, I convinced him and he was very eager to create a chair because the research area of this chair has a large student population and he also had some internal candidates in mind who fitted the position very well. (humanities, woman)

At that time, there was a project under way in which this candidate was put forward by the Board to initiate a joint project with another medical hospital. That was when I said to the chairman of the university: ‘It is going very well, now we have to make sure that he stays with us. And I would like to talk with you about that, because he is really unique and we have to keep him.’ So, I brought it up at the right moment ... that deal was struck by using subtle persuasion. (medical sciences, woman)

Both these heads of departments lobbied with their superiors using subtle persuasion or during informal gatherings, which illustrates that deals tend to be made behind the scenes. Most respondents are, as the quotes illustrate, proud of their political negotiation skills, which they seem to view as a skill that a professor

needs to have. They argue that a full professor needs political and strategic skills to uphold the interests of the research group in a competitive, academic environment. A professor needs to keep an eye on developments in the department and to deploy his/her diplomatic and persuasive skills to gain personnel and resources.

The vagueness of the appointment protocols and the acceptance of deviations from the professorial chair plans both allow micropolitical practices to come into play. This tends to reduce transparency at the start of the appointment process, as the role of a few academics in inviting candidates or negotiating 'slips under the radar'. Information about this first step is not included in the appointment reports – in other words, no one is held accountable for this stage.

Gender in the Establishment of the Chair

For this first phase of the appointment process, the protocols contain hardly any guidelines to avoid unwanted gender effects. Only one protocol mentions explicitly that when a decision is made concerning a vacancy it 'has to be decided whether a vacancy initially should be "reserved" for women' (university protocol). According to those interviewed from this university, however, this element in the protocol is almost never considered by committee members. Gender equality goals are not addressed by the remaining protocols, although some universities have established special chairs for women. These chairs were established through personal initiatives or lobbying by external funding organizations, not due to the efforts of committee members in the early stage of a vacancy. Resistance to the suggestion of reserving or creating chairs for women is prompted mainly by the notion of meritocracy: one should be appointed on the basis of merit and not gender. Interventions on the basis of positive action, such as special positions for women, are seen as an outdated emancipatory method. In short, the idea of reserving vacancies for women has remained a formal suggestion that has not been taken up in practice and only half-heartedly followed up by one university.

Although policies to promote gender equality are either absent from this phase or have been implemented only reluctantly, other gender practices have been integrated in the establishment of the chair that can lead to either gender equality or gender inequality. In their use of political and strategic skills, we detect no differences between men and women respondents; they both shared an acute awareness of political power processes and the need to lobby for more positions when the opportunity arises. Yet it cannot be forgotten that lobbying can only be achieved successfully from a position of power within the academic system. The academics in positions of power are predominantly men, especially in the Netherlands where 93 percent of the deans and 89 per cent of all professors are men (WOPI 2008). Women are, therefore, in a disadvantaged position when it comes to circumventing codes of practice, mobilizing resources and becoming involved early on in the decision-making process. Gender is practiced through the unequal gender distribution of the positions of power needed to negotiate chairs for one's department successfully. What is more, even when the protocols make no mention of gender, it can still be actively practised, either by deliberately setting out to attract women candidates or, at the other extreme, by excluding women candidates by retaining men candidates.

The Functioning of the Appointment Committee

The selection protocols set out guidelines for the composition of the appointment committee to ensure the creation of a well-balanced committee. These guidelines cover the number of members and their function, position and gender. In practice, our data indicate that in 9 per cent of the procedures no committee was involved at all because rapid action was needed. Although the reasons for these rapid appointments are explained in the appointment reports, the lack of transparency created by the absence of an appointment committee to verify the quality of the candidate is remarkable, particularly because the appointment protocols attach considerable importance to the role of the committee in the protocols.

Additionally, some committee members argue that the appointment committee is sometimes 'purely decorative':

It was an internal candidate who had already been spotted, and had written a profile himself which was sent to the committee. In that profile, a lot of political and strategic choices had already been made. And then the résumé was included. In this specific case I was not impressed at all, but the decision had already been taken. It was clear that this was going to happen. My opinion was not going to change that. (medical sciences, woman)

In such cases, the only task of the committee is to formalize and legitimize the decision already made. Such 'decorative' appointment procedures occur mainly when the decision to appoint a certain candidate has already been made. Although other interviewers may realize this, they do not seem troubled. Loyalty to the chairperson or the key academics who have arranged the deal is reason enough to accept the favored candidate. This would suggest that micropolitical processes are at play in the composition of the committee. The chairperson could strategically choose certain members whom he or she knows will favour a particular candidate. Some committee members appeared to reflect on these strategic coalitions in their remarks about 'not upsetting the boss', 'returning a favour', 'loyalty' and 'putting the right people in position'. Some of the respondents that had chaired appointment committees used words such as 'guide', 'influence', 'control', or even 'manipulate', to show that they have room for manoeuvre in the decision-making process. One chairperson in natural sciences confided:

When I see an excellent candidate before me, as the chair I can manipulate the process so that in the end, that candidate is nominated. That is how it works. It is a question of pitting people against each other, controlling the meeting, and choosing the right moment to make very positive noises about that specific candidate. That much is true. But, again, this is only the case when the criteria have not been clearly formulated at the beginning of the process. (natural sciences, man)

This respondent is convinced that he is able to help his favoured candidate in the appointment procedure by playing strategic games and persuading other committee members. It seems, then, that the chair of the committee has a real opportunity to influence the outcome of the process, especially when he or she has a direct link with the dean or the university board.

Gender in the Functioning of the Appointment Committee

In order to promote gender equality, formal rules about the number of women on the committee are usually included in the protocols. Our data show, however,

Table 1.
Number of Women
Committee Members
per Committee and
Gender of Appointee

| Women members | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3> | |
|-----------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|------------|
| men appointed | 305 (93%) | 235 (86%) | 102 (78%) | 18 (78%) | 660 (100%) |
| women appointed | 24 (7%) | 37 (14%) | 29 (22%) | 5 (22%) | 95 (100%) |
| Total | 329 (44%) | 272 (36%) | 131 (17%) | 23 (3%) | 755 (100%) |

Source: 755 appointment reports (The N of this analysis does not match the total number of reports analyzed (N = 971) as the 'missing cases' for the variable 'number of women in appointment committee' are taken out of the analysis)

that this is not systematically followed up in practice. Table 1 shows that 44 per cent of professorial appointment committees in the period 1999–2003 had exclusively men members. This means that the requirement for the inclusion of at least one woman, as laid down in the majority of the protocols, is ignored almost half of the time. The majority of the appointment reports do not clearly explain why no woman was included. Other reports simply state: 'no woman available'.

Table 1 further shows that there is a noteworthy relationship between the number of women on a committee and the sex of the candidate appointed. The chance of women applicants being appointed increases significantly when more women sit on the appointment committee. Mixed gender committees with at least two women members generally appoint more women professors. The formal rule of having at least one woman committee member in the appointment committee would appear to make sense, therefore. It is not clear, though, whether the prospects for women candidates are directly affected by the presence of women on appointment committees. The availability of women candidates can be an intermediate variable for this significant relationship.

Another significant factor is the relative power position of the committee members. The woman committee member is a student or PhD candidate in one out of five cases. Making the – usually female – HRM advisor responsible for safeguarding gender equality policies is also problematic, given that these advisors lack authority. Only 5 per cent of women committee members were present in the capacity of chair. As shown above, the interviewees attribute substantial influence to the committee chairs when it comes to determining the final outcome of the appointment procedure.

In addition to the intended equality consequences of the formal policy of including more women on the committee, gender is also practiced in the way committee members conceive of the effects of these measures. We detected three ways of viewing gender in the committee: 1) arguing that women make a positive difference, 2) denying gender relevance and 3) arguing that women committee members are more critical as assessors.

The majority of the respondents argued that the participation of women committee members changes the atmosphere of the committee. Here, the 'difference' school of thought on gender equality seems to be at play in the argument that women bring a different perspective to committees. Committees would be 'less competitive' (medical sciences, woman), 'a more friendly environment' (natural sciences, man), 'aimed at consensus' (humanities, man). Women would pay more attention to social and personal criteria 'not only to the number of publications and the scores in the citation index' (medical sciences, woman) and 'take the candidate's life history into account' (social sciences, man). Several respondents,

both men and women, indicated that committees which include women are not only more pleasant for women candidates but for most men candidates, too. This argument seems to fit the statistical analysis that women have a better chance of being appointed by a more gender-balanced committee.

A small number of committee members contended, in contrast, that a gender-balanced appointment committee is of no relevance at all to the search for quality. In their opinion, the gender of the assessors makes no difference at all, because a woman candidate with the necessary qualities will be identified by women and men committee members alike. These respondents base their argument on the objectivity of the selection criteria and the principle of meritocracy. These academic respondents reject the notion of any difference in the positions of men and women committee members and seem oblivious to the evidence of how gender stereotypes affect the evaluation of assessors, as demonstrated by various scholars (Cole et al. 2004; Valian 1998; Van Vianen and Willemsen 1992).

Some respondents also argue that the inclusion of women committee members by no means guarantees a change in the prevailing atmosphere or attitudes on the committee. Women committee members are not necessarily expected to speak in favour of women. A few respondents gave examples of women committee members being critical or even hostile towards female candidates. This finding is in line with the findings of other research that women do not necessarily make more gender-neutral assessment decisions, and that women are not automatically more favourably disposed to giving other women more opportunities (e.g. Cole et al. 2004; Foschi 2000; Graves and Powell 1995). Despite the fact that the presence of a woman committee member is no guarantee of a 'women-friendly' committee, an analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data points out that the presence of women in the committee significantly increases the chances of women applicants and improves the atmosphere. The inclusion of a diverse group of academics in terms of function, position and gender will enhance the transparency of the appointment committee, making it less of an inner circle of white men making selection decisions.

Recruitment

Selection protocols stress the importance of open recruitment in a transparent and fair process. Deviation from the open recruitment system is only permissible in 'exceptional cases'. What constitutes an exceptional case, however, is not clarified in the protocols and it seems that 'exceptional cases' are in fact very common in professorial recruitment. The appointment reports revealed that 64 per cent of all appointed professors in the period 1999–2003 were recruited through a closed appointment procedure. This practice is not confined to the Dutch system. Winchester et al. (2006) point to a similar process in the Australian context in which shadowy irregularities and exceptions occur in the yearly promotion process. The high number of closed procedures appears to indicate that universities do not follow formal policies and protocols strictly, in spite of the importance of these for transparency and accountability. In the Netherlands, the use of closed recruitment procedures is not considered the norm, but rather as an exception; however, when policy-makers

and committee members were notified about these numbers, they were surprised that these 'exceptions' amounted to 64 per cent of all recruitment procedures.

In principle, all recruitment is open, but in fact we often make one-to-one arrangements. (social sciences, man)

When you have spotted a talented scientist in your field, you are not going to tell him that he has to wait in line to apply here together with other, less qualified, candidates. He has to be sure that we favor his appointment. (natural sciences, man)

These quotes illustrate that committee and university board members often find it necessary to make exceptions to the system of open recruitment, mainly because they have a favoured candidate. A small number of committee members confided that there was ample opportunity to deviate from recruitment protocols. The reason for the widespread use of a closed recruitment system, as described by the respondents, is the battle for excellent academics in a competitive international labour market.

Despite the fact that recruitment by invitation is common practice, university boards continue to favour open recruitment. In some appointment procedures, an advertisement is placed due to pressure from the dean, the Board or the HRM advisor. The respondents, as well as the appointment reports, reveal that the consequence of this pressure to make the vacancy public can create a veneer of 'transparency'. Vacancies are advertised in media, but in reality the preferred candidate is already known and any other academics who might apply for the position is part of a 'purely cosmetic' appointment procedure. At the levels of the department or faculty, agents use their strategic skills to alter or bend the rules to their own advantage. Thus there appears to be a conflict of interest between the university board or those who make policy on the one hand, and the committee members who have to implement these policies on the other. The way in which the latter can conceal their actions from the university board is clear from the following quote:

Sometimes we place an advertisement even though we already have a candidate in mind. But you never know if everything will work out the way you planned it. It is important not to create the impression that you have planned everything beforehand. For the university board, it is important to project the image that we are recruiting in an open way and have done nothing underhand. Everything is visible and transparent for everyone. (medical sciences, woman)

Gender in Recruitment

Two university selection protocols explicitly require committee members to consider women internal candidates that may be eligible for the position before proceeding to open recruitment. It is not clear, however, whether these 'eligible' candidates must subsequently compete with other candidates recruited through an open procedure. Some protocols clearly mention the search for women applicants via the networks of the committee members, even before the vacancy is officially advertised.

Closed recruitment significantly reduces the transparency and accountability of recruitment procedures and can lead to all kinds of gender effects. One question is whether the use of a closed procedure has an impact on the appointment of

women. At 60 per cent, the number of women appointed through closed procedures almost equals the percentage of men appointed (64%) (see also Van den Brink et al. 2006). These figures might suggest that open recruitment is not necessary for gender equality. However, many closed procedures for women concern the creation of special women's chairs that are often temporary and whose status is disputed. These chairs may therefore inflate the numbers of women appointed, but do not genuinely counterbalance the disadvantages women encounter in professorial appointments. A gender effect is also indicated by the repeated reference to 'he' when mentioning talented new candidates who need to be 'snapped up' quickly through a closed procedure. There is a pervasive tendency to see the professor as masculine. Committee members tend to select applicants from their own networks, who share their characteristics (e.g. Özbilgin and Healy 2004, Bozionelos 2005; Martin 1994). Coupled with the importance of mainly men-dominated networks in these closed procedures, this gives men a head start.

Selection

Protocols generally provide a list of broad selection criteria: the quality of the candidate's research, his or her experience in research, teaching, management and administration, sometimes his or her practical experience and contribution to the wider societal debate.

Appointment reports show that shortlisted candidates usually meet the standard criteria. However, committee members also contend that it is often very hard to make appointment decisions between candidates who are of an ostensibly similar standard. There can be subtle but significant differences: one may be an established senior academic who is often abroad; another may be a promising young talent with less experience in management; the choice may be between a generalist and a specialist. The official criteria do not provide detailed guidelines on which to base the decision. In this phase, the criteria become more tacit and are often described in very abstract terms. For instance, committee members talked of a candidate that 'had a strong vision', 'knew where the field was going', 'was creative', 'innovative', had 'a certain level of ambition', 'an excellent academic reputation', or 'was an internationally renowned scientist'. The findings revealed that committee members based their decisions on multiple criteria – and interpretations of criteria – and that those decisions were characterized by confusion, contradictions, and even conflict. Doherty and Manfredi (2006) note that tacit interpretation of criteria is commonplace in UK professorial appointment as well.

The lack of transparency in the criteria means that the selection phase is the perfect breeding ground for micropolitics. It appears that stage is the most prone to manipulation in order to filter out or favor certain candidates. Because the criteria are flexible and dependent on context, it is possible to put a particular slant on them during this phase. This can happen simply because committee members change their opinion or obtain new information, but also as a result of power games.

R: Of course, I have seen committee members manipulating the outcome of the interview ... hmm ... this is hard because of the anonymity ... One of the committee members had been put forward by his team to achieve a certain outcome. They [this specific team] absolutely didn't want candidate A.

I: *Why not?*

R: I'm not sure, but I suspect the head of department had worked with this person, and they weren't actually friends, you know. But putting the head of department in the committee would have been too obvious, would have aroused suspicion. It seemed like it was set up.
(humanities, man)

In this specific case, a member was added to the committee by the head of department to prevent the selection of candidate A. The committee member in question was told to filter out that candidate, whose entry to the organization was perceived as a threat to the power network of the head of department. We subsequently asked this respondent how this committee member had manipulated the rest of the committee.

For me, it was quite obvious; he [the committee member] argued that he [the candidate] was not an inspiring teacher. But he had plenty of publications. And teaching was not that important. It was just a premise on which to criticize him. (humanities, man)

By playing down the abilities of an undesired candidate or making an inflated evaluation of the performance of a desired candidate, committee members can manipulate, or at least influence, the outcome. During this phase, it is hard to compare candidates objectively, and there are no standard criteria available to evaluate them.

Gender in Selection

Standard protocols contain no measures that might mitigate gender effects in the selection phase. Only the universities with the protocols for gender-neutral recruitment and selection pay any attention to the way the criteria are applied to men and women applicants. But even at these universities, these issues are often neglected, which gives free reign to micropolitics in this stage of selection. When criteria are not clearly formulated and agreed upon before the selection phase starts, there is more room for negotiation about what constitutes quality. It therefore becomes more likely that criteria will be applied differently to men and women candidates because gender stereotypes are imbued in perceptions of quality (Greenwald et al. 2002).

In the appointment reports and committee interviews, it is often mentioned that women lose out because they are perceived as having fewer skills or are not labelled 'excellent'. The appointment reports reveal some examples of how women's qualities are called into question. A woman on a shortlist was rejected because 'the committee evaluates her thesis as adequate, but by no means excellent'. Subsequently, a male candidate was hired who had not obtained his PhD at all, which would appear to be a clear example of double standards.

Many women professors noted in their interview that they feel that they have to prove that they have been selected for their qualities, rather than because of their gender. Women candidates are only selected when they are 'excellent' beyond all doubt. The following quote illustrates this.

Women who want to become professor, in particular, still have to outperform men. ... It all has to do with images and sense making. The essence is that women, no matter what, face more difficult situations than men and have to prove themselves beyond doubt. And we never really succeed. (humanities, woman)

This respondent emphasizes the double standards that apply when the performances of men and women are evaluated. There is a large body of research showing that women have to outperform men to prove themselves equally capable and suitable. Brouns (2000) has shown that in competition for a prestigious grant for talented young researchers in the Netherlands, more men applicants obtained the label 'excellent' whereas the majority of women applicants were labelled as 'good'. This gendered double standard was not supported by evidence in the applicants' personal files because men and women were rated similarly in terms of their academic qualifications, as derived from the number and quality of their publications. There is a growing recognition that 'excellence', as it has been defined and measured in academia, is tied up with aspects of gender and seems to privilege men (Asiemberg and Harrington 1988; Bailyn 2003; Valian 1998; Deem 2007, 2009).

Recommendations and Reporting

The last section of the university selection protocols concerns the appointment report which is submitted to the university board. Most protocols provide a list of items which the report must include: the basic profile; letters from sister faculties recommending candidates; the deliberations of the appointment committee; a résumé of the nominated candidate(s); the recommendations of sister faculties concerning the nominated candidate(s); a letter from the dean; and, if necessary, letters from referees.

Our study of 971 appointment reports revealed that they varied enormously in scope and style. Some gave detailed consideration to all applicants for the position and the criteria by which they were assessed, while others gave only the name of the person who 'was obviously the most suitable candidate'. In the majority of the reports, one or more of the items listed above was missing. Upon closer inspection, it became clear that most reports were written as a matter of routine. The qualities listed in the original announcement of the vacancy or the basic profile are often simply repeated in the written accounts with no further elaboration or justification as to why the nominated candidate had been the most suitable. When a professor is recruited on the grounds of competence, the abilities of the nominee are typically presented as self-evident. Equally typical, however, was that the definition of merit or competence remained unspecified. In some universities, the protocols stress that it is important to clarify why women candidates were not nominated, but often these arguments were absent, or limited to cursory statements such as: 'There were no women academics for this position available'. Some respondents did stress the importance of accountability in the process.

Imagine a situation like this: there are two candidates – a good one and a bad one. But you want to appoint the bad one, for whatever reason. Then it is not that complicated to

write the advisory letter in such a way that the bad candidate was the best you saw. ... In those reports, you usually only see the story of one candidate. That is strange. ... When I ask those people what they based their decision on – questions like ‘why was this candidate nominated and the other one not?’ – then a lot of people say: ‘well, I don’t know, but when I read the résumé it didn’t look convincing’. When hard criteria play no role, or are not elaborated, then I am afraid that many candidates are eliminated unfairly. And not only women. (natural sciences, man)

This interviewee stresses the importance of being accountable for the choices made during the selection process. He argues that if committee members are held accountable, the likelihood of unjustified decisions, or decisions based only on ‘gut feeling’, is reduced. In this respect, the fact that sister faculties, scientific committees and finally the university board are asked to approve the nominated candidate increases the likelihood that the selection of candidates is conducted properly.

Gender in the Recommendations and Reporting

Four universities have experimented with protocol guidelines or checklists for gender-neutral recruitment and selection. None of them have yet been properly evaluated, hence it is not clear whether they have actually been implemented. Additionally, the majority of the committee members interviewed were not keen on the introduction of such protocols or checklists specifically for gender-neutral selection. Protocols and checklists regarding gender-neutral selection criteria or special action for women academics would only add new rules to the current protocol. Committee members were of the view that greater transparency would involve an increase in bureaucracy and even a violation of their autonomy.

This is not the way it works. And it all ends up in a new kind of bureaucracy in which we have to add some rules or comments about why we did this and why we didn’t do that. Really, the system is self-regulating and it all works fine. Others should not endlessly interfere. (social sciences, man)

Insofar as protocols and policy measures remain guidelines that are not actually put into practice, we can speak of a ‘paper tigris’. Since there is no sanction for failing to return the checklist, most committees see this as excessively time-consuming and mere bureaucracy. Such procedures often require measures to induce disclosure, either by coercion or by incentive, but there seems to be an absence of both coercion and incentive when it comes to gender. While there is an overall aversion to detailed accountability, this aversion is voiced even more strongly when it comes to gender equality practices.

The Politics of Protocols

This paper has revealed a range of problems in enhancing the transparency and accountability of various stages of the appointment process. While there are very good arguments in favour of transparency in recruitment and selection, we have shown that the universities’ attempts to implement transparency have had limited effects, and the issue therefore remains politically charged.

Firstly, Dutch universities have opted for protocols in order to enhance transparency rather than making information relating to appointments available to the

general public as provided for under Swedish and Finnish law. The issue of privacy has thus been a stumbling block to achieving full transparency. Only a narrow selection of elite academics have access to information on appointment decisions, making any transparency bounded, at best.

A second political choice pertains to how gender equality has been translated in those protocols. We have noted how explicit references to gender are rare and how gender equality only concerns women. The protocols are based mainly on the 'equal opportunity perspective' on gender equality, focusing on the numbers of internal and external women candidates in the recruitment phase. The 'difference perspective' is drawn upon at the selection committee stage, by referring to the special contribution of women committee members. Although both perspectives contribute to greater gender equality, this method of 'adding women' without addressing the genderedness of organizational practices (Verloo and Lombardo 2007) fails to challenge masculine norms. Four protocols are more in line with the third perspective on gender equality, the 'transformation' perspective, and call attention to potential gender biases and masculine norms in recruitment and selection. These last protocols would have the potential to enhance gender equality, if it were not for the implementation problems.

This brings us to the third political factor that is hindering transparency, accountability and gender equality. University selection protocols remain toothless – 'paper tigresses' that are fraught with implementation problems. Such implementation problems are inherent to gender equality policies (Benschop and Verloo 2006). In all phases of the appointment process, micropolitical dynamics and gender practices were observed, which run contrary to the spirit of the protocols. The interviews contain many examples of political games and loose interpretations of the rules and regulations. For instance, the protocols only allow closed recruitment processes in exceptional cases; however, fully 64 per cent of procedures involve closed recruitment. Closed recruitment significantly reduces transparency and accountability and has a number of consequences for gender. Another example is the rule that at least one woman must participate in the selection committee, while our analysis of the appointment reports shows that almost half the committees (44%) consisted of only men, and that few powerful women are included in these strategic coalitions for recruitment and selection.

Two main justifications are used for these political choices. Firstly, these methods of increasing transparency and gender equality are not, in the opinion of the interviewees, compatible with the aim of selecting and recruiting on the basis of merit. Meritocracy is a strong ideology and gender equality practices such as 'searching for women' and 'reporting the number of women in the procedure' seem to provoke particular resistance and are thus often neglected. Interviewees argue that quality is all that matters, and that 'quality will always out'. Gender is thus irrelevant. The many gender practices that lead to gender inequalities (such as double standards, stereotypes of men and women academics and men support networks) remain veiled by the ideology of meritocracy.

The second reason is a widespread aversion to bureaucracy. Committee members are critical or even cynical about the protocols and reject them as time-consumingly bureaucratic and of no relevance to academic appointments. They feel that these procedures curtail their professional expertise and 'accountability'

restricts their freedom to select the best candidates on an academic basis. Nevertheless, the bureaucratic rules on transparency and accountability are sometimes stretched to serve particular interests. In the most extreme case, practices designed to increase transparency were even counter-productive, leading committee members to use micropolitical techniques and strategies to create the appearance of transparency or gender equality while manipulating the system behind the scenes to ensure the outcome that they desire. An example of this can be found in situations where open recruitment is propagated, so that several candidates can be compared, but with a profile designed to match one particular candidate. That candidate then naturally emerges as the best. Transparency policies deployed to counter gender discrimination are counterproductive if they are used to cloak gender discrimination in 'objectivity'.

Conclusion

Our findings clearly indicate that the role played by transparency and accountability in gender equality could be considerably improved. Policies on transparency in general and on gender equality in particular have barely been implemented. Yet even if these policies were implemented properly, we would argue that they can never be the only remedy for gender inequality. This is not to say that transparency should not be pursued, but this study has made it painfully clear that some elements in the process of recruitment and selection are almost impossible to formalize or make transparent. Since the academic field is a political arena, micropolitics inevitably detract from attempts to 'expose' gender practices. All the actors involved in the recruitment process have their own agendas that may interfere with the goal of increasing the openness and formalization of procedures. The blurring of priorities and interests means that gender practices can continue to have their effect.

Paradoxically, the existence of protocols and guidelines has actually legitimized current recruitment and selection practices by lending gender practices a spurious 'objectivity'. Due to the fact that these policies are now set down on paper, the hegemonic discourse among committee members on meritocratic appointment processes is further strengthened. The norms of transparency, accountability and gender equality veil the practices of inequality; the norm is conceived as the practice, while the fact that these policies are routinely ignored is hushed up.

This has profound implications for gender equality theories that have hitherto embraced transparency and accountability as ways of mitigating biases in recruitment and selection. We conclude that it is often difficult to enhance gender equality because of the existence of multi-faceted gender inequality practices alongside gender equality practices that lack 'teeth', especially in a traditional masculine academic environment with ponderous traditions and 'thick' values. Gender equality practices, such as the establishment of chairs for women or other programmes to promote the upward mobility of women academics, are being hijacked by gender practices that call the quality of women appointees into question – their quality becomes suspect because it has not been measured against men competitors (Morley 2005). We conclude that gender inequality

practices continue to dominate and that they detract from, distort, or even hijack attempts to introduce gender equality practices. Transparency and accountability, deployed with the aim of enhancing gender equality, are thus of limited usefulness in countering gender inequality practices.

Nevertheless, transparency and accountability could be developed further to maximize their contribution to gender equality. We would recommend three ways to improve future university policies in the Netherlands, as well as in similar contexts worldwide. Firstly, the tools of transparency and accountability can be deployed to their full potential. Currently, transparency is limited to recruitment protocols, but transparency could also imply making the process and decisions more visible for the larger academic society, as is already the case in Sweden and Finland. This requires a profound system change, and concerted action of university boards, committees and candidates are needed to break with prevailing norms about privacy and secrecy and introduce new ones about openness and responsibility.

A second, less revolutionary way would be to put more effort into the implementation of recruitment protocols, because we contend that it is not transparency itself that fails, but rather that micropolitics obstruct its implementation. Because promoting transparency generally involves requiring institutions and individuals to release information which they are accustomed to withholding, transparency can rarely be achieved without pressure from university boards. These most influential academics need to monitor compliance to the regulations and put in place the incentives and sanctions that can ensure full implementation. Experiments with financial incentives to reward departments who alter their methods of recruitment to increase the number of women candidates, include women committee members, and address gender inequalities in the criteria are a promising incentive in this respect. As for meaningful sanctions, a refusal of the board to appoint the candidate when the protocol is breached is a drastic but effective measure that will radiate beyond its immediate casus.

A final policy recommendation concerns the use of all three perspectives on gender equality. The 'equal opportunities perspective' addresses the sex ratio in the pool of candidates, the 'difference perspective' would indicate the positive effect of a gender-balanced committee, and the 'transformation perspective' draws attention to the role of masculine norms in defining 'quality'. All three perspectives on gender equality should be reflected in training programmes to make committee members aware of double standards and routine gender inequalities in the appointment process. Alliances between university boards, networks of women academics, HR-staff and departments of gender studies could play a role in pushing for these trainings that should be given by professional trainers with a track record in issues of gender in academia. This could help counter resistance to gender equality policies. The active involvement of gender experts could help disseminate knowledge about effective gender equality practices. In the short term, these gender experts should participate in selection committees so that micropolitics can contribute to, rather than work against, gender equality. When those gender experts actively seek collaboration with committee members who have inside knowledge about the field at hand, they can have a powerful say in the deliberations and the outcomes of appointment procedures.

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