Postprint

Gendered recognition practices and the perpetuation of vulnerability:

A study in Swedish universities

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1. Introduction

In current critical research on work life in the higher education sector, analyses often revolve around neoliberal managerialism as contrasted to traditional professional academic values (cf. Henkel, 1997; Deem, 2004; Ekman et al, 2017). Academics are both faced with expectations to uphold the integrity of academic values in their research and teaching, whilst at the same time performing and 'careering' in accordance with managerialist reforms (Clarke & Knights, 2015).

Knights & Clarke (2014) analyse insecurity as a central aspect of identity in academics, conceptualizing academic life as a 'bittersweet symphony' populated by imposters (self-doubt and low self-esteem despite adequate performance), aspirants (under-recognised in relation to their inner sense of excellence) and existentialists (questioning the meaning of work and maintaining a sense of anxiety over their contributions to wider society). Another example is provided by Bristow et al (2017) who identify how early career-academics within CMS play on three narratives – diplomatic, combative and idealistic – by which they both resist and reproduce the ethos of business school neoliberalism in which they are embedded. Academics' identity construction thus in different ways tend to position them as vulnerable selves (Cicmil et al, 2016), that is, as existentially exposed to the risks associated with projectified careers, macho-style management and a high degree of self-responsibility (Loveday, 2018).

In addition, a number of earlier studies has also pointed out the highly gendered nature of how academic work is organized, how recruitment and promotion processes unfold etc. (cf. (cf. Husu, 2001; Mählck, 2003; van den Brink & Benschop, 2012).

In this study we will focus on recognition practices (how recognition repeatedly tend to happen or not happen in local/cultural contexts, and thus also become the expectation on

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what may happen in future interactions) and their consequences for identity construction and sense of vulnerability thus seem central to advance the above insights. Recognition practices thus involve not only what and whom is recognized or not for something, but also in what settings certain practices are legitimate or not, and how they are publicly displayed in social interaction.

We suggest that
- recognition practices are an important yet under-researched aspect of academic identity construction processes
- recognition practices are gendered, i.e. we perform gender in our ways of
  - conferring and receiving recognition,
  - constructing what recognition may mean in different local/cultural contexts,
  - constructing when it is to be conferred/received or not,
  - constructing how it is appropriately played out how in social interaction.
- recognition practices tend to sustain vulnerability among academics, but in different ways for men and women.

2. Empirical data

The paper draws on empirical data from interviews, participant observation and interventions carried out during the past five years at the business schools of three Swedish universities of which one is an ancient general university, one is a large new general, and one is a small new general university, as well as a large old technical university and a small college university. The data has been collected as part of an on-going research programme on academic leadership and from interventions/developmental work. Most of the respondents are assistant or associate professors, established academics but still in career and subject to a range of evaluation forms and performance metrics.

3. Recognition practices

We have identified four recognition practices evolving around, e.g., explicit/formal rewards and evaluations and promotions/employments, but also how academics include/exclude, refer to/not refer to, in work interactions such as private conversations, seminars, official gatherings, speeches, performance reviews.

3.1 Recognition as caveated

Individualisation – this is not about us, it is about you and individual others, e.g. pointing out a local 'star scientist' as the only one performing at an acceptable level. This is also something that is manifested in the process of gaining lecture and professor positions. In that sense, recognition often involves shaming.

Selective metrics-orientation – metrics are everywhere, but measurable performances are drawn upon in some situations, for some persons. They are used to strengthen already

existing arguments for or against specific individuals, but are rarely invoked to the same extent for everyone.

Compartmentalisation is also a feature of recognition, it is usually constructed in relation to specific achievements and contexts. Recognition is rarely formulated in terms of innate excellence but rather as "you did this fine but we can't assume you will do it (as well) again"

3.2 Local/cultural constructions of recognition

Localisation – we are 'special' here so general standards cannot be counted on
Careerism – constructed as responsible or irresponsible (different local cultures)
Careerism and *self-promotion* – accepted attitude amongst belongers but as unwanted egoism from the 'others'

3.3 Conferring and receiving recognition

Construction of some as 'heroes', star scientists', 'potentials' whilst others are constructed as 'losers', 'mediocre', 'lucky'.
The humble self-promoter – receiving recognition in an acceptable way
Recognition-giving as virtue – you should be thanked for thanking someone!

3.4 Recognition on display

Recognition practices are aimed at an audience and often performed in front of an audience
Public shaming – i.e. constructing entire research groups as deviants and underachievers in sweeping terms despite good results, which is the practice of rewarding not by praising the achievers but rather refraining from criticising them
Public praising – usually for individuals having performed specific things such as a research grant or acceptance in high-ranked journal
Publicly giving discharge – the practice of approving the performance of resigning managers and other responsible persons
Recognition is *temporary*, soon old news – rarely brought up again and cannot be counted on

4. Recognition practices and the perpetuation of vulnerability

As noted by Butler (2004), the Western ethos of the rational and autonomous citizen exposes us to fundamental vulnerability as it "fails to do justice to passion and grief and rage, all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, and implicate us in lives that are not our own, sometimes fatally, irreversibly." (p. 20). The concept of vulnerability is thus seen by several scholars as central not only to an understanding of individual exposure to social structures and processes but also of the inter-connectedness between the individual body and these structures and processes (cf. Butler, 2004; Cicmil et al, 2016). By focusing on the notion of vulnerability it is also possible to critically question the notion of 'resilience', suggesting it is mainly concerned with coping with vulnerability rather than assuming that vulnerability can be effectively handled and avoided (Cicmil et al, 2016; Fineman, 2011). Resilience, that is '*the ability to recover from, or*

resist being affected by, setback, illness etc' (Kirby, 2011, p. 103**)** comes from resources in the form of advantages or coping mechanisms that compensates for vulnerability. However, as argued by Evans and Reid (2013), resilience is a neo-liberal construct which promotes a lasting crisis where the purpose of the human subject is reduced to survivability and '*adaptability so that life may go on living despite the fact that elements of it may be destroyed.*' (Evans and Reid, 2013, p. 84).

The recognition practices identified are part of a process that contributes to the perpetuation of vulnerability for academics. This process is visualized in a cycle that goes on and on (figure 1).
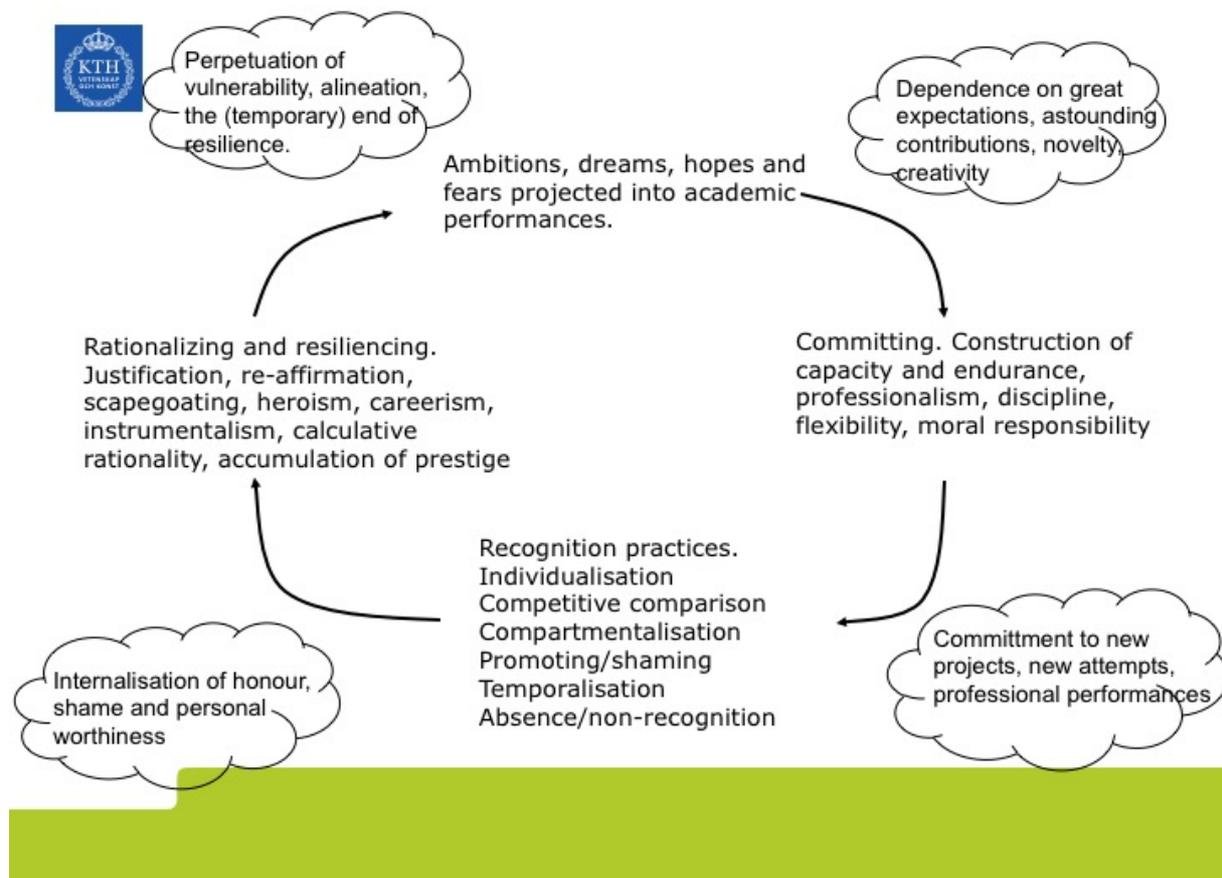

Figure 1 The perpetuation of vulnerability (developed from Cicmil et al, 2016)

Recognition is in our cases based in construction of desire; academics project their ambitions on specific future achievements that is expected to yield certain forms of recognition. With ambitions, dreams and hopes – as well as fear of losing out - academics become committed to different projects, lecturing and other tasks. Often these hopes and fears are linked to a level of performance that does not only result in replications and mundanities, but in novelties and break throughs.

These ambitions and fears are channelled through a deep commitment to the tasks ahead, and a construction of self as a high-capacity worker, that proves professionalism through self-discipline, flexibility and assuming individual responsibility for organisational matters.

Vulnerability then becomes evident in how recognition is practiced, in terms of individualisation (individuals are recognised, not groups or organisations), compartmentalisation (things deemed positive here and now cannot automatically be counted on elsewhere, and no one performs well in all respects), promoting/shaming (recognition can often imply not being shamed rather than actually being praised), temporalisation (recognition is passing and is soon forgotten), and absence (recognition may well be practiced through silence and neglect). Through these practices, academics tend to internalise honour as well as shame and form a view of the worthiness of oneself.

This honour, shame and valuation of oneself is articulated and analysed by individual academics as a process of explaining and coping. One's choices and actions are subject to post-hoc rationalisations, sometimes in order to accept disappointing outcomes but sometimes also in a sense of stubborn resistance that is transformed into renewed hopes and ambitions – in order to preserve personal worthiness and achieve the recognition one deserves it is imperative to try even harder and raise the bar. It often involves instrumentalism (rational calculations of what is the smart things to spend one's limited hours on) and careerism (approaching work tasks as steps taken in order to achieve higher status and formal positions). But it might as well gradually alienate academics from Academia, consume the resilience available and posit the academic as a neoliberal subject – enterprising self - in a constant state of crisis, exception and risk (Cicmil et al, 2016, Berglund et al 2017).

The consequences of these recognition practices are often that a basic sense of identity strain and ontological insecurity is perpetuated – you can neither be, nor cease to be, yourself in order to lead an academic life. The feminine – already from the outset 'the other' – is further othered as recognition practices exclude, redefine, diminish, compartmentalise and put shame on the sense of professional attachment and personal worth.

5. Gendering recognition in a state of vulnerability: Homosociality

In this study we have focussed on recognition practices (how recognition repeatedly tend to happen or not happen in local/cultural contexts, and thus also become the expectation on what may happen in future interactions) and their consequences for identity construction and sense of vulnerability, specifically on how gender structures are involved and invoked in these practices.

Homosociality runs through our empirical data as a common characteristic of academic cultures (cf. also Roper, 1996; van den Brink, 2010). A result of homosociality is that men's flaws and mistakes are individualized and compartmentalized in assessments and evaluations (Holgersson, 2013; van den Brink et al, 2016). In our studies we find several examples of how such 'negative' recognition are practiced in a sense that glosses over performances below par more easily for male academics.

Moreover, homosocial cultures reproduce a sense of entitlement, that all men deserve some sort of recognition, and a sense of reciprocity, men owe each other recognition. All men tend to be recognized for at least something, and also exchange recognitions, whilst female academics tend to be excluded or need to build their own arenas (e.g. female networks) to experience similar things.

Homosocial recognition is often practiced in front of an audience; in meetings, seminars, conferences, in social media exchanges. The existence of an audience as broad as possible is sometimes a necessary condition for recognition being bestowed upon someone, and for the recognisee to be available. In such occasions self-promotion is accepted, even encouraged (such as in the long congratulatory Facebook threads following announcements of papers being accepted in scientific journals) and also displays of mutual respect, private friendship and affection. Gratitude and gloss-overs are exchanged, sometimes to alleviate tensions between competing colleagues or guilt for not having been homosocial enough for a while.

Homosociality is also present in how recognition is stored and remembered in academic organisations. In our data there are several examples of how (almost always male) academics are better remembered for their past achievements than women, and even 'branded' through such achievements – e.g. forever the 'star scholar' despite years without significant publications or having a lasting reputation for deep business life experience despite not having worked outside Academia for decades.

All this implies different conditions for men and women. Vulnerability is perpetuated to a larger extent for women because the system is more forgiving towards men (cf. also van den Besselaar & Sandström, 2017) This has to do with extended homosociality when it comes to publishing, citations, network and grants. Women's resilience is used up faster and will lead to consequences in terms of differences of remaining in/quitting Academia (Silander et al, 2013). Recognition therefore supports male careerism and higher education sector dominated by masculine norms (competition, individualisation, instrumentalism, nepotism, prestige) (Coate & Kandiko Howson, 2014)

In sum, we suggest that

- recognition practices are an important but yet under-researched aspect of academic identity construction processes
- recognition practices are gendered, i.e. that we are performing gender in our ways of both conferring and receiving recognition, in our ways of constructing what recognition may mean in different local/cultural contexts, when it is to be conferred/received or not, and how it is displayed or not in social interaction.
- recognition practices tend to sustain vulnerability among academics, but in different ways for men and women.

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