

Transformative Experiences of Female Adult Educators in Greek Academia: Gender Free or Not?

Katerina Kedraka ¹ & Anna Tsiboukli ²

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Abstract

Gender stereotypes and other gender related issues are present in Adult Education. The current study wishes to explore experiences of female professors- adult educators in relation to their professional role in modern Greece. This qualitative study was carried out in December 2013 and women, experienced adult educators, were asked to critically reflect on their experience in the field. Content analysis was used for analyzing the responses. The participants, women adult educators, seemed to be aware of gender discrimination issues. At the same time, they were highly interested about the development of the role of women adult educators in Greece through critical reflections and also, the quality of their work and their own creative development and job satisfaction. Current research suggests that at the current climate of socio-economic and political crisis, greater emphasis is placed on the quality of educating rather than on gender issues.

Key words: Adult Education, Gender, Academia, Transformation, Bias

Introduction

Greece experiences these last years extreme austerity measures that inevitably affected the position of women in the labor market, even though men and women in Greece suffer equally. According to Karamesini & Rubery (2013), the female unemployment rate in Greece climbed from 16.3 per cent to 31.5 per cent and hiring restrictions have led to a 20 per cent fall in female employment in the public sector. Overall, the two sexes have been equally hit by austerity over 2010-13. As a result gender gaps in employment, unemployment and pay have narrowed since 2008. This calls for a reappraisal of the notion of gender equality in a context of social regression characterized by unemployment of historical dimensions and the severe deterioration in the employment, working and living conditions and social rights of both women and men.

Adult Education teaching and managerial posts according to some (Hugo, 1990; Thomson & Shield, 1996, Stalker, 1996) are male dominated. Therefore, female have relatively low representation as tutors -especially in Higher Education. On the other hand, modern environment calls for further women participation in all spheres of life. Gender differences should be taken into account in order to understand and include gender specific needs and expectations in educational practices (Avenel & Fontanini, 2009). In Academia, gender discrimination over the past 40 is mainly researched in relation to unconscious bias or gender schemas (Easterly & Ricard, 2011) where the possible solutions can also be found in order to

Bionotes

¹ Assistant Professor, Dept. of Molecular Biology & Genetics, Democritus University of Thrace Dragana, Alexandroupolis, 68100 Greece, kateked@otenet.gr

² PhD in Education, Psychologist (AFBPS), Tutor at the Hellenic Open University, anna.tsimpoukli@ac.eap.gr

increase participation of female faculty in institutions of higher education. Most studies, however, mainly concentrate on access to decision making managerial posts or to faculty development and professorships rather than to discriminations experienced due to gender differences in the classroom setting. Several studies argue that despite effort for transformation, women have not given yet equal opportunities for academic careers (Touchton, 2008) due to hidden assumptions and unconscious gender bias (Towers, 2008). Furthermore, the issue of culture in organizations, that is the commonly held assumptions, beliefs and attitudes, is significant in gender equity in the context of higher education. Assumptions serve to shape and constrain the range of possible solutions to the problem of inequity (Allan, 2011). Gender stereotypes are embedded in cultural discourses, social institutions, and individual psyches that systemically reproduce male power and shape how people perceive, conceive, and discuss social reality in generation after generation. Women have also their own biases and assumptions, believing that their work is valued less than men's and that there are more constraints because of home responsibilities that limit career advancement and fragment career growth. West & Curtis, (2006) would argue that the limited women's participation reflects a lack of balance between family and career pressures. Valian (2005) also suggests that gender differences are reflecting an acculturation problem.

Unconscious bias occurs in every part of life and almost in all parts of the world including certainly Greece. However, given the growing number of women in professional life and Academia, it comes as an unexpected finding that sex and gender stereotypes (Babcock & Laschever, 2007) still exist. Houston, Meyer & Paewai (2006) address the complexity of gender bias in knowledge creation and knowledge transmission through research and teaching in Academia as Romainville (1996) noted a decade back. Women, who work within administration in Higher Education, face many struggles since Higher Education has traditionally been a hierarchical and patriarchal system that makes it more difficult for women to advance and contribute to the marginalization of women in leadership roles.

The limited progress of women is documented in several studies from US to China. Women are strictly controlled and University governance, management and leadership are predominantly occupied by men. A Portuguese study suggests that Higher Education Institutions reproduce the same inequalities in career structures that are dominant in other occupational spheres with the use of informal procedures emerging as an obstacle for women entrance into academic careers (Carvalho & Santiago, 2010). According to authors Universities, and especially managerial positions, are culturally embedded by masculinity and reflect traditional notions of femininity and masculinity with significant implications for women's participation in top management in HE institutions. A similar qualitative study in China concluded that Chinese women faculty as other international studies suggest are working double time but continue to play a limited role in critical personnel decisions influencing academic promotions and advancement (Rhoads & Gu, 2012). Another qualitative study with a critical feminist framework, concludes that women Faculty experience overall negative institutional and departmental environments and slow rates of promotion (Gardner, 2012). Therefore, the above data suggests that gender difference and gender bias is still present in the daily life of several academic institutions. Some (Stout, Staiger, & Jennings, 2007) would suggest that training Faculty, Chairs, Deans, and administration that unconscious gender bias exists, may be one of the most effective methods of ending it.

The current study would argue that prior to change the bias of others is significant to understand your own bias, assumptions and beliefs in relation to professional roles, disorienting dilemmas and possible courses of action. Jack Mezirow argued that a habit of mind based on assumptions that act as a filter for our experiences (moral consciousness, social norms, learning styles, philosophies including religion, world view, etc., our artistic tastes and personality type and preferences) (Mezirow, 2000: 17 & 18) is ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the predisposition to regard others outside one's own group as inferior. He considers educators as able to engage in the kind of metacognition that is required to question the premises of beliefs and perspectives and he has stated that transformation include "maturity, education, safety, health, economic security, and emotional intelligence" (Mezirow, 2000:15). Mezirow based his theory on a qualitative study of U.S. women returning to higher education or the workplace after several years of absence. Mezirow's original study (1978a, 1978b) concluded women returning to education went through a 'personal transformation'. On a later development of his theory, Mezirow (1998b) argued that critical reflection of assumptions involves subjective reframing, an understanding of the causes of the assumption, that can include one of four self-reflection forms: narrative, systemic, therapeutic, and epistemic. From all the above forms, this paper is concerned with systemic critical self-reflection on the taken-for-granted cultural influences, which might be organizational (e.g., workplace) or moral-ethical (e.g., social norms) and which often place obstacles in the professional development of women adult educators, with the relative results on hindering development of awareness of gender stereotypes in training adults.

Literature in the field of transformative learning has focused on several aspects of the possible transformation of women. Age and its effects on the self-image is developed by Armacost (2005) who writes on menopause and its transformative dimensions, and Kluge (2007) stresses out that women are challenged to undertake physical activity as a means of challenging stereotypes of aging. Barnacle (2009) and Michelson (1998) have show the role of the self-image in women's learning and emphasized non-cognitive modes of knowing, which recalls Ryan's (2001) contention that learning is based on individual self-reflection. Through the examining of the self-image and their physical boundaries women learn their potential and are transformed in self-perception, moving from stereotypes and negative self image to "increased connection with and confidence in their bodies" (Kluge, 2007: 187).

However, at the current climate of crisis in Greece and the constantly changing environment Mezirow's theory with its emphasis on individuals rather than on social settings, maybe cannot be solely applied in understanding and interpreting gender bias. Freire's (1970) ideas could also be relevant in the Greek context, since he emphasized the role of the adult educator in a context of social inequalities but at the same time he underlined that emotion is a catalyst in transforming one's life circumstances. Much of the transformative learning literature on women focuses on emotional conditions, which affect women's critical understanding in learning. These conditions directly and indirectly affect women's transformation either by stymieing it or by serving as a catalyst. It would seem that women, who work, face or survived a crisis and went on through difficult circumstances, have an extra ability to be transformed. Hamp identifies the "drama and extreme emotional distress" (2007: 176) that is part of women's learning. Muhammad and Dixson (2005) focused on specific emotions, like resistance and anger, latent pain, and discomfort among white and black women as they discussed race and gender and Mejuini (2009) considers the role of emotions in female academics' transformative learning

as significant. All this data suggests that emotion plays a particular role in transformation for women, even though in many studies it remains beneath the surface and is not named directly. On the contrary, in many relevant studies, a lot of importance is paid to the importance of relationships in women's transformative experiences (see Brookfield, 2003; Buck, 2009; Grant, 2008; Hamp, 2007; Wittman et al., 2008). This connects to Brooks' (2000) notion that the opportunity for women to share their life narratives is at the heart of their transformative experience. Cooley (2007) explores the significance of an enclave or gathering for women, which can facilitate friendship, trust, and transformative learning. Mejiuni (2009) speaks to the value of collaboration and support for transformative learning among women in academe in Nigeria.

A resulting point of view is the complex of feelings, beliefs, judgments, and attitudes regarding specific women. Most of the above studies suggest that ethnocentrism continues to be present even in higher academic institutions and exhibits itself in the form of unconscious bias. John Dirkx and Patricia Cranton have researched the unconscious on our individual meaning-making including what Jung considers as the "unconscious functions." Jung ([1921]1971: 448) focused on "individuation as the process by which individuals differentiate themselves from the general, collective society". It involves becoming aware of and considering the collective unconscious. People come to see how they are both the same as and different from others. When we participate in life consciously and imaginatively, we develop a deepened sense of self and an expansion of consciousness. Thus, transformation relies on the emergence of the Self, which is the very essence of the development of authenticity (Cranton, 2007). Academic educators should be able to act authentically by distinguishing their beliefs about themselves from the common rhetoric. This process is transformative, since it is a reconstruction of the frame of reference related to the self and teaching. Cranton (2007) concluded that since transformative learning theory and Jung's concept of individuation describe people as moving from unconsciousness to consciousness, from unquestioned formulations to complex, integrated, and ambiguous understandings of the world, the individual becomes more aware of who he or she is as apart from the collective, uncritically assimilated whole of well known, accepted ideas, notion and stereotypes and she demonstrated that these processes are evident in university educators, who tend to become authentic in their practice. Moore et al, (2007) suggest that adult educators must engage in a secondary viewing of what we already know and believe and they challenge adult educators to incorporate innovative practices of the field to increase their autonomous components.

We can conclude that gender roles are considered a main factor shaping the experiences of individuals, and in particular women's roles. Gender, a socially-constructed phenomenon, shapes people's experiences in every culture, and it certainly affects the transformative process of women educators. Freire's education for critical consciousness offers principles that can be used to help women to identify the factors in the social/economic/ political environment that limit their growth and development, to see the connection of those limits to their oppression, and hence to motivate them to act against personal and institutional sexism.

Following this process of raising awareness of Academics in order to be able to recognize and understand these phenomena on their personal sphere, the present study focuses on women's adult educators understanding of unconscious functions with regard to gender.

Methodology

The current study focuses on women's adult educators understanding of unconscious functions in relation to their role with the use of free association. Therefore the first aim for researchers was to explore whether women would actually refer specifically to that dimension of their role and then to understand the types of references they make.

For this purpose data was collected from 14 women, all experienced adult educators working in Academia, who were approached with the purpose to 'talk' about their role as adult educators. Free association was used through a single question, pilot tested before given to participants in this study. Respondents were asked to disclose their own 'truth' at their own time and space (Atkinson, 1998). They were asked whether they agree to take part in the survey. They all volunteered and their availability and openness to talk about subtle issues like gender discrimination was clear and this was a very important element, since free association as a method requires a minimum level of trust between researchers and respondents. Researchers had a long lasting professional relationship with most respondents and this is very likely to have influenced the level of exposure and the interpretations made by researchers as they themselves are adult educators in the same professional area. Participants received a research question and briefing for the purposes of the study at their personal e-mail address. No information was disclosed in relation to other participants' identity. Participants were given one month to respond in writing. The question was the following: 'Describe, as freely as you can, your professional work and experience as woman adult educator'. Content Analysis was used for understanding participant's responses to the question. Content analysis is considered appropriate for "decoding and interpreting written data and especially personal beliefs, attitudes, assumptions and perspectives" (Verma & Mallick, 2004: 224).

Results

Content analysis revealed that through a single question and free association, women adult educators were able to identify a number of discrimination issues in relation to their gender. Written data collected led to key-issues that arose and can be classified in at least four categories –some containing sub-categories:

- a) Assumptions and Bias of others
- b) Real Circumstances - Obstacles
- c) Assumption and bias of one-self
- d) Denial

a) Assumptions & Bias of Others

Content analysis revealed that most women adult educators experienced discrimination in relation to gender which they explain on the basis of bias and assumptions of others (mainly men trainees) concerning the female identity. Characteristically they say:

«...the first few years I was frustrated from the attitude of men trainees who could not 'accept' me...I was trying to break their resistance, to prove that even though I am a woman they can trust me as adult educator. However I was not feeling the same for the women trainees, even though they might have been hard and competitive...I didn't feel the need to change their attitude».

«...the first few years I was upset with the looks that men trainees were giving me...I could see that they did not trust me...some of them were trying to flirt with me...it was just a way to pose their question – how come you are the trainer and I am the trainee - I had the same attitudes expressed from older women adult educators...some of them thought that I gained this job not because I deserve it but because I had friends in higher administration...».

Being Patronized

Women adult educators also suggest that they are often confronted with completion and suspicion from others as a result of their gender and that male trainees often try to patronize them.

«...adult trainees do not accept me so easily. They always try to test me. They were always trying to prove that their professional roles were much more important than their assignment ...they always challenged their marks and wanted explanations ...».

«...I have often become the object of confrontation and competition.... I can always see suspicion in questioning what I know from adult education, despite my 20 years of professional work, am I more able to do this job...».

«...Some had a very competitive attitude I think because I am a woman....when I was asking them not to smoke in the corridor they would reply....'we have a woman at home to moan all day...and now we have another one here.....' often they were trying to impose their opinion especially on politics, social issues, immigration etc. and they resisted with passion when I was asking them to reflect critically on their assumptions».

«...A man around 55-60 came into my office and asked to see the director...when I replied that I was the director he became upset and said...I am not going to register in a school where the director is a woman...».

False identity

Women adult educators often report that they are accepted by male trainees only when men trainees attribute to them male characteristics but also when women try to confront them in 'womanhood'.

«...but you are not a woman, you are a man ...».

«... women trainees who are more dynamic and competitive are always distant, suspicious and critical...I feel that somehow there is a subconscious attitude that says...I am dominating as a female here and no one else...».

Others believe that discrimination is obvious in the preferences that trainees have in relation to the gender of the adult educator. Characteristically they say:

«...I believe that when women are more than men in a classroom they feel much better when the trainer is also a woman rather than a man, they feel that they can be more open to discussion...».

«...I think that they like it more that I am a woman, they believe that women are more flexible, they give better grades, are more supportive and less competitive than a man who frightens them a little bit ...».

b) Real Circumstances – Obstacles

However, there are some women adult educators who refer to gender discrimination mainly exhibited in familial and social pressures to abandon their professional life. Some women adult educators confront and resist these pressures and others feel guilty and inadequate to cope with the different roles.

«...I was very interested in adult education and I chose this field consciously but many of my friends criticized me saying...why do you need this now, you are going to create more problems to yourself, you don't have the time to do this etc...I think it was the best choice I ever made...».

«...not really the trainees but the professionals, men adult educators criticized my ability to cope with various roles being a wife, a mother, an adult educator and they would certainly prefer to see me go back home because in this way they could prove the value of their role...».

«...I had a lot of pressure working full time, being pregnant, trying to cope with house chores...but I really liked being an adult educator...despite all obstacles I was passionate for this job and worked more and more...the pressure was incredible...I was trying to be perfect in everything...I was feeling guilty all the time especially about children and family but now I have started finding a balance...I don't feel guilty any more ...».

c) Assumptions and Bias of One-Self

Women adult educators also confront their own attitudes and assumptions in relation to their own gender and this becomes obvious when they try to act as 'mothers' for their students. It is worth to note what they are saying:

«Sometimes I think that I am using my female social skills even consciously in order to protect and support them, I act as a mother, maybe I am overprotective and I think this has to do with my gender...».

«...I worked with women trainees and I feel that I helped many of them to transform their assumptions by disclosing my own experiences in education...».

d) Denial

Finally there is a group of women adult educators who think that their gender was never an obstacle in their professional life or in the classroom. Is this denial or a fact?

«...As a female adult educator I have never experienced prejudice because of my gender, never not even at the least...».

«...I never experienced any prejudice because of my gender...it is maybe my experience or my age...».

«...from my experience my gender was never a problem in my relationship with my students...».

Discussion

Although there is a rapidly increasing entry of women into European higher education systems (Nielsen, 2017), gender discrimination in Academia is attributed to unconscious bias (Easterly & Ricard, 2011) and hidden assumptions (Towers, 2008). Assumptions (Allan, 2011) are embedded in cultural discourses, social institutions, and individual psyches that systemically reproduce male power and shape how people perceive, conceive, and discuss social reality in generation after generation. Women have their own biases and assumptions, but they also face certain constraints because of home responsibilities (West & Curtis, 2006) that reflect a lack of balance between family and career pressures.

Unconscious bias is certainly present in the current qualitative study and the results are similar to those of other studies carried out in different parts of the world, from US to Portugal and China (Williams, 2004; Carvalho & Santiago, 2010; Rhoads & Gu, 2012; Gardner, 2012; Kelly

& Fetridge, 2012). Ethnocentrism as Mezirow (2000:17 & 18) would define it, seems to be an issue revealed from the responses of participants in the current study.

Most academic educators, who took part in this study, following a transformative path, seem to wonder about their bias but mostly on their role among men trainees and colleagues, trying to distinguish their beliefs about themselves from the common rhetoric as Cranton (2007) recommended. We consider this process a transformation, since it is a reconstruction of the frame of reference related to the self and teaching, in the framework of Jung's concept of individuation who described it as moving from unconsciousness to consciousness, unquestioned formulations to complex, integrated, and ambiguous understandings of the world. Indeed, the educators in this study tend to become more aware of who they are and how they respond to challenges and needs of their role, apart from the uncritically, accepted ideas, notions and stereotypes.

Emotions are also present in the way the women educators in our research experience their role, a finding which agrees with Mejuini (2009) who considers significant the role of emotion in female academics' transformative learning. It would seem that Greek women educators who these last years work in a country hit by an economic crisis, tend to successfully face the obstacles deriving from their double role in home and work through their ability to move on from familial and social pressures and feelings of guilt and inadequacy to a successful career as academics.

We know from relevant studies, the importance of relationships in women's transformative experiences (see Brookfield, 2003; Buck, 2009; Grant, 2008; Hamp, 2007; Wittman et al., 2008) and that women share their life narratives as part of their transformative experience (Brooks, 2000). Following Mezirow's notion that critical reflection of assumptions involves subjective reframing, we can conclude that a major understanding of the causes of the assumption of self-reflection focuses on the systemic critical self-reflection on the taken-for-granted cultural influences. However, in the light of the current long-term effects of crisis to focus on individual's motivation and ability for critical self-reflection only equals to undermining the significant social and economic factors that shape the work market and affect inclusion or exclusion from it on the bias of gender and other socially imposed stereotypes. In some cases the causes might be organizational (e.g., workplace) or moral-ethical (e.g., social/ familiar norms) and these obstacles probably affect the professional development of women adult educators with the relative results on hindering development of awareness of gender stereotypes in training adults, thus explaining the denial that surprisingly appeared as a finding in this study.

Conclusions

In the middle of the Greek crisis, economical and social at the same time, where even the academic working environment has its difficulties, it is interesting -and hopeful- to find out that women, adult educators in third grade education, focus more on quality than gender issues within their role. To raise awareness of bias, assumptions and beliefs in relation to professional roles, disorienting dilemmas and possible courses of action and to make a conscious effort to overcome them (Mezirow, 2000) will probably benefit women adult educators and the institutions at which they work. At the same time collective efforts and gender oriented actions are necessary within the work domain in order to detect and minimize gender based hidden

exclusion criteria. The current study, in accordance with Stout, Staiger, & Jennings (2007) recommendations, would also argue that training, in order to raise awareness in relation to gender bias and discrimination, is significant. When everyone working in the academic research community is conscious of these concerns, it will become a welcoming place for both women and men (Bingham & Nix, 2010) but furthermore for the adult trainees and their own learning experiences.

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