Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal

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The politics of knowledge: the responses to feminist research from academic leaders

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the knowledge on the slow gender change in academia by examining university leaders' defensive patterns of responses to feminist knowledge. Identifying the most common responses will enable scholars and practitioners engaged in equality work in academia to anticipate them and implement specialized interventions to target these arguments.

Design/methodology/approach – The author developed a reflexive, composite methodology, combining participatory action research, documentary analysis and auto-ethnography. It is an explorative study, based on author's own interpretations and experiences while talking about gender inequality issues in the academic setting. Data are drawn from discussions stemming from public lectures and encounters in the academic setting where academic leaders were present between 2009 and 2015.

Findings – Three patterns of responses are identified: two defensive patterns and one which provides opportunities for change. The two defensive responses resisted the feminist knowledge on the basis of methodology/epistemology or the study's findings. The pattern of commitment shows promising opportunities for change.

Research limitations/implications – For future research, it could be interesting to further explore the role of leaders in gender equality work. The author examines leaders who are gender aware and analyze how they champion gender equality in their organizations and what actions they take to increase equality. The actual leadership work that has to be done to create gender equal or inclusive work places is an under researched premise.

Originality/value – Hitherto, little is known about the way the feminist knowledge is received within in the academic community. This paper zooms in on this knowledge transfer and investigates a moment where feminist knowledge and academic leaders meet and learning opportunities occur. In addition, this paper shares the hard task we have as feminist scholars, and the feelings this brings to ones one identity as a scholar.

Keywords Resistance, Academic leaders, Auto-ethnography, Feminist knowledge, Gender awareness, Gender equality

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Gender scholars have extensively documented the ways in which social inequalities are reproduced in the academic system (e.g. Deem, 2007; Eveline, 2005; Husu, 2001; Katila and Meriläinen, 1999, 2002). This line of research has generated a good deal of knowledge and understanding about the "gendering of academic careers" and has shown that processes that give rise to inequalities are complex and multi-faceted. Given this substantive body of knowledge, we might assume that we would have a better understanding of how to make universities more equitable work places for men and women. Yet, progress toward gender change in academia remains slow (Bendl and Schmidt, 2012) and gender

inequality seems like an unbeatable seven-headed dragon that has a multitude of faces in different social contexts (Van den Brink and Benschop, 2012b).

As a feminist academic, I have often wondered why there is such a discrepancy between our body of knowledge about gender inequality and the slow progress in academic practice. After all, the goal of feminist organizational research is not only to generate more knowledge about the reproduction of inequalities, but also to question and transform current organizations and society (Calás and Smircich, 2009; do Mar Pereira, 2012). Why is it then that this knowledge hardly contributes to a fundamental change in our own academic system? Why does this knowledge not diffuse to the broader circles of the academic institution? Why is dissemination of this knowledge extremely difficult in a domain that is supposed to be rational and reliant on academic studies and methods? Many academics have very little knowledge about academic research on gender, science and equal opportunities.

This lack of knowledge can also be observed in academic leaders (e.g. presidents, vice-chancellors, deans or department heads) who are ascribed roles crucial to the success or failure of gender change programs. How is it possible to be unaware of or even blind to gender (Linstead, 2000) when they are being confronted with gendered knowledge by their own scholars? Can we still cling to the premise that gender bias, old boys' networks and a lack of transparency are completely unknown subjects to these leaders? To answer these questions, we need better insights into the translation of feminist knowledge into the academic arena, especially to academic leaders. As Connell (2005) put it: "[our task] is to recognize the reasons for resistance to gender equality, to find answers to the arguments advanced by opponents, and to find better solutions to the underlying social concerns that find expression through resistance to gender equality" (Connell, 2005, p. 1803).

The aim of this paper is to contribute knowledge about the slow pace of gender change in academia by examining university leaders' defensive patterns of responses to feminist knowledge. Drawing on auto-ethnography, I studied the responses to my thesis on the recruitment and selection of professors in the Netherlands (Van den Brink, 2010). That study led me to receive many invitations to speak about the underrepresentation of women in academia. Those public lectures, debates and meetings made the feminist knowledge from my research exchangeable, rendered in a form that allows it to travel (Latour, 1990).

In this paper, I analyze academic leaders' responses to my research to gain better insight into their process of (non)learning. It is not so much the process of knowledge transfer itself that takes center stage, but rather the responses to this knowledge and the arguments used to refute it. Identifying the most common responses will enable scholars and practitioners engaged in equality work in academia to anticipate them and implement specialized interventions to target these arguments. In addition, I will also try to share the "hard task" we have as gender or feminist scholars, and the feelings this brings to one's own identity as a scholar. We often find ourselves at the forefront of the struggle when we are engaging in gender equality initiatives. When we are attacked or discredited and our change efforts meet with backlash and resistance, it is easy to become frustrated, discouraged and disempowered. Therefore, it is important to share our stories and give voice to feminist activists and researchers (Bendl and Schmidt, 2012).

Academic leaders, gender awareness and the perception of feminist research
Although the number of studies about gender and diversity champions is increasing (de Vries, 2015) and the call to include men in the gender project is growing louder (Connell, 2005; Prime and Moss-Racusin, 2009), many leaders and managers remain

ambivalent toward gender equality initiatives (e.g. Welp, 2002). Wahl and Holgersson (2003) noted that male managers often express positive attitudes toward gender equality and diversity as principles, but predominantly resist when it comes to actual actions to change the gender order. The authors ascribe this to a lack of knowledge about how gender works in organizations and the male managers' lack of awareness of their privileged position.

In line with Brody *et al.* (2001), I define gender awareness as a person's readiness to recognize how gender differences and privilege are deeply embedded in the assumptions, expectations, practices and manifestations of organizations and society. According to Acker (2006), conscious awareness is a key link between inequality regimes and action for change. Since the way we do gender in daily life is mostly unreflexive (Martin, 2003), people are often unaware that they are making distinctions and creating inequalities. Most gendered actions are characterized by a routine way of doing things and are unintentional. This routine way of doing gender is based on tacit and internalized images, which are relatively stable and inert. An aim of feminist knowledge on gender inequality is to disclose these images so we are able to reflect on them.

To enable reflexivity and evoke change, feminist scholars have been working for years to make gender practices visible (e.g. Deem, 2007; Eveline, 2005; Husu, 2001; Katila and Meriläinen, 1999, 2002). Although this literature has been critiqued for not being oriented toward practice or providing guidelines for how to make organizations more gender equal, some scholars, in cooperation with consultants and practitioners, have attempted to transfer the knowledge to organizational and academic life (de Vries, 2010; Ely and Meyerson, 2000). This work illustrates the difficulties that scholars and practitioners face when working with academia and implementing gender equality programs (Goltz and Sotirin, 2014), but little is known about how feminist knowledge *an sich* is received within the academic community (Moss-Racusin *et al.* 2015). This paper zooms in on this process of knowledge transfer and investigates the moment when feminist knowledge and academic leaders meet and learning opportunities occur.

In line with feminist research (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987), it is important to note that feminist knowledge – including mine – should neither be considered objective nor as disinterested knowledge (Harding, 1987). The way of seeing (i.e. epistemology) upon which my knowledge is based is itself a socially and historically generated phenomena (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000; Latour, 1990). This means that research findings on gender inequality are not objective facts with which leaders or managers simply have to become "aware," or that managers are just passively influenced by this knowledge. By knowledge transfer, I mean the social process of interaction in which knowledge is shared, discussed and negotiated. Knowledge claims are a constant struggle (Haraway, 1988). This research focusses on that struggle and tries to uncover why creating gender awareness is such a political and challenging endeavor.

Case and methodology
In this section, I will briefly describe the content of my research to better understand the nature of the responses to this knowledge in this particular setting.

Thesis on academic recruitment and selection
The aim of my dissertation was to develop insight into the gendering of appointment practices for the most influential people in the academic world: full professors (Van den Brink, 2010). I combined quantitative and qualitative empirical methods including recruitment and selection protocols, 971 appointment reports and 64 interviews with

members of appointment committees. Supposedly gender-neutral organizational processes (e.g. the implementation of transparency policies, the search for talent, the construction of scientific excellence) were exposed as being based on hierarchical conceptions of masculinity and femininity. For instance, I found that 64 percent of new professors in the Netherlands are recruited through closed procedures that involve formal and informal networks of scouts. These scouts function as gatekeepers, since they decide which candidates are nominated and which are excluded before the official process even starts; they exercise considerable control over flows of information and access to vacant positions. Gatekeeping is tied in with several gender practices (Van den Brink and Benschop, 2014). The research also illustrated that academic excellence is a gendered construction. It revealed double standards in the attribution of excellence to male and female candidates (Van den Brink and Benschop, 2012a). The data provided several examples of male candidates who were hired despite the fact that they did not excel on all criteria, whereas women were often rejected because they fell short of one of the criteria of excellence.

Data collection
This is an explorative study, based on my own interpretations and experiences while talking about gender inequality issues in the academic setting. It developed into a reflexive, composite methodology, combining participatory action research, documentary analysis and auto-ethnography (Boyle and Parry, 2007). Sparkes (2000) defined auto-ethnography as "highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understandings" (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). Feminist researchers have used auto-ethnography to show gendered processes in their own daily practices (Goltz and Sotirin, 2014; Hearn, 2003; Katila and Meriläinen, 1999, 2002). I drew on their critical work on academic organizations to more fully elucidate how feminist knowledge is perceived by academic leaders in the Netherlands and how this influences their learning processes. I did not formally interview academic leaders, but informally spoke to them at several receptions and talks.

My reflections on their responses were sometimes retrospective, as I did not have the instrumental aim of generating data before the summer of 2010. I was then advised to analyze these encounters to advance our knowledge about the slow progress of gender awareness among leaders in academia. Data were drawn from discussions stemming from public lectures and encounters in the academic setting between 2009 and 2015 where at least some academic leaders were present.

In these meetings, I presented the core findings from my thesis on gender inequality in academia. In total, I have research notes from 17 formal public lectures: nine in the Netherlands, one in Germany, one in Sweden and six in Belgium. I also kept a research diary alongside public documents. I reflected on approximately 20 formal and informal discussions with senior academic leaders. In addition, I reviewed written documents (e.g. articles in university magazines, formal letters) from 2009 through 2015 in which academic leaders commented on my research.

For the analysis, I coded the data in two steps: what were the academic leaders' first responses; and what arguments did they use to underpin them? After clustering the arguments, three patterns of responses emerged: responses related to a critique of the methodology and epistemology of the research, responses that acknowledged the research but argued that its findings were not accurate in their situation and responses that acknowledged the knowledge and indicated a willingness to take action.

Responses to feminist knowledge

During the presentations, I often observed recurring responses. For instance, leaders'
non-verbal behavior (e.g. using their phones, reading) often indicated that they were not
fully engaged in the presentation. Another recurring behavior was a leader coming to
open a seminar, symposium or discussion about gender in academia, announcing how
important this topic is and how much they do to promote more women academics to top
positions, and then stating that they were busy, had to leave and wished the audience
well. The most common response was a sometimes uneasy silence in which they
avoided eye contact, looked away or had glazed eyes. When women academics were
present, they sometimes started asking questions or sharing their experiences, but also
showed reluctance to talk about this topic.

When university leaders were not in the majority, they were less engaged in the
discussions. Most of them were probably disinclined to argue against the topic of gender
and diversity, especially on a public occasion where gender inequality was the main
topic. We have to consider the possibility that responses more in line with their "real"
opinions might have been obscured by social desirability concerns and self-monitoring
(Moss-Racusin *et al.* 2015). However, in most encounters, one or two debates emerged
about the interpretation and applicability of my findings. I have distinguished between
three verbal responses, which are presented below.

Resistance to methods and epistemology

When presenting my research results to academic leaders, I was often asked for the
"objective truth," perhaps the "statistical truth," about women's careers. This required
me to continuously and persuasively convey the nature of my research while defending
what I consider to be claims of legitimate knowledge. University leaders repeatedly
questioned the epistemology and methodology of my research in several ways.

First, they often hinted that it only provided "anecdotal evidence." Many leaders were
skeptical about the ability of qualitative research to deliver empirically grounded
description, complex analyses and delicate theorization. On one occassion, it was even
considered "false" knowledge. This response, one of the most intense I encountered,
occurred when I gave a lecture during a roundtable on gender equality in a technological
university in eastern Germany. The university was in the first stages of taking gender
equality measures and was gathering expertise to develop a gender equality plan. The
university was very male dominated: no more than 5 percent of the full professors at any
of them were female. I had 20 minutes to address 20 men (institute directors) and one
female Minister of State. After my lecture and one from a German equal opportunity
advisor, the group was given time to reflect on what they had heard. Some of them
argued that my conclusions were completely unrealistic for Germany, based on their own
experiences on selection committees in Germany and the USA. I could agree to an
extent; although German colleagues had recognized my findings as similar to gender
mechanisms in Germany, it was possible that my results were mostly applicable to
a Dutch setting. However, a director told me that I was "completely misinformed about
the way professors were recruited." Although he had no experience as a scientist or a
member of a selection committee in the Netherlands, he said that my data were incorrect
and that the written documents I had studied and the informants I had interviewed
had told me a story that did not represent "the truth." The situation was worsened by
my fellow presenter, who apologized for possible misinterpretations (in both our
presentations) and argued that it was good to discuss points that could be wrongly
reported. I felt very frustrated, misinterpreted and marginalized.

Another encounter took place in writing. A woman academic wrote about my research in a Dutch university magazine, hinting at discriminatory practices in her own faculty. That faculty had a long history of individual women academics championing this issue, but the majority of academics and the establishment had never been very open to it. The dean was furious at the article's insinuations of discriminatory practices and wrote a comment in the same magazine stating: "At our faculty, there is no such thing as discrimination between men and women. Elsewhere there is, if we believe Marieke van den Brink." Further on, he wrote: "It is wonderful to critique everything, but it helps when this critique is grounded by factual knowledge." In this example, the dean considered my research to be an opinion rather than scientific knowledge because it did not fit his idea of "good science." It is important to note that at that time, the university was in the midst of a legal case in which it had been accused of gender discrimination during the hiring process for an assistant professor. Therefore, the dean was eager to deny the existence of gender discrimination and the case might have made it difficult for him to respond otherwise.

A second way to question my epistemology and methods occurred when some leaders drew attention to issues that I had not been studying, such as disciplinary differences or "hard" evidence from studies in experimental settings that compared the resumes of men and women candidates. Some of these issues I did actually study but was not able to include all findings in my short presentation. Other issues were included by references to other gender literature. This was not considered to be sufficient or convincing enough. Since the majority of these "hard" evidence studies were conducted somewhere else (e.g. USA, UK) or were not recent, they argued that this knowledge was flawed and inapplicable to their situations.

Third, although this was less openly voiced in public, some leaders were suspicious about the feminist agenda of the research. My research explicitly aims to contribute to gender equality in academia. However, academic leaders do not always consider research that aims to change the current status quo to be "objective." In Belgium, one leader responded: "You talk about bias, but what if a man would have done this research? Would he have gathered the same results and drawn the same conclusions?"

All these examples show a male bias in which the "loose" and "unscientific" nature of my methodology and findings were critiqued. These critiques called for "scientific" methods often considered to be more "objective" (e.g. longitudinal quantitative analysis, statistical regression) rather than qualitative or normative arguments (Cavaghan, 2013; Lewis, 2010). Goltz and Sotirin (2014), gender scholars engaged in bias training in their own university, also encountered this when discussions in training sessions were often diverted to research protocols, rather than to reflections on gender practices. Do Mar Pereira (2012), who studied how academics demarcate what constitutes "proper" academic knowledge, noted that academics recognize the relevance and value of some analytical insights of feminist scholarship, but bypass or reject its critiques of dominant standards and tools of academic knowledge. So, it is exactly the consequence of this knowledge – that the taken-for-granted structure has to change – that is considered problematic.

Resistance to content or results
During most of my presentations, I encountered some denial of the described gender inequality practices. These academic leaders argued that forms of gender inequality do

exist in academia (so my research was not considered false or invalid), but that they had been capable of eliminating these harmful practices from their institutions. Gender discrimination, they argued, was something from the past or something that might happen at another university, but no longer at their university. This response was very common in the discussions after my presentations. For instance, a research manager from a physics department stated:

> I do not recognize this […] I've been here for only three years […] and I haven't been involved in many appointment procedures. I can tell you that the number of women applicants is not that substantive. I can't say that I've experienced this [closed recruitment procedures] at this institute.

I most often-heard statements claiming that my results were no longer applicable when I spoke to a broader audience. Almost without exception, events transpired as follows. An academic leader gave the first speech, talking about how well the university was doing in terms of diversity and what wonderful and effective tools were in place to enhance gender diversity. This felt like the most disempowering introduction, as it seemed inappropriate for me to argue against it, even if I knew that the university had a long history of not implementing their gender policies. When leaders were given the opportunity to respond after my lecture, they often stated that they had managed to make their recruitment more transparent and that they monitored it very closely. For instance, one dean said that there was no such thing as an "old boys" network' after two-thirds of my lecture had been about visibility and support networks based on data that included his university.

This defensive response was most clearly demonstrated by a dean from a Dutch medical faculty in 2009. After hearing about my research from a colleague, he invited me for a meeting in his office to discuss my thesis. I assumed he would ask my advice about how to decrease gender discrimination at his institution, so I was rather astonished by how the discussion developed. He was shocked by my finding that 77 percent of recruitment procedures in the medical sciences were closed and questioned whether his institution was represented in the data material. After I confirmed that it was, he asked me when I had done my research. After I told him that my data came from 2003 and 2004, he replied that these exclusionary practices might have taken place then (denying my research results), but that they had been abandoned and no such thing was happening there anymore. He had personally taken care of the issue, and ensured that all vacancies had been openly advertised for the last two years. He therefore concluded that his university was a front-runner on gender equality.

At the time of my public defense in 2009, my dissertation yielded substantial media attention and I gave several interviews to university magazines in the Netherlands. After I spoke to a magazine for a Dutch agricultural university about my core findings, the journalist interviewed prominent academics from that university to reflect on them and collect stories that countered my results. Before the magazine was printed, the journalist also asked members of the university board for comments. The vice chancellor responded: "This [research results] cannot be true; the only thing we take into account at this university is quality." His comment was printed in the article that discussed my findings, even though he knew that his university was also part of my research.

Thus, these leaders who responded defensively to my research findings did not question feminist knowledge as such, but did not recognize bias at their own institutions. It is important to note that I am talking about responses to presentations of my empirical findings about inequality practices in Dutch academia. Although it is completely understandable that individual experiences may differ, these people assured me that

these practices did not happen at their universities. As a consequence, they did not see a compelling reason to become actively involved in gender initiatives and challenge the status quo. When I asked a senior manager who showed greater gender awareness about the nature of these responses, he suggested that they were related to responsibility, loss of status and legal protection. If university leaders agreed that there were problems at their institutions, they would have to take action and change the status quo. In addition, an admission of bias would undermine the perceived fairness of the academic system, so the leaders might be eager to hold onto the meritocratic principle in public debates.

Commitment

There were, however, also encounters in which academic leaders showed commitment to gender equality and signs of gender awareness. Most of the time, this was shown non-verbally (e.g. nodding) or by verbal confirmation (e.g. "I recognize what you're saying"). For instance, during the presentation in Germany, an academic director responded to the rather offensive comments made by another academic director, stating that: "Whether or not this complete 'story' is true, we [the men present] should take it seriously, as some of this information may actually be helpful to improve diversity in our institutions." After the meeting, this director approached me and apologized for his colleague who, in his opinion, had behaved badly toward me. It is, however, interesting that most encounters in which leaders backed me up occurred in private discussions rather than in public. A small group of leaders could be described as taking a championing role. Some of them acknowledged my research and argued that gender equality is key to university policies and performance. However, their analysis of the "gender problem" was not always in line with my research findings.

An example was the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science, who voiced commitment to the study's results. Representatives of two political parties asked questions in parliament about the study's results around non-transparent appointment procedures and asked what the minister would do about it. In response, the minister sent copies of my thesis to all Dutch universities with a letter saying: "We have to work on changing the culture at universities to increase diversity at the top. For inspiration, I send you the results of the work of Marieke van den Brink." It appears very likely that his staff had crafted this letter since when he was interviewed on the radio, he did not argue for cultural change but rather placed the responsibility for gender equality back on women. He talked about possible ways for women to combine family and career. As a biology professor himself, he explained that he had seen many women leave science due to work balance issues. However, this point was hardly addressed in my research and was certainly not the issue here. According to him, female underrepresentation in full professorships could be explained by women's choices, the difficult work-life balance of young mothers and greedy institutions.

This is one example of commitment from academic leaders without corresponding gender awareness. Interestingly, the minister used his own experience ($n = 1$) to inform his opinion, instead of the systematic research findings from my study. This was repeated in many of the actions taken by university leaders. Although many acknowledged that something had to be done, the majority of those I spoke to still saw the change potential in women themselves, and not in organizational practices and structures. Although it is laudable that these academic leaders became change agents at their institutions and perhaps even in the Dutch university system at large, they could be counter-productive when they proposed interventions that only "fixed" women and not the institutions themselves.

Some leaders showed gender awareness by focussing on the structural side of gender inequality or on the dominant masculine representation of the scientist. An esteemed professor in the Netherlands exemplified the strong image of the male professor in public discourse by telling a story about a taxi driver who was asked to pick up a visiting professor at the airport. The driver disregarded the female professor, who was left waiting at the taxi stand for half an hour, because he did not recognize her as "the professor." The interesting question here is why did these academic leaders become more aware of gender? One told me that he had worked in the USA, where there were more women in physics. After returning to the Netherlands, he found hardly any women working in the psychics department and thus became a champion for gender equality in his field. Another professor voiced the often-heard story that men become more aware of the structural side of inequality when confronted by daughters or wives who face indirect discrimination:

When my daughter was advised in high school to choose a humanities profile, I was shocked! Her grades in the sciences were as good, so I confronted the teacher. This teacher just assumed that she might be more interested in a humanities profile. I thought this is why we have so few female students: they are given the self-evident advice that science is for boys!

These are just some example of informal stories about university leaders who had developed gender awareness and began questioning their own assumptions and responsibilities. Although I cannot make any conclusive statements about the effects of gender awareness on the actual behavior or decision making of these leaders, I have noticed instances in which individual leaders have become advocates for gender equality and have become involved in equality work.

Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the slow gender change in academia by examining university leaders' defensive patterns of responses to feminist knowledge. Since research on responses to academic studies on gender inequalities are still rare (Moss-Racusin *et al.* 2015), identifying the most common responses may enable scholars and practitioners engaged in equality work in academia to anticipate them and implement specialized interventions to target them. The common-sense but under-examined explanation among feminist scholars is that evidence of gender inequality and feminist scholarship continue to threaten many and varied sites of power (Lewis, 2010). It threatens white male privilege: men in power positions have nothing to gain by acknowledging gender inequalities if they wish to "maintain their own privileged position in the social hierarchy" (Rudman *et al.*, 2012). However, if we zoom in a little deeper, we might be able to learn more about the defensive routines and possibilities for change.

I distinguished three patterns of responses, two of which could be considered defensive and one which provides opportunities for change. The two defensive responses resisted the feminist knowledge on the basis of methodology/epistemology or the study's findings. These defensive patterns prevent structural change in leaders' values around the structural character of gender inequality. These defensive strategies prevent them from reflecting on fossilized norms and ideas about gender in academia.

The first defensive pattern is for leaders to acknowledge gender inequality as something possible and unacceptable within the workplace, but to simultaneously frame it as something that was dealt within the past and is therefore no longer relevant for day-to-day interactions (e.g. Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998; Kelan, 2009). Despite

their rhetorical support for gender equality and personal statements in support of gender equality, these academic leaders deny their responsibility in the production of this inequality and therefore take a limited role in changing it. It is often easy for leaders to deny that there is a gender problem in their institute, or to argue that they already have taken some measures to "take care of it all," because feminist scholars are not able to provide in-depth findings (i.e. proof) of gender inequality in every university department. The implications of acknowledging the existence of gender inequality would be profound. So, this defensive pattern prevents leaders from reflecting on their gendered norms and ideas and prevents structural change related to gender inequality. If they accept that others might inadvertently discriminate, they also have to accept that they might do the same themselves. Also, they might have attained their positions in a less-meritocratic way than they hoped. For academic leaders to learn about gender equality, they have to put aside their personal interests, positions and values and invest in adjusting organizational practices. Leaders would need to take responsibility for acting differently and allocate resources to combat gender inequality.

The second defensive pattern I identified has to do with the activist agenda of feminist knowledge. Although the activist agenda of feminist studies has come under scrutiny (do Mar Pereira, 2012; Lewis, 2010), it might be in line with the suspicion faced by other scholarly work. For instance, in recent years, academic knowledge about topics like climate change and vaccination has been met with public skepticism and distrust. The specific distrust faced by feminist academics presenting their research are perceptions of direct self-interest and involvement. Previous work has demonstrated that knowledge transfer on inequality might be less effective when enacted by members of the "target group" (Gulker *et al.*, 2013). To circumvent this alleged conflict of interest, it is becoming increasingly popular to involve men in the equality project and as advocates for gender projects (Prime and Moss-Racusin, 2009). Although it is important not to limit gender equality work to women (de Vries, 2015), this also raises a more problematic issue: knowledge about gender equality stemming from men is considered more legitimate and "impartial." This can add another layer to the marginalization of women.

The most promising opportunities for change can be found in leaders who show some gender awareness and willingness to take action. However, only a few leaders in my experience have shown interest and awareness about the structural side of gender, a willingness to accept knowledge from gender scholars and a willingness to stand up publicly for these issues. One emphasized all the research that has been done about gender inequality in the social sciences and noted that it is now the responsibility of university leaders to take action. The few university leaders who backed me up during the discussions and meetings often had wives or daughters who had encountered gender inequality. Rather than adopting a defensive stance, they were willing to scrutinize their own ideas. A few university leaders are not afraid of difficult discussions and have been willing to take brave actions. They are convinced that there is something wrong with the status quo. For example, some have instituted quotas for the percentage of female professors or continued a female tenure track program despite a formal complaint being lodged alleging reverse gender discrimination. Another professor voiced the importance of increasing gender balance among students at the level of the university and faculty board. Others are willing to be more flexible about international experience on women's and men's resumes. Prime and Moss-Racusin (2009) have identified potential factors that could increase men's awareness of gender inequality. When men experience the restriction of gender norms themselves, they are more apt to view these norms as a barrier for women too. Also, men who had been

mentored by women and had a strong sense of fair play were more likely to be aware of gender bias.

For future research, it could be interesting to further explore the role of leaders in gender equality work. We could begin by examining academic leaders who are gender aware and analyzing what brought them this far. Then we could study these gender-aware leaders and see how they champion gender equality in their organizations (de Vries, 2015) and what actions they take to increase equality. The actual leadership work that has to be done to create gender equal or inclusive work places is an under researched premise. It is also important for gender scholars and activists to think about how we transfer our knowledge to different audiences. The way we materialize it in books or presentations influences how established or accepted a piece of knowledge becomes. It is challenging to find appropriate and provocative ways to disseminate ideas. However, research suggests that experimental learning activities may make participants more receptive to evidence of bias than more passive (i.e. lecture) formats (Benschop *et al.*, 2015; Zawadzki *et al.*, 2012).

I would like to conclude by arguing that is important to continue sharing stories about being a feminist academic with a change agenda. I have on many occasions contemplated retreating into the ivory tower and no longer engaging in knowledge dissemination, but knowing that there are others out there doing the same work convinces me to continue. By sharing both negative encounters and positive stories (e.g. Katila *et al.*, 2010), we share the hard task of doing this work. We not only do it because it makes us feel better, but also "because we might become more accountable to a feminist politics inside and outside the university" (Bannerji, 1992, p. 7).

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