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The Social Production of Research

PERSPECTIVES ON FUNDING AND GENDER

Edited by Sandra Acker, Oili-Helena Ylijoki
and Michelle K. McGinn



RESEARCH INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

‘This insightful book offers a critical multi-level account of the institutional complexity of ever-changing research funding conditions across Canada, Finland, Sweden and the UK. The work provides a fresh look at the gendered repercussions of external research funding imperatives and thus is a must-read for higher education policymakers, managers and researchers alike.’

– **Liudvika Leišytė**, *Professor of Higher Education, TU Dortmund University, Germany*

‘Shines a powerful light on unexamined gender dynamics of who – and what – secures research funding and how this contours academic lives and careers. Essential reading for everyone invested in understanding inequalities in knowledge production and how such inequalities can be challenged.’

– **Maddie Breeze**, *Senior Lecturer in Public Sociology, Queen Margaret University, UK*

‘In an era marked by a global competition based on publications and growing concerns for equity, diversity and inclusion, a nuanced and detailed exploration of the links between research funding and gender is more than necessary. Drawing on a diversity of qualitative approaches, these 23 respected scholars with varied expertise and experiences have produced an insightful comparative work structured around compelling themes such as stability and change, care and conflict, and funding and defunding. I strongly recommend *The Social Production of Research: Perspectives on Funding and Gender* to all current academics, future academics, and reflective practitioners, whether they work in granting agencies, government, higher education institutions or unions.’

– **Olivier Bégin-Caouette**, *Associate Professor, Université de Montréal, Canada*

‘Acquiring competitive research funding is a must in today’s hypercompetitive academia. *The Social Production of Research: Perspectives on Funding and Gender* explores the deeply gendered dynamics and experiences of that endeavour. This insightful book should be on the reading list of all higher education scholars and leaders.’

– **Terhi Nokkala**, *Senior Researcher, Finnish Institute for Educational Research, Finland*

‘This book provides a broad and up-to-date account of gender and research funding by drawing attention to the gendered dimensions of the neoliberal research funding context. The use of qualitative methods makes it an important complement to existing bibliometric studies on the connection of gender and funding.’

– **Charlotte Silander**, *Associate Professor, Linnaeus University, Sweden*

The Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) is an independent and financially self-supporting international learned Society. It is concerned to advance understanding of higher education, especially through the insights, perspectives and knowledge offered by systematic research and scholarship.

The Society's primary role is to improve the quality of higher education through facilitating knowledge exchange, discourse and publication of research. SRHE members are worldwide and the Society is an NGO in operational relations with UNESCO.

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- is a specialist publisher of higher education research, journals and books, amongst them Studies in Higher Education, Higher Education Quarterly, Research into Higher Education Abstracts and a long running monograph book series.

The Society also publishes a number of in-house guides and produces a specialist series "Issues in Postgraduate Education".

- funds and supports a large number of special interest networks for researchers and practitioners working in higher education from every discipline. These networks are open to all and offer a range of topical seminars, workshops and other events throughout the year ensuring the Society is in touch with all current research knowledge.

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THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF RESEARCH

The Social Production of Research offers critical perspectives on the interrelations between research funding and gender, in a climate where universities expect accountability and publishing productivity to be maintained at peak levels.

Drawing upon a range of qualitative methods, contributors investigate experiences with research funding; the nature of institutional, funding body and country contexts; and the impact of social change and disruptions on research ecosystems and academic careers in Canada, Finland, Sweden and the UK. Nuanced accounts call attention to the social, emotional and political conditions within which research is produced, while identifying the ways academics enact, shape, negotiate and resist those conditions in their everyday practice.

Featuring thought-provoking and critical insights for an international readership, this volume is an essential resource for researchers, academics, administrators, managers, funders, politicians and others who are concerned about the future of research funding and the importance of gender equity.

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Edited by Sandra Acker, Oili-Helena Ylijoki and Michelle K. McGinn

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THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF RESEARCH

Perspectives on Funding and Gender

*Edited by Sandra Acker, Oili-Helena Ylijoki and
Michelle K. McGinn*

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CONTENTS

<i>List of contributors</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>Editors' acknowledgements</i>	<i>xvi</i>
<i>Series editors' introduction</i>	<i>xvii</i>
PART 1	
Introduction	1
1 Editors' introduction	3
<i>Sandra Acker, Oili-Helena Ylijoki and Michelle K. McGinn</i>	
2 Research funding and gender: Insights from the literature	20
<i>Sandra Acker</i>	
PART 2	
Stability and change	35
3 Here today, gone tomorrow: The vicissitudes of funding in gendered higher education contexts – a view from Sweden	37
<i>Gabriele Griffin</i>	
4 Discourses of university research in precarious times: A spatial/temporal analysis from the United Kingdom	51
<i>Barbara Read and Carole Leathwood</i>	

5	Gender inequalities, research funding and organisational practices: Academic mothers in Finnish universities <i>Marja Vehviläinen, Hanna-Mari Ikonen and Päivi Korvajärvi</i>	66
6	Casting a long shadow: COVID-19 and female academics' research productivity in the United Kingdom <i>Kate Carruthers Thomas</i>	81
PART 3		
Care and conflict		97
7	Funding journeys in health technology in Finland: The atypical stories of Sara and Heidi <i>Oili-Helena Ylijoki</i>	99
8	Caring about research: Gender, research funding and labour in the Canadian academy <i>Marie A. Vander Kloet and Caitlin Campisi</i>	113
9	The gendered affective economy of funding: Conflicting realities of university leaders and researchers in Finnish academia <i>Johanna Hokka, Elisa Kurtti, Pia Olsson and Tiina Suopajärvi</i>	127
10	Black women academics, research funding and institutional misogyny in the United Kingdom <i>Shirley Anne Tate</i>	142
PART 4		
Funding and defunding		157
11	Status hierarchies, gender bias and disrespect: Ethnographic observations of Swedish Research Council review panels <i>Lambros Roubanis</i>	159
12	Tracing excellence and equity in research funding: Policy change in the Canada Research Chairs Program <i>Merli Tamtik and Dawn Sutherland</i>	173
13	Women academics under RAE and REF: The changing research funding policy landscape in the United Kingdom <i>Lisa Lucas</i>	189

14	Research funding organisations as change agents for gender equality: Policies, practices and paradoxes in Sweden <i>Liisa Husu and Helen Peterson</i>	204
	<i>Index</i>	221

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EDITORS' ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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SERIES EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

This series, co-published by the Society for Research into Higher Education and Routledge Books, addresses key issues in higher education relevant to a wider international audience. Drawing upon innovative and empirically based scholarly thinking, the series aims to provide cross-cutting analysis that can inform policy and practice across the field.

Internationally focused, the Research in Higher Education series provides an opportunity for scholars and thought leaders to showcase recent research and insights relevant to the higher education environment. Each book in the series is unique but shares the common objective of meeting at least one of the principal aims of the Society: to advance knowledge; to enhance practice; and to inform policy.

In this book, the editors have successfully combined the research and perspectives of researchers from several countries and higher education settings to critically reflect on the intersections of gender and research funding. The result is a collection of diverse and thought-provoking contributions, which delve into the ways that gender, funding policies and procedures interact with the very nature of research, shedding light on the challenges faced by scholars across Canada, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom and by extension in many other sites. There are pervasive gender disparities that persist across academia, and while some of this is captured by large datasets and bibliometric explorations, the contributors in this book point to the need for a more nuanced understanding of these dilemmas. A series of qualitative studies is presented that illustrates the often oblique and subtle ways that gender interacts with the research funding process, including the deeply embodied and emotional nature of this work. The result is both deeply personal and public accounts of the

social production of research, including the broader implications for innovation, knowledge production and societal progress.

Rachel Brooks
Sarah O'Shea

PART 1

Introduction



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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Sandra Acker, Oili-Helena Ylijoki and Michelle K. McGinn

Today's universities operate within a neoliberal climate in which accounting and accountability are central, and managerial practices are expected to ensure that research and publishing productivity are kept at peak levels (Leišytė, 2016; Olssen, 2016; Shore & Wright, 2000). Granting structures and cultures appear in the shadows of higher education literature (Polster, 2007), yet they greatly influence academic lives and careers. In this context, universities compete for government funding and academics compete for external grants to support their research (Laudel, 2006). Academics require funding as both a means and an end. As a means, funding allows them to do research in order to publish in approved outlets and keep or progress in their positions. As an end, gaining funding counts in performance reviews as an achievement. And to be fair, not all motives are utilitarian: many, perhaps most, academics enjoy the research work that funding makes possible. Regardless of motive, researchers frequently find themselves in uncomfortable situations where funding is elusive and success rates low. They are 'faced with an increasingly complex and changing environment affected by the behavior of external funders and by national university policies' (Luukkonen & Thomas, 2016, p. 100).

This volume draws attention to gendered dimensions within the current neoliberal research funding context. Our rationale behind this effort is that the two important topics of gender and research funding have not usually been considered together. It is not that there is a scarcity of work on gender in the academy nor even on research funding. However, linkages between gender (and other intersecting social divisions) and research funding are less common.

A growing scholarly trend involves bibliometric and other explorations of large datasets, some of which consider the relationship of gender to funding success, citations and/or research productivity (e.g. Ceci et al., 2023; Kozłowski et al., 2022; Larivière et al., 2013; Sá et al., 2020; Sugimoto & Larivière,

2023). These approaches are useful in identifying broad patterns and have become increasingly sophisticated, revealing information about issues such as the gendered nature of authorship and credit during research collaborations (Ni et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2022).

A complementary approach involves smaller scale, usually qualitative studies that focus on the aspects that the quantitative studies cannot reach: how it feels to search for funding, the gatekeeping operations of networking, and the everyday gendered and racialised practices that sustain and often mask inequalities in research work (e.g. Acker & McGinn, 2021; Grant & Elizabeth, 2015; Griffin, 2022; Leberman et al., 2016; Murgia & Poggio, 2019; O'Connor & Fauve-Chamoux, 2016; Rollock, 2013; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2020). Chapters in this volume follow this second path by exploring the social production of research. Contributors investigate personal and group experience with research funding; funding-body, institutional and country contexts; and the impact on the research ecosystem and the careers of academics of sudden changes such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. The chapters provide nuanced accounts of the social, emotional and political conditions in which research is produced and the ways that academics enact, shape, negotiate and resist these conditions in their everyday practice. Authors draw on a wide variety of qualitative methods: in-depth interviews, ethnography, diary-interview methods, media analysis, email questionnaires, vignettes, focus groups and policy critique. Overall, the chapters provide critical perspectives on the research funding imperative and its gendered repercussions.

The book differs from many collections on aspects of higher education in multiple nations. Although we take an international approach, we focus on a limited selection of countries: Canada, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom (UK). (Although the UK is an amalgam of four countries, we treat it collectively as a 'country' for convenience and comparability.) We believe that this smaller scope involving a limited set of countries enables a deeper analysis, leaving room to include details of each country's higher education and research ecosystem essential to understanding individuals' actions and sense-making, while still exploring a range of themes across chapters that are relevant beyond the four countries. In the next section, we introduce the four countries, after which we provide an account of how the book came to be written and an overview of the contributions that follow.

Countries: similarities and differences

Our four countries look very different from one another when we consider area and population, although their research ecosystems have much in common. In terms of area, we have from largest to smallest: Canada, Sweden, Finland, UK. For population, the order is different with the UK leading, followed by Canada, Sweden and Finland (Worldometer, n.d.). All four countries are welfare states

to a degree, but with elements of capitalism as well. Gosta Esping-Andersen's (1990) three types of welfare states (conservative, liberal and social democratic) seem at least partially apposite. The Nordic countries have been well-known as social democratic states, where social services are widely available and usually free, although recent governments have moved towards market orientations in different sectors, including higher education. Canada and the UK are mixed systems, generally falling under the liberal umbrella where market solutions play a role, while medical, social and educational services remain largely accessible but may be means-tested. All four countries offer free elementary and secondary education and have all or mostly public universities and robust research ecosystems. There are important variations in academic career structures, explored to an extent in the following discussion and in chapters of this book. The next sections consider the four countries' gender equality frameworks and the place of their research funding systems within neoliberal higher education.

Gender equality frameworks

All four countries have gender equality (or equity¹) policies for higher education, yet gender gaps in research funding as well as more broadly in academic career-building persist in each of them (see Acker, this volume).

The Nordic countries, including Finland and Sweden, are known for both gender equality and investment in innovation (Griffin & Vehviläinen, 2021). Still, writers (e.g. Helgesson & Sjögren, 2019; Silander et al., 2022, p. 73) point to a 'Nordic gender paradox' wherein certain gendered inequalities remain stubbornly resistant to change. In Sweden and Finland, and also in the UK and Canada, the representation of academic women in senior promoted positions, top leadership roles and STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) disciplines falls behind that of men. Despite comprehensive legislation prohibiting discrimination and years of gender mainstreaming² (Silander, 2023, p. 47), the Swedish Research Council is quoted as saying, 'It is expected that achieving gender balance among professors will take another 25 years' (Myklebust, 2021). In a review of journal articles from Nordic countries published between 2003 and 2018, Silander and colleagues (2022) stress the importance of the early post-PhD years in gaining access to career-building networks, with men holding a cumulative advantage that begins early (Angervall et al., 2015) and grows over time. Griffin and Vehviläinen (2021) point to cases in their data where old boys' networks operated to offer posts to young men, bypassing formal job searches. Our chapter authors dig deeper into some of the sources and consequences of gender inequality. For example, when research funding becomes scarce, as began in Finland in 2008 (see Aarveaara & Pietiläinen, 2021), men have a greater chance of survival as male-dominated hierarchies (re)assert themselves (see Griffin, this volume; Vehviläinen et al., this volume; and Ylijoki, this volume).

Gender equality policies have been applied to higher education institutions that receive government funding and to research funding bodies themselves and developed with increasing force over time, yet as Tamtik and Sutherland (this volume) point out, ‘targets are not enough’. Following Ahmed (2012), Griffin and Vehviläinen (2021) comment that sometimes the creation of a policy is taken as a signal of action and no effort is put towards the real work of implementation: ‘nothing is done *because* a policy is in place’ (p. 7, emphasis added). The UK’s Athena Swan³ charter programme is a well-known and imitated intervention in which universities work towards awards at different levels for their gender equality policies and practices. Critics point to the emphasis on performativity rather than the reality of change, the extra labour for women who usually do the work of preparing submissions, and metrics that insufficiently prioritise intersectionality (Bhopal & Henderson, 2021; Tzanakou, 2019). The UK has more recently developed a Race Equality Charter, which Bhopal and Henderson (2021) regard as showing potential but suffering from institutions’ reluctance to add more work beyond their Athena Swan applications.

Canada’s research funding agencies have launched a pilot of their own version of Athena Swan, named ‘Dimensions’ and encompassing a broad sweep of considerations under the umbrella of ‘equity, diversity and inclusion’ (EDI). ‘Best practices’ guidelines for a funding stream initiated in 2018, titled the New Frontiers in Research Fund (NFRF), contain detailed requirements to demonstrate EDI practices in grant applications, including research team composition, research environment and project details (Government of Canada, 2023). Interestingly, the NFRF funds ‘interdisciplinary, high-risk/high-reward, transformative research’ intended ‘to support world-leading innovation and enhance Canada’s competitiveness and expertise in the global, knowledge-based economy’ (Government of Canada, 2022, para. 1), the type of rhetoric often thought to be implicitly masculinised (see Read & Leathwood, this volume). EDI requirements have also been added to evaluation criteria for other funding streams and to institutional processes associated with the Canada Research Chairs Program, the latter detailed in this volume by Tamtik and Sutherland.

These Canadian initiatives are informed by contemporary feminist writing that emphasises intersectional approaches, i.e. acknowledges the intersecting categories that cut across gender. While race and class are the most frequently cited such categories, others such as age, disability, indigeneity, sexual orientation and ethnicity also feature prominently. How intersectionality is approached tends to vary across countries. Hübinette and Mähle (2015) write that ‘in the English-speaking world, racial discrimination is a well established research area and an integral part of the equality and quality work of the university sector’ (p. 67). Yet Tate (this volume) draws attention to the difficult climate for Black women academics in the UK who wish to conduct funded research. In contrast, the focus in Nordic scholarship has been more

directly on gender or gender and class than on the intersections of gender and race or ethnicity (e.g. Hübinette & Mählick, 2015; Lund, 2019). The intersecting social divisions considered in this volume's chapters depend on the historical and demographic composition of each country, local area and institutional profile (Hvenegård-Lassen et al., 2020).

Research and the neoliberal university

In recent years, the higher education sectors in all four countries have been subject to competition, rankings, differentiation among institutions, increased accountability and other aspects of neoliberalism. The neoliberal turn in academe (also called 'corporatisation' and 'academic capitalism') has consequences, such as a market orientation guiding decisions, emphasis on competition both within and between institutions, strategic planning and managerialism (Croucher & Lacy, 2020; Olssen, 2016). Two topics that have implications for research work are often mentioned in chapters in this volume: *performance management through selective funding* and *security of academic positions*.

Performance management through selective funding

Government funding is of two main types: core funding for universities; and competitive funding for individuals and sometimes for institutions through public funding agencies, especially research councils. Competitive funding for individual research projects or research programmes has become increasingly prominent in the lives of academics and is analysed in various chapters of this volume. One key reason for the increased emphasis is said to be that universities increasingly depend on external funding for financial survival (Pelkonen et al., 2014; Sugimoto & Larivière, 2023, p. 93). In research council and similar awards, there are systems of peer review that consider the quality of the research proposal and often the track record of the proposer(s) (see Husu & Peterson, this volume; Roumbanis, this volume). Peer review is necessarily subjective, at least in part, and review systems become characterised as unfair and 'a lottery' (Perez Velazquez, 2019), especially when award rates are low. The question that animates our contributors is whether there are gendered patterns to the processes of grant application, review and acquisition, and if so, how they operate (see also Sato et al., 2021; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2020).

Core funding for universities is increasingly performance-based, though differently determined from country to country. Governments are actively altering these systems and their investments in research and development (R&D) so that it is difficult to describe a situation that is forever in flux.

For individual universities, selective government funding is like an investment, intended to give greater support to research programmes with outstanding promise or better records, or direct the energies of individual institutions into areas