

# German early career scholars in Gender Studies: Do networks matter?

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**Purpose of the study:** The field of Gender Studies in Germany demonstrates a rather heterogeneous culture due to its unclear status in relation to other disciplines, while its scope varies from diversity management to critical feminism. Career origins, paths and options for new generations of researchers in this field have to date been only minimally analysed. The contribution of this essay aims at reducing the existing research gap by focusing on the career start and qualification stage in Gender Studies and highlighting the significance of social networks in this process.

**Methodology:** Building upon a qualitative analysis, this study is based on an explorative investigation into German early career researchers. It utilises primary data collected during semi-structured problem-centred telephone interviews with 30 PhD students and Postdocs. The findings evidence three forms of recruitment of PhD students into Gender Studies and question the same sex co-optation principle reported within other fields of scientific inquiry. At the same time, results show that network composition and modes of support are based on the supervisor's and the early career scholar's mutual interest in contributing to theory, rather than maximising political and administrative power. The main contribution, thus, addresses social networks and institutional nepotism in general and as a recruiting strategy in particular, as well as the role of graduate schools as a 'second best' option for junior researchers in Gender Studies.

## **Keywords**

Gender Studies, career development, early career researchers, traditional doctorate, graduate schools, Germany

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## **Introduction**

Social change in labour markets, coupled with the recent financial and economic crisis in Europe, has altered careers not only within the commercial sector, but also in academia, which is going through a concurrent process of reforming its structures towards flexibility, service orientation and excellence (Etzkowitz, 2003; Lynch, 2014). This goes hand-in-hand with modifications in early career life courses in Germany, not in small part due to a growing awareness of economic and social potential associated with young scholars as a source of competitiveness for German universities (Herzog, 2009; Senger, 2011). Being exposed to the conditions of a highly competitive national academic labour market, early career scholars are expected to adapt themselves to the agenda of the New Public Management, which brings public sector structures to competition-oriented principles common within the free economy (Baker, 2009). This trend leads in particular to a career tactic being less driven by curiosity, and more by economic factors, since academic knowledge and its production have been increasingly recognised as powerful strategic resources (Kehm, 2007).

In the light of changes occurring within the space of academic institutions, the German doctoral qualification phase is undergoing substantial modifications to enhance its competitiveness. As a result, German doctorates can be obtained both through the traditional route of research assistantship and through graduate school, which makes the German case noteworthy not only regarding the effects of qualification stage on career development, but also in terms of gender specificity pertinent to these processes. While research and project assistant positions still represent a traditional path to an academic career (Kreckel, 2016), an increasing demand for structured doctoral studies, called graduate schools (*Graduiertenkolleg*) could be observed as early as the 1990s (Gellert, 1993; Bartelse, 1999; Thaller, 2006). These aim at shortening the PhD stage and providing better tuition for doctoral candidates, in conjunction with mitigating gender inequalities that are deeply rooted in German academia. Gender disparities are culturally anchored due to a highly praised notion of the consummate devoted full-time male scientist, and albeit in a diminished form, these disparities still affect the academic life courses of subsequent cohorts of scholars.

However, the effects of social class and gender associated with doctoral stage and selectivity of doctoral programs have not yet been addressed. This is especially true for Gender Studies that have not been scrutinised due to their separate status on the German scientific landscape and a somewhat ambiguous assignment to existing disciplines. Having developed from a clearly critical impulse, this field of study incorporates a striking majority of female scholars with multiple research backgrounds, such as sociology, political sciences, literature, history, cultural studies and anthropology, medical sciences, and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). Yet, past research has not elaborated distinctly whether these

circumstances lead to similar patterns of career origins and destinations as those known for male dominated fields.

In order to reduce the existing research gap, this study explores academic life courses of German early career researchers in Gender Studies and their subsequent occupational integration into academia from the theoretical perspective of social networks foregrounding the gender dynamics. The following two questions are central to this investigation:

- Do decisions to obtain a doctorate in the academic field of Gender Studies correlate with social networks and gender?
- Do recently implemented graduate schools support women in establishing their careers in academia?

The article is structured as follows: after an overview of the theoretical approaches, I discuss two categories crucial for academic career advancement. Then I present the data and methods used, followed by the results of the study. A discussion and outlook complete the contribution.

## **German doctorate and Gender Studies**

Similarly to within other countries, a master's degree or diploma represents a prerequisite for a doctoral education in German academia. Yet, Germany has largely maintained a peculiar model of PhD training that significantly diverges from educational standards agreed on in other countries such as France, the UK or the US. Specifically, qualifying for a postgraduate degree in Germany was predominantly carried out in research assistant positions until the end of the 1990s and thus represented a traditional path to an academic career (Kreckel, 2016). This model – together with more recently introduced positions of project assistant – is subject to a simultaneous autonomous doctoral training and additional faculty work that includes teaching, local administration and scientific activities not necessarily related to one's dissertation project. Along with research and project assistantships, there exist two further possible ways to a doctorate: one on the basis of a scholarship, a mechanism for tax-free sponsorship of talented PhD students through established state or private foundations; and the other implying working part- or full-time to finance one's PhD, also referred to as the 'weekender' (Abels & Woods, 2015).

Due to a growing precariousness associated with working conditions in academia, as well as competition and performance driven modes of operation in science and research, German universities have been heavily criticised for inefficient PhD training. Specific criticisms include indefinite numbers of PhD candidates and their social characteristics, the length of time taken for completion, excessive bonding between supervisor – PhD advisor – and PhD candidate, among others (Kehm, 2007; Herzog, 2009). To overcome these apparent shortcomings, German institutions of higher learning have attempted to strengthen and structure doctoral education by

introducing graduate schools as a third cycle of studies relating to the Bologna education reforms in order to contribute to internationalisation and recognition of certificates. By doing so, higher education institutions have envisaged making PhD training not only more standardised and transparent, but also multidisciplinary by bringing together researchers with diverse topics and academic backgrounds into a dialogue.

So far, little research has been carried out to evaluate the anticipated impact of newly introduced doctoral programs on early career outcomes. Recent studies endeavoured to assess equality of opportunities in terms of gender and diversity (Korff et al., 2012), improvement of supervision in structured doctoral education (Hausse et al., 2012; Matzick et al., 2016) or reasons for non-completion of PhD programs (Hausse et al., 2010; Zervakis, 2015). Additionally, past research has illustrated developments regarding structured doctoral programs, having covered traditional fields of study such as engineering, natural sciences and social sciences (Berning & Falk, 2005; Hippler, 2012). However, having shed some light on structural and epistemological aspects of recently launched doctoral programs, these studies have hardly addressed gendered career decisions of and subsequent career opportunities for young scholars in the newly established and/or emerging fields of study like Gender Studies research.

Gender Studies represents a rather specific field on the German academic landscape for several reasons. Firstly, as already mentioned, this area of scientific inquiry has struggled to establish itself into a countrywide fully recognised discipline except for within specific centres of Gender Studies nested at several German universities that offer degrees at bachelor's and/or master's level. However, the option of obtaining a doctorate in Gender Studies is not widely provided. The unclear status of Gender Studies is partly owing to its controversial position among gender scholars themselves, and partly to its condescending treatment from other disciplines, especially from within the positivist, male dominated field of sociology. Secondly, this academic field exhibits significant feminisation at all levels of the academic hierarchy, which is less than typical within German academia. Female scholars most often have backgrounds in social sciences and the humanities. Thirdly, Gender Studies incorporates scholars from a wide range of disciplines including engineering, natural sciences and the humanities, thus demonstrating a high degree of multi-disciplinarity without one specific academic culture. Additionally, the genesis of Gender Studies as a research field at state universities represents a state initiative resulting from the German bottom-up feminist emancipation movement (Müller, 1997), aiming at making female scholars more visible (Baer, 2016). As a result of this state focus, Gender Studies run the risk of being understood as diversity management and gender mainstreaming activities run by the state, rather than as a fully-fledged academic subject with valid career options. Theorisation on early career passage with regard to feminist routes into and out of doctoral education as well as job opportunities in gender research are especially lacking (Kahlert, 2015). Due to the conditions set by the

New Public Management and risks of precarisation and individualisation found at the beginning of an academic career, it is all the more important to explore career opportunities for scholars in this field of scientific inquiry.

### **Considerations on conventional explanations of decisions to obtain a doctorate**

Women are still sometimes seen as less suitable for leadership in academic life courses than men (Wolfinger et al., 2009; European Commission, 2012; Piotrowski & Kang, 2016). The life course framework, forming the basis of this study, overcomes the limitations of the conceptual approach of the 'leaky pipeline' (Berryman, 1983), which rests on the assumption that the more women at the base of the pyramid, the more will find their way to the top. Yet, several authors have suggested that the 'leaky pipeline' is too simplistic as the scientist's career pathways are not linear (Xie & Shauman, 2003; Sagebiel & Vázquez, 2010). Therefore, it is promising to investigate the experiences of women at different stages of their educational and professional development (Glover & Fielding, 1999; Glover, 2000), as this approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the gendered pathways through the life course and recognises the cumulative effects of life events at particular stages on career outcomes.

Scholars have revealed that while men's careers are considered normative and exhibit a relatively stable, gradual development, female academic life courses demonstrate higher individualisation due to significant vertical and horizontal inequalities (Beaufaÿs et al., 2012). These are characterised not only by the social origin and the field of study, but also increasingly by gender (Bagilhole & White, 2013). Yet, past studies theorising on (gendered) career advancement in academia placed human capital and the meritocracy principle in the foreground of the argument (Bielby, 1991; Śliwa & Johansson, 2013; Leberman et al., 2016). By doing this, they often correlated promotions with performance, achievement and efficiency of individuals who pursue academic careers (Berning & Falk, 2006; Heineck & Matthes, 2012).

First career decisions (in academia) have been tackled through a number of theoretical approaches. The most prominent of these are: 1) the social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994) drawing upon Bandura's (1986) self-efficacy concept; 2) related considerations on talents of young individuals (Harmon, 1971; Leung & Harmon, 1990); and 3) the theoretical debate on intrinsic and extrinsic motives as main drivers of career decisions (Deci, 1975; Ryan & Deci, 2000). These approaches have considerably enriched our knowledge of processes underlying certain occupational and career-related decisions. For instance, since Lent et al. (1994) understand occupational choices as dynamic processes rather than static events, they investigated cumulative micro-level effects resulting in career choices, such as

individual characteristics, contextual and contingent factors, as well as previous experiences of singular persons. Indeed, past experiences with and successful mastering of gender-related problems represent a spectrum of factors regarded as opportunities and constraints. However, these approaches hardly explain the interdependence of gender, individual networks, doctoral education and further career development in Gender Studies.

Capacities, or talents, demonstrate an additional reason to pursue an academic career in the field of gender research. Furthermore, motivation is an integral part of career decisions associated with further occupational trajectories inside or outside academia, which has been confirmed by other fields of study (Pololi et al., 2013; Janger & Nowotny, 2016). In the investigation by Berning & Falk (2006), Bavarian PhD students reported a wide variety of different motives for starting a PhD depending on their field of study: while engineers mentioned intrinsic motives, such as interest in the research topic, students in law anticipated better occupational chances, an extrinsic motivation. Moreover, women are more likely to perform out of intrinsic than extrinsic motives (D'Lima et al., 2014; Skatova & Ferguson, 2014). For Gender Studies, it can be assumed that candidates make PhD related decisions driven by a genuine interest in the topic of their further research on gender. Yet, this intrinsic motivation might be moderated by the selectivity of candidates due to previous experiences with senior researchers or established networks. As a result, individuals better equipped with social connections might benefit in the form of traditional university PhD positions, with others being allocated in graduate schools.

### **The role of networks in early career**

Although studies rooted in psychology have enhanced our understanding of inequalities faced by women who pursue academic careers, they have only to a small extent highlighted the link between early academic career as a life course stage, social networks and their role in dynamics of inequalities for further career trajectories. Moreover, most investigations focus on the professorial level and use retrospective research design in order to reconstruct obstacles faced by female researchers within academia. By doing so, they often neglect the fact that professors are established scholars who have already overcome barriers and may tend to rationalise their experiences. Besides, this kind of research design excludes women who left academia and makes it hardly possible to fathom the reasons and factors of success and failure in scholarly careers.

Past research has shown that it is not always the graduates with best completion grades who proceed further to a doctorate (Wissenschaftsrat, 2001; Krempkow et al., 2008). Instead, graduates compensate for performance deficits by personal social connections, having approached professors or worked with them during the undergraduate stage as teaching or research assistants (Lenger, 2009). In some cases,

career advancement can strongly correlate with networks accumulated throughout the qualification stage and may prove a successful proxy for less pronounced efficiency and excellence (Scheff, 1995).

According to Granovetter (1995), social networks can advantageously equip individuals: while strong ties represent close relationships and provide psychological or emotional support, so-called weak ties have an extraordinary power and can leverage better job positions. Weak ties represent information channels that serve as a bridge between various social groups (McDonald, 2011) and transmit job-related data; the latter get spread beyond one network and thus ensure dissemination of information to broader circles. Additionally, weak ties can serve as a mechanism of subtle support ranging from simple information transfer, through the recommendation of an individual up to direct employment.

However, the existing literature provides controversial evidence for the effects generated by such ties: previous studies for other countries demonstrated that doctoral supervisors and PhD candidates built a strong tie relationship (Gewinner, 2017). At this juncture, these were strong ties that provided implicit support to early career researchers in terms of acceptance of their conference abstracts or invitations to workshops. Moreover, available networks can either positively or negatively impact on a decision-making process regarding thematic specialisation in Gender Studies based on the quality of experience associated with these networks. According to Berning & Falk (2006), nearly 22% of respondents in social sciences and about 15% in the humanities mentioned having been encouraged by their current supervisor. However, these results do not provide information on whether or not this was the same person under whose supervision they first encountered the academic life. Drawing upon considerations of past communication with potential supervisors, it can be assumed for the context of Gender Studies that previous work on gender-related topics, be that undergraduate courses, student assistantships or undergraduate tutor activities, can result in the intention to receive a doctorate.

Feminised fields of study in general face a particularly high loss of women's scientific potential at the highest levels of academic hierarchy (Lind, 2007). However, Lind (2007) argues that the ways young researchers are being recruited are crucial for understanding further success in their academic life course. Specifically, the degree of formalisation is of pivotal relevance in the recruitment process, meaning that recognised scholars tend to encourage graduates to obtain a PhD according to the homosocial co-optation principle (Langfeldt, 2006; Monroe et al., 2008). This might be especially true for Gender Studies with their high proportions of female scholars who would tend to promote young women on a basis of homophily (McDonald, 2011). Yet, the stigmatisation of the discipline as a 'girls network' using an unorthodox, non-positivist methodology can diminish the further career chances of new generations of scholars and make them search for alternative jobs either in university administration

or outside academia, thus putting the productivity and efficiency of Gender Studies in question.

In her investigation of female scholars in the North of Germany, Geenen (2000) found that efficiency-oriented established scholars were more likely to support young researchers irrespective of gender as compared to those driven by the desire to increase their influence. Moreover, established professors can be inclined to supervise PhD candidates they already know (Marsden, 2001; Brooks & Youngson, 2014). Hence, it can be assumed that a decision to obtain a doctorate and to work on gender-related topics at traditional university positions comes into existence when senior scholars supervise candidates they already know either through past undergraduate encounters or via recommendation from other established researchers. In that way, they exhibit the power to structure their successor networks, yet the background logic of hiring either talented or loyal candidates is disputable.

Regarding structured PhD programs, the current literature touts such programs as a panacea capable of solving the existing problems associated with doctoral education. Explicitly, past research has indicated the following shortcomings pertinent to PhD education at university positions: lack of supervision, duration of PhD studies, high dropout rates, high average age at completion, and low integration into academia or a lack of key skills after receiving a PhD (Enders & Bornmann, 2001; Berning & Falk, 2006). Graduate schools were anticipated to overcome these weaknesses: successful candidates were intended to concentrate on doctoral studies through implemented scholarships coupled with the provision of a working place and release from other job activities in academia. Specifically, the application process has been largely formalised in order to reduce the power of the co-optation principle and to assure that mostly highly-skilled candidates would be selected for doctoral studies (Hauss & Kaulisch, 2011). Apart from a formal application, graduate schools introduced interviews in front of a group of senior scholars. Still, although graduate programs gained a wide response among young academics, the traditional way to receive a doctorate at university remains dominant (Briedis et al., 2014; Kreckel, 2016).

Within the German context, graduate schools are frequently sponsored by the German Research Foundation (DFG) that not only grants general resources for a maximum duration of nine years for each thematic PhD program, but also supports PhD students with scholarships. From a wide range of supported doctoral schools (243 as of 2016), there is only one that explicitly dealt with gender, a second having expired in 2013. Other, general PhD programs are sponsored either by federal states or prominent universities that have pioneered the institutionalisation of Gender Studies as a discrete discipline in Germany. Previous research demonstrated that graduate schools, including doctoral schools in Gender Studies, could actually select high-performing students (Enders & Kottmann, 2009), and sometimes even violated the formal acceptance rules in order to facilitate access for talented young academics

(Möller, 2011). Moreover, as Möller (2009) describes, the female alumni of one graduate school in Gender Studies who disproportionately originated from working class families could exhibit very fruitful careers later in their lives. Indeed, more formal application to a PhD course can recoup otherwise missing social capital or direct contact with a senior scholar and provide financial security should an academic position at a university be out of the question. Whereas about 19% to 30% of external doctoral candidates rely on scholarships from private foundations, about 52% of postgraduate students in PhD programs are funded by bursaries provided as a salary within these programs (Reinhardt, 2007; Weichenrieder & Zehner, 2013). Therefore, one can hypothesise that obtaining a doctorate in Gender Studies at a graduate school comes about due to a lack of contact with senior academics, or for monetary reasons.

## **Data and Methods**

The focus on the early career phase in the current study is designated due to several reasons: first, it is a key stage, as junior researchers have recently experienced a major transition point in lifecycle, from the education system to the labour market, in terms of new dilemmas and survival strategies. Moreover, this phase plays a crucial role not only for further career continuity, but also for the family formation plans of academics, since both events often run simultaneously. Secondly, early career female researchers drop out from academia increasingly at this stage, since they do not find suitable entry paths into this as yet male domain, thus wasting their talent.

Taking into account the widely unexplored aspects of network-related early career stage inequalities in Gender Studies, this study rests upon an interpretative approach and concentrates on subtle nuances pertinent to the routes into the PhD phase in Germany. To collect the primary data, I carried out an explorative investigation by conducting semi-structured problem-centred telephone interviews with German early career researchers who were either at the final stage of their doctoral project (19 PhD students) or have received a doctorate within the four years prior to the study (11 Postdocs). Detailed data on sampling are provided in Table 1.

*Table 1 Overview of the Respondents: Sociodemographic characteristics*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Sub-category</b>	<b>Number</b>
Gender	Women	25
	Men	5
Nationality	German	27
	Other	3
Employment situation at the time of the doctorate	Research assistant	12
	Project assistant	4
	Graduate school	10

	Scholarship 'Weekender'	3 1
Original fields of study	Arts and the Humanities Social sciences Gender Studies Life sciences STEM	10 15 3 1 1
Undergraduate experience as student assistant/tutor	Yes No	24 6
Current academic status	PhD students (last stage) PostDoc	19 11

*Source: Own calculation.*

The data stems from an ongoing project hosted at the Leibniz Universität Hannover. Using a prospective research design, this project follows early career researchers on their way to career advancement in academia, starting from their first career decisions (doctorate) to the point of their establishment as recognised scholars or dropping out of academia. This method envisages subsequent follow-up waves and telephone interviews with the respondents from the first wave and, by attrition of a respondent pool, incorporation of new participants. This contribution utilises the data gained from the first wave of the qualitative survey. Apart from the factors presented in Table 1, I collected information on marital status, family formation and children, household composition and organisation, academic/undergraduate background as well as the academic activities and concerns of young German scholars. Thanks to the broad spectrum of topics thematised in interviews, I gathered a valuable pool of diverse perspectives pertinent to early career academics at German universities and graduate schools.

Respondents have been randomly selected and invited to participate in the study, based upon the Internet screening of all German universities and graduate schools, across the whole country. Overall, 74 potential participants whose contact data could be identified online have been approached in the first wave of data collection. The prerequisite for participating in the study was respondents' self-identification with Gender Studies expressed by thematic contextualisation or topics of interest within Gender Studies. Each interview lasted about 60 minutes, with rare exceptions amounting to two hours, and all participants consented to the audio recording of interviews and the use of data for subsequent analysis. At the end of each interview, respondents have been given the possibility of addressing any study-related topic and providing their thoughts and perceptions of their paths within academia.

This strategy accomplished the issues activated in a prior conversation, and yielded better conceptualisation of the specificity of gender scholars in German academia.

The data were collected in the summer and autumn of 2016 and subsequently entered into MaxQDA to highlight important determinants associated with social capital accumulation and the effects of social networks on academic career advancement. The coding process consisted of bringing together deductive categories and interview passages and respondents' statements, while one and the same sentence could be assigned to different dimensions and categories due to rich information content. Data were coded twice by one coder, with a time spell of four months between coding activities, and followed the scheme suggested by R. Thomson (Thomson & Holland, 2003; Plumridge & Thomson, 2003). The categories contained important information on family background and educational history, development of the scientific profile, family formation, networking within the community, relationships with supervisors and peers, vision of Gender Studies in future academia, job possibilities for gender scholars, etc. While the most relevant dimensions of this analysis pertained to decisions related to academic path and relationships with supervisor(s), others gave valuable insights into life circumstances and rationalisation of respondents' agency.

Interviewees agreed to participate on a free basis, were not familiar with each other, represented different universities, disciplines and scientific schools, and asserted that they had shared the experiences discussed in their interviews with other colleagues or friends elsewhere in German academia. Such practices reflected both common obvious and subtle ways of getting into and advancing in academia. This makes the current investigation the first in Germany that elaborates on the career paths of gender scholars from different universities in a comprehensive way, using a prospective research design, interpretative methodology and problem-centred interviews.

## **Social networks and early careers in Gender Studies – Findings and Discussion**

### ***Encounter and decision for Gender Studies as a discipline***

Early career researchers follow their topics within Gender Studies out of a genuine interest in the issues they raise, and seek to pursue an academic career under the aegis of Gender Studies if they have already collected first encounters with gender-related topics. This clear intrinsic motivation often evolves from student assistantships or tutor activities prior to postgraduate studies. Indeed, a substantial number of respondents reported having possessed previous experience primarily in assistantships at the undergraduate stage. Some respondents mentioned that they have been holding positions of student assistants for a long period of time, thus not only acquiring skills in research and/or teaching, but also gathering tacit knowledge

on how things work in academia. Interestingly, respondents pursued topics explicitly related to Gender Studies during their undergraduate studies even when they were taking bachelor's or master's courses in other, usually 'big', disciplines, such as sociology, history, etc. Some interviewees affirmed that, although they obtained first tertiary degrees in subjects not directly related to gender, such as arts, pedagogy, social work, literature, etc., they developed an interest in gender themes also out of personal life experience.

This finding relates to both men and women in my sample: they described their biographical events prior to tertiary education or during undergraduate studies as meaningful for taking the path of Gender Studies. For example, men were inclined to investigate gender segregation in the labour market (men in care occupations, women in leading positions), or the relation between body and nutrition; women scrutinised topics linked to societal disparities, such as inequalities and the right to equality, or their historical genesis, and relation between power, violence and conflict.

Q: How did you come about working in Gender Studies?

Irene (PhD student): In my parents' family, I grew up with something I call doing gender in a purest form. For my parents, my brother was a future breadwinner, and he received all imaginable support he could get. I, just a girl, had to justify all my decisions... A levels, then university, student work – they hardly supported me, my mom didn't even come to help me with my relocation to another city!.. Later, I wanted to get to the bottom of these patterns... perhaps that's why I study gender.

Anna (PhD student): Actually, I studied German and Roman philology and anticipated a teaching career, till I came across one text representing a pure form of misogyny. It battered me in such a way that I started reading more until I was so much concerned with the issue that I revised my plans and decided to obtain a PhD from a graduate school. It was a good alternative to otherwise lacking research positions at our university.

### ***Networks, motivation and patterns of commitment to Gender Studies***

I could observe a correlation between previous undergraduate activities and the establishment of a connection with a doctoral supervisor (current for PhD candidates and former for Postdocs). My respondents reported that they were approached by a senior scholar regarding continuing their activities within the academic environment at PhD level. The requesting individual acted either as an advisor in the past (for example, as the advisor of a diploma/master's project) or as an examiner at final oral tests upon the completion of tertiary education. This established professor (either male or female) suggested considering taking an academic path as a future occupation,

either a doctorate or the coordination of a project. It turned out to be a very good match or – as many respondents claimed – a “smooth transition” directly after completing undergraduate studies, especially given their past experience as an assistant or a tutor.

Thomas (PhD student): Back then, I was not going to stay at university. I was open to other activities and options, and even rejected the invitation of one [*female – I.G.*] professor to write a PhD thesis under her supervision...

Melanie (PhD student): I studied pedagogy and worked as a student assistant. Simultaneously, I attended courses led by female professors in Gender Studies and after my diploma, I have been approached by one [*female – I.G.*] professor who asked me whether I had an interest in a PhD.

Significantly, male respondents received an invitation to start a PhD project equally as often as female interviewees. Thus, based on my data, I cannot support the argument for the presence of a recruiting mechanism based on the same sex co-optation principle and homophily. Looking for a reason for this peculiarity, I asked my interview participants to delve more into their employment history. As a result, I revealed a striking pattern of continuous support on the part of female professors towards early career male scholars. It can be hypothesised at this point that such practice represents a cultural, deeply-rooted notion of a breadwinner normative coupled with gender stereotypes of men as knowers unconsciously possessed by established scholars despite their scientific creed. Indeed, all young male scholars who gave insights into their professional development reported having family and children for whom they were responsible. Interviews with female professors would be necessary to evidence this claim. Wishing to allocate more male scholars into Gender Studies in order to diversify or even legitimize the discipline might embody another explanation of heterophily in Gender Studies. This wish, however, cannot be observed in top-down funding pressures for gender parity.

Michael (PhD student): I have been with my boss [*female professor – I.G.*] since 2002 and have never been unemployed. The jobs have emerged in the course of these years, as our department has always recruited third-party funds. I am convinced by my boss as a person, since she once tried to negotiate my contract being tenured. It didn't work though.

Thomas (PhD student): ...I got to know my doctor mother during my first research project – we have been working together for 11 years now. I act as coordinator of her projects, and besides, I try to work on my PhD. It takes time.

Felix (PhD student): Previously, I studied German philology and philosophy, but my interest increasingly shifted to the issue of heteronormativity. My supervisor received two tranches of funding and could therefore guarantee me

continuity of employment. Without this, I would be searching for alternative positions in other German cities.

## **Gender Studies and disciplinary network composition**

One more finding is remarkable at this point. While all female full professors who acted as PhD advisors of my respondents were located within Gender Studies, male professors were distributed across other disciplines, mainly within sociology. On the one hand, this circumstance can be interpreted as Gender Studies representing a specific arena where collaborative networks are mostly important because Gender Studies are an interdisciplinary field of scientific inquiry (Liinason & Holm, 2006). On the other hand, women's, feminist and Gender Studies appear (somewhat) marginalised in the humanities and social sciences (Pereira, 2012; Liinason & Grenz, 2016), thus causing men to steer away for the sake of their careers. Indeed, topics scrutinised by male scholars incorporate broader themes and within Gender Studies, can cover masculinity, legal and/or policy issues, but don't usually encompass violence or gendered career inequalities (Walter, 2000; Kimmel et al., 2005; Dean, 2011).

Julia (Postdoc): I once heard my former supervisor saying that men consider Gender Studies an arena for complaints... where women blame men for all their bad luck... she laughed then, but there is something in that, isn't there? (*smiles*)

Calling Gender Studies "an arena for complaints" reveals how the academically-motivated wish to understand inequalities in a scientific way and elaborate on societal solutions is being misunderstood as a gender based complaint, rather than a need and pursuit for alternative role models or practices within institutions. Addressing and theorising inequalities, bringing deficient structures or misogynistic organisational cultures to the current agenda runs the risk of being devaluated or interpreted in a populist way. This can go so far that, depending on the context, Gender Studies can be labelled as non-scientific, and feminist scholarship "as not quite 'proper' academic knowledge" (Pereira, 2016, page 101). Positivism driven 'real' scholars, especially men, would reasonably keep away from such unprofessional activities in order not to obstruct their own career paths.

Dodging the rules and norms within academia to improve one's own career chances is the next interesting example of agency within Gender Studies. Deploying performativity towards career ends might look like an individual response to neoliberal structures targeting content-provision and credential-based quantifiable activities. Yet, this mode of action is symptomatic for changing academic cultures and burdensome working conditions, and finding a collective strategy to overcome and resist the pressure has already been addressed as an urgent task, particularly for

women scholars. This sits especially within the scope of Gender Studies (Wilbourne, 2009; Gill, 2010; Pereira, 2016).

Maria (Postdoc): My boss is so prominent in theoretical sociology that I was happy to just have him as a PhD supervisor back then. I was a typical weekender and could count myself lucky. When he advertised a position at his chair, I didn't think twice and proposed in a 'cheeky' way that he would hire me (*laughs*)... oh yes, a girl should be cheeky in academia...

Another interesting observation is noteworthy here. Even provided that respondents received inquiries from senior scholars as to whether or not they would opt for an academic career, the relevant contact did not guarantee a certain position at the university. Instead, three different scenarios were possible. In the first case, if an established professor had already worked with a respondent at the undergraduate level, he or she was more likely to offer a research assistant position, thus applying a mechanism of direct hiring. In the second case, if a respondent signalled an interest to obtain a doctorate but a senior academic was not able to offer a position, the latter recommended application to a place at graduate school. The third scenario complied with the framework of the so-called 'weekender' when a candidate received a senior scholar's consent to supervise a dissertation but had to search for means of subsistence, thus working autonomously and being unaffiliated. These three scenarios are clearly consistent with Granovetter's thesis on the gradation of power with respect to ties: the weakest connection was characterised by agreeing to supervise a doctoral thesis, followed by providing a PhD seeker with information regarding opportunities within a graduate school, and crested by its strongest manifestation, directly hiring a doctoral candidate.

Julia (Postdoc): Much of my success is explained by performance, while personal chemistry and networks are tabooed. PhD candidates experience substantial pressure in their work, also due to 'developable' supervision. Traditional research assistants are commonly thwarted by their supervisors and do not manage to become independent researchers.

Lena (PhD student): I approached one professor in sociology who I expected to supervise me, but he advised me to apply for a position at a graduate school. Apparently, he had no positions to offer.

Although simple at a first glance, a detailed look at the veiled structures and hierarchies within Gender Studies in Germany shows a more complex picture. The most striking characteristic consisted of a perceived gradation of 'gender' as an analytic category, mirrored in publications and professional creeds of established scholars. Doctoral supervisors differed in their interpretation of 'Gender Studies', their

scope and general mission, ranging from a statistical variable up to a highly critical position associated with challenging basic definitions and questioning existing societal orders.

Michael (PhD student): My boss offered me a position after my graduation; she suggested deepening my analyses because she apparently liked my work... We have several joint publications and agree in advance who writes which part.

Emilia (PhD student): We [*PhD supervisor and respondent – I.G.*] have a joint paper, which is part of my PhD project... I presented it at the annual meeting [*of one research committee – I.G.*], but they don't recognise gender as a problem. For my boss, the only way to get acknowledged there is doing quantitative empirical research. I think this does not necessarily go along with making explanations based on individual meanings... That's a pity.

The willingness to support prospective researchers can therefore be explained not just by a mere level of acquaintance as a prerequisite for cooperation, but much more by a compliance of candidates with the general understanding of gender and its epistemological role. If it matches with the position of doctoral supervisor, then it increases the chances of being supported within a traditional university position. By contrast, being a representative of a different approach diminishes scientific productivity and may even result in a higher fluctuation of the university workforce.

Nicole (PhD student): My supervisor and I have a formal professional relationship but our connection is not close. Our topics of interest diverge. I don't work in the tradition she does, so there are no common issues we can elaborate on. The only help she can provide is related to empirical research. It is difficult to contact her on a regular basis though, as she is always very busy.

Irene (PhD student): She changed her mind every two weeks, and I had to obey, accepting her visions of theory and methods, you know, hierarchy. This supposed scientific superiority does more harm than good for a prospective researcher... I never experienced emotional support from my supervisor.

In fact, weaker or even missing previous contact with a potential supervisor turned out to be a predictor for attending graduate school, as revealed by the data for Gender Studies. Moreover, PhD candidates affiliated with graduate schools were slightly more likely to move from universities from which they received their first tertiary degree, which is consistent with findings for other fields of study (Langfeldt, 2006). However, this finding should be scrutinised more thoroughly with respect to the moderating effect of family status, since some of my interview partners attended graduate schools at the universities where they had already completed their first undergraduate studies. Family responsibilities or care commitments played a significant role in the decision

to stay at the same place of residence – at least for those with such obligations. Others, affiliated with graduate schools, moved for reasons of the benefits offered by doctoral programs, such as curriculum, autonomy and time freedom, as well as monetary profits. Financial reasons contributed considerably to a decision to start a doctorate in a graduate school – a substantial proportion of respondents accentuated their perceived freedom from administrative duties and generous time resources for pursuing their own research. Additionally, financial benefits guaranteed for three years of funded training attracted prospective early career scholars, especially those from other countries.

Joanna (Postdoc): I chose graduate school out of lack of other perspectives. Looking back, I know that integration occurs better at university positions. Besides, my PhD supervisor was never concerned with my work and even dampened lots of my ideas... I've been on the job search for a year now.

Nicole (PhD student): In a graduate school, one has the luxury of doing only one's own research. One has time and financial resources for that, one has no administrative obligations and other stuff to cope with... Yet, the competition for future positions is tremendous and we are all subtle rivals. This thought spoils the mood.

Again, by itself, the decision to study for a PhD does not in itself deliver much information on likely success, since this determination to a great extent shapes the further academic life course against the background of other factors. For that reason, I observed individuals' further steps in academia, especially after PhD completion. My data show that obtaining a doctorate while undertaking a traditional research assistant position can convey an individual towards a better integration within academia in terms of tacit knowledge, namely how structures work, who is responsible for what, who can be of help in different situations. Besides, Postdocs reported better recognition of themselves as colleagues at their universities. They explained this as occurring through close collaboration with colleagues on topics that complement each other without producing competition. On the other hand, the experiences of Postdocs after obtaining a PhD in a graduate school dispersed: while some Postdocs from 'small subjects' (anthropology, film studies, design, etc.) could exhibit a transition to paid employment under a temporary contract, others reported lack of knowledge on integral mechanisms in academia despite better training. Moreover, they are believed to have shifted their job search phase to a later point in time, namely after obtaining their scientific degree. This state of affairs resulted in rather pessimistic speculations relating to remaining in academia, due to a lack of prospects. These interviewees attributed this to missing contacts and patronage during the qualification stage and unintentional deficiency in collaboration with supervisor and/or other PhD candidates.

## **Conclusion**

This contribution has addressed network-related determinants of obtaining a doctorate in Gender Studies as a new perspective on knowledge production. Previous research broached the issue of factors affecting a decision to start an academic career. However, these largely focused on other academic fields (Berning & Falk, 2005; 2006; Pololi et al., 2013), applied individually-centred and partly psychological approaches, such as self-efficacy or motivation (Janger & Nowotny, 2016), and rarely incorporated a life course perspective. Gender Studies, standing for a highly interdisciplinary field of scientific inquiry, accumulates knowledge from a wide range of research areas, such as the social sciences, humanities, natural science and medicine, and STEM. Due to this peculiarity, the analysis of gender-specific routes into doctoral education in a highly feminised research arena is all the more important. Existing literature can hardly demonstrate generalisable results taking into account a wide range of disciplines within Gender Studies, whereas comprehensive qualification stage examinations are not available for Germany.

I have argued that networks represent an important determinant of career decisions associated with academic life courses, and applied network perspective on Gender Studies as a specific field of scientific inquiry in Germany. I explicitly analysed decisions to undertake research in Gender Studies, and students' early career academic life courses in research on gender. First, I discussed the role of undergraduate experience and gender-related themes from individuals' life or educational history as relevant for deciding to obtain a doctorate degree in Gender Studies. To scrutinise my assumptions, I interviewed 30 early career researchers who have seen themselves as junior scholars in gender research. The available data elucidate that working as a student assistant or a tutor during the undergraduate stage is an important condition to predict whether a student will pursue a PhD in the field. This can be explained by the fact that working as an assistant or a tutor not only helps to gain knowledge and acquire skills, but also establishes important contacts to senior staff as a substantial prerequisite for a doctorate. Indeed, the probability of gaining consent for supervision of a dissertation or of getting hired by an established scholar depended on the extent to which a senior academic already knew a potential candidate. The weakness of respective connection as well as other reasons, such as bursaries or age, resulted in decisions to obtain doctorate degrees from a graduate school instead. Therefore, doctoral schools seem to function more as a 'second best' option – with students choosing them mostly in response to a lack of other options, or constraining factors such as family location.

It is interesting to note that networks within Gender Studies reportedly come about less through the desire to increase administrative power and influence by senior researchers, but more about achieving substantial records and contributing to theory.

According to the data, tenured professors were more reluctant to cooperate with doctoral candidates representing scientific approaches distinct from their own, which stimulated uncertainty, anxiety and stress among PhD students at traditional university positions. In terms of implications for personnel policies, this circumstance may lead to long-term ruptures and a higher fluctuation of academic workers, which can be countervailed by alternative hiring practices. This task is partially solved by graduate schools that are more impersonal, but at the same time these provide far less connectivity and continuity in academic careers.

Another striking result is that (senior) scholars in Gender Studies seem to have less effective networks. This finding represents a clear contrast to so-called 'old boys' networks' that are marked by continuity and support based on loyalty of involved individuals. Moreover, a culturally rooted normative of gendered social roles implicitly affects female professors in Gender Studies in their decisions as to whom to offer their support. It is questionable whether talent, loyalty or cultural beliefs play a more important role in this decision-making process.

First career related decisions were found to have consequences for junior researchers in Gender Studies. While doctoral candidates at traditional university positions (even if they were all temporary) could report better integration into academia in terms of tacit knowledge, encounters with junior and senior colleagues, and experience in academic self-administration, alumni of graduate schools demonstrated better theoretical and methodological training but in some cases, were challenged by finding an academic position after the completion of their doctoral program. Further research should deepen our understanding of this finding and assess the role of individual disciplines as determinants of job searches after finishing a PhD on the basis of graduate schools.

Further research on gender scholars should include institutional factors, such as the reputation of universities, in order to estimate the macro-level effects on academic life courses. Especially worthwhile is the question, whether the 'importance of networks' can be articulated as the importance of nepotism on the structural level. Additionally, studying individuals who have dropped out of doctoral education would enrich our knowledge on networks and academic paths within Gender Studies. Yet, this might be a rather more challenging endeavour, since establishing contact with former PhDs might be difficult due to lack of information on their alternative paths. Furthermore, keeping in mind the prospective research design of the present study, a follow up would be needed to trace career trajectories of current early career academics in the field of gender research.

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