Generation and Gender in Academia is the second book edited by Bagilhole and White that considers issues facing women academics; it contains contributions by members of the Women in Higher Education Management (WHEM) Network, an international feminist research consortium. Bagilhole and White's first book, Gender, Power and Management: a Cross Culture Analysis of Higher Education, provided an analysis of the impact and potential impact of women academics on organisational growth and culture, and the issues facing these women in university senior management (Bagilhole & White, 2011). Generation and Gender in Academia takes those themes further by exploring intergenerational differences in the experiences of and careers for a group of women academics.

Focusing on a select group of women academics, all of whom belong to the WHEM Network, Generation and Gender in Academia provides a case study of gender and generation in universities. In a book of four parts, autobiographies of nine women academics from eight countries illustrate four key themes: national context, organisational context, personal context and individual agency. The Introduction (Part I) sets the scene, providing context for the countries of the women featured, for women making their careers as academics and for higher education more generally. Part II comprises individual stories of five more mature women, reflecting on their careers in academia, whereas Part III is one chapter, written by four early to mid-career academics, which discusses contemporary experiences of gender issues in academia. Part IV concludes by exploring generational change in the context of the gendered academy.

The six autobiographical chapters are well written, engaging accounts of the lives of these nine women that provide a rich tapestry that illustrates the issues for women academics. Similarities in the stories abound and cross the generation gap: for example, the relatively long time taken to establish a career, and the overt and covert gender discrimination, were similar experiences for the younger and the more mature women. The key difference between these two groups of women was their career expectations, shaped by the differences in national context of equal opportunity frameworks, which have changed considerably over the last four decades in all countries represented in this book except Turkey.

The issues associated with organisational context crossed generations: each woman in this study experienced a gendered organisational context that impeded their career progress, and ‘the organisational culture for the younger women in this study, on the whole, does not appear to have changed markedly from that experienced by the more senior group of women’ (White & Bagilhole, 2013, p. 173). The personal context of family, class and geographical location has had similar impacts for the women in this study. The class of each woman, her family and her geographical mobility all impacted on her ability to progress her academic career. Class and family prioritisation of education shaped the notion of entitlement to tertiary education, while ‘strong mothers provided daughters with a sense of entitlement’ (White & Bagilhole, 2013, p. 176). Geographic mobility – or lack of it – features in many of the narratives. Most of the more senior women were constrained in their careers due to restricted geographical mobility, whereas for at least two of the younger women mobility has led to career advancement.

The final theme identified in these autobiographies is that of agency, which is considered in terms of an individual’s choices, sponsors, cultural capital and becoming gender aware. The younger women demonstrate greater agency, particularly through acquiring sufficient cultural capital to believe that they are entitled to a career on the same terms as male academics. This is supported by growing use of sponsors and by becoming gender aware at an earlier age than the more senior women.

Another strand that runs through the autobiographies in this book, and is positioned as a subtheme in the personal context (White & Bagilhole 2013, pp. 178–180), is that of being an outsider. This outsiderness – or difference – is discussed by the authors in terms of gender, age, class...
and education in their experiences as children and/or adults. The experience of being an outsider transcends the generations for these women. Pat O’Connor, for example, one of the senior women, says: ‘An “outsider” to university in terms of class, gender and age, I had survived and was on my way, with high hopes and naïve optimism’ (2013, p. 27). In a later chapter, Heidi Prozesky reflects that she ‘felt trapped and powerless, and became an outsider to the academic establishment’ (Carvalho et al., 2013, p. 133), while Teresa Carvalho acknowledged her outsiderness in wanting a tertiary education: ‘Swimming against the tide, I decided to keep my dream [to get a university education]’ (Carvalho et al., 2013, p. 154). As someone who was the first in her family to attend university, who started her career in a non-traditional profession (engineering) in the early 1980s, and who then moved into non-academic appointments in the higher education sector, I found much in the women’s stories that resonated with my self-conception of being an outsider. The outsider concept underscores the experiences of female professional staff who, when trying to move into more senior roles, face what I call the ‘double-glazed glass ceiling’ of being not academic and not male.

Gender inequality and gender discrimination in academia are changing from overt to covert (Husu, cited in Carvalho, et al., 2013, p. 144). Thus, this book is a timely reminder of the systemic nature of gender inequality in higher education (White & Bagilhole, 2013, pp. 172–175), which crosses generations. As noted by White and Bagilhole in the concluding chapter, the key challenge remains the need to confront ‘the assertion that the younger generation of women live in an era when the battles have been won’ (2013, p. 188). The continuing activities of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) in addressing gender inequity and discrimination, such as the Bluestocking Week events (National Tertiary Education Union, 2014), remain essential and need to be inclusive of both academic and professional staff. Since gender inequity is systemic within our institutions of higher education, it is important that men and women address these matters. Hence, I commend this book to all readers of Australian Universities’ Review.

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References


