## Excellence as a Gender Biased Concept and its Effects when Linking Excellence with Gender Equality

### Abstract

This paper focuses on the subjectivity of evaluations of excellence in promotion and hiring processes in academia and on the accompanying factors for successful careers in SET disciplines. Against the background of the so far disproportionately low rate of appointments of female scientists to professorships in Germany, the article analyses how the demands of gender equality and the concept of excellence are negotiated at one German University that was successful in the German Excellence Initiative which was accompanied by a discourse of the linking of excellence with gender equality. The article draws on qualitative interview data which were gathered in the context of the European project *FESTA -Female Empowerment in Science and Technology Academia*. The aims of the project included a mapping of the perceptions of excellence in the working environment of scientists as well as in appointment processes to learn more about how women's career paths in SET disciplines could be improved.

### Keywords

Social construction of excellence, meritocracy, career path in science and technology, promotion and recruitment of women in academia

## INTRODUCTION

Excellence has become a buzzword that entered academia at the end of the 20th century in times of ongoing massive organizational changes in academia. These changes derive from the introduction of the principles of New Public Management in academic organizations. It is narrowly connected to the discourse of meritocracy which principles should guide staff recruitment and progression. Excellence is commonly considered as the most important factor in recruitment processes for academic positions at each level of the scientific system. In this context, the principles of meritocracy are rarely challenged. There is common belief that academia is based on a meritocratic system, even though inequality in the career paths of minority groups are obvious. However, among others, gender scholars have questioned the concepts of meritocracy and excellence and analyzed the processes that undermine its principles and which contributes to the reproduction of inequality in academia. (Skully, 2002; Brink and Benshop 2012, Beaufaÿs 2003, 2007, European Commission 2004, 2012; Rees 2011, Śliwa and Johansson 2014) They started to de-essentialize the concepts of meritocracy and excellence and showed how they are socially constructed and that especially the notion of excellence does not base on a clear definition.

The excellence discourse in the German higher education system accelerated during the implementation of the German Excellence Initiative. The aim of this political supported initiative was to identify and foster outstanding universities which produce top research that is international highly visible. However, the Excellence Initiative was also used to link research excellence with gender equality – in particular, because international evaluators indicated a strong underrepresentation of female researcher among the Principal Investigators and within the research teams who participated with research proposals in the Excellence Initiative. In the following, the proportion of female researchers became one indicator in the evaluation of the applications and the evaluation of the university as whole. Many university boards translated this new development into a demand to recruit more women and to develop programs to foster young female researchers. One effect of this new gender policy was that high pressure evolved especially on disciplines with low proportions of female scientists, such as the SET disciplines. Thus, the competition among universities within the Excellence Initiative resulted in a visible disproportionate appointment practice of women in particular in the SET disciplines. (cf. table 1)

*Figure 1: The leaky pipeline in SET subjects in comparison to other academic areas in Germany (Data source GWK 2013; author’s compilation; "Promotionen" is equivalent to PhD degrees; data of appointments of women in SET only for 2012)*

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to explore how researchers in SET disciplines perceive the politically introduced connection of gender equality and excellence and the thereof deriving political pressure on realizing gender equality in academia with its effects on recruitment and promotion processes.

Throughout the analysis, I approach excellence and meritocracy as a discourse which is invoked by the research participants when they reflected the system within which the try to build up their careers. These discourses may also reveal the composition, reproduction and legitimation of power relations in the university. Finally, the findings reveal that excellence is a hegemonic discourse that veil the practices of inequality. (cf. Van den Brink and Benshop 2012) Addressing gender equality in a concrete way, e.g. in kind of quotas, threatens the belief in the meritocratic system and evokes discourses of discrimination that effects men. The discourses on excellence standards that are alleged lowered for women in hiring processes to fulfill quotas reveal the deep fixing of gender inequality in the perception of individuals: women can be not as good as men in domains of high societal reputation and gratification.

In the following I first give an overview of the concepts and the mainstream discourse around meritocracy and excellence with focus on academic staff recruitment and progression in the German higher education system and outline some critiques that have been put forward in relation to the notion of excellence from the perspective of feminist scientists. After explaining the methodological background of this study, I will move on to the discussion of contestation of excellence and meritocracy in the narratives of the research participants who have experienced gender equality demands at their workplace and as members of hiring committees. Finally, I will offer concluding remarks addressing conceptual and theoretical contributions of this study as well as its practical implications.

# THE MAINSTREAM DISCOURSE OF EXCELLENCE AND THE CONCEPT OF GENDER EQUALITY IN GERMAN HIGHER EDUCATION

As the Glass Ceiling Index indicates, the leaky pipeline and the glass ceiling in science persisted over the last decades in Germany like in most of the European Countries (She figures 2015: 136f). Although there has been some change in the representation of women in leadership positions such as the professoriate and university boards, women in Germany are still underrepresented on these positions. For example, the proportion of women professors increased from 11.9 percent in 2002 to 19.9 percent in 2011. In the SET disciplines, the increase in the representation of women over the same period was from 9.5 percent to 11.1 percent (Gemeinsame Wissenschaftskonferenz 2013). Consequently, in recent years there has been strong pressure on universities in Germany to advance gender equality in the context of the German Excellence Initiative with its central initiators– the government, the Science Council and the German Science Foundations. Key elements were the fostering of women in their scientific careers and the increase of the numbers of women on professorships. Two further important initiatives underlined the newly gained importance of advancing gender equality and established it as an important issue for the managers of universities: the *Professorinnen-Programm* (female professorship programme), and the Programme of the German Research Foundation (DFG)*"Forschungsorientierte Gleichstellungsstandards an Hochschulen”* (programme on standards for gender equality at universities). In particular, the Professorinnen-Programm, which was introduced by the government in 2008 with the aim to appoint five hundred female professors, was a very concrete measure to increase the numbers of female professors at German universities. It evoked much critiques because it was seen as undermining meritocratical principles within recruitment processes at universities.

A look on the statistics (see figure 1) shows that especially in the SET disciplines these programs proved to be effective. The leaky pipeline in these disciplines is rather marginal. At the beginning of the academic career trajectory the leaking out of women scientists is not significantly higher than for women in other disciplines. However, because of the low proportion of women who undertake undergraduate degrees in SET disciplines, the proportion of women remains quite stable in comparison to the other academic disciplines across the career trajectory. In fact, the strong under-representation of women scientist in SET disciplines can become an advantage for them to reach senior positions. Figure 1 shows that on the level of appointments in the period from 2010 to 2012 women in SET got appointed disproportionate to their representation based on prior levels of qualification. However, women in SET disciplines are a selected group who have already demonstrated high performance in school and university. They have a high chance to be successful in academia due to their potential for high performance (author 2015) and they have learned how to handle their minority group status among men (Moss Kanter 1977). Faulkner argues that these women often follow the strategy of behaving like "one of the boys" to get accepted by their colleagues (Faulkner 2007, 2009).

Against the background that selection of the best candidate for a professorship position does not take place in a non-coercive space, it shall be questioned what such constellations of "being a woman among men" and "being one of the high performers" means for hiring processes for academic positions in male dominated professions and how in such constellations gender bias emerge. The way in which excellence is constructed and evaluated daily and in specific situation such as appointment processes in SET disciplines can contribute to a more profound understanding of the ways in which constructions of excellence are connected to the reproduction of inequalities in the academic system. The findings refer to a national context with its respective gender policies and cultures. Nevertheless, analyzing the logic of academic practices in the SET disciplines from a national point of view can provide general insights about how excellence is constructed and why it contains gender bias that produce effects of inequality. Moreover, my findings support those which were generated for example in the UK context and which shows that “one of the consequences of contesting meritocracy by those who feel disadvantaged by the meritocratic system is, paradoxically, its perpetuation and even its further strengthening.” (Śliwa and Johansson 2014: 823)

## RESEARCH REVIEW

Many studies have questioned the meritocratic principles with its purported objective criteria of scientific publishing in top scientific journals, keynote speaking engagements, securing funding, prices, patents and especially the significance of scientific indices and indicators (Brouns 2007, Dömling & Schröder 2011, Färber & Spangenberg 2008, Husu & Koskinen, 2010). That doesn’t mean that such criteria should have less significance in the evaluation of the scientific achievements of scientists. But it is important to recognize the subjectivity that is inherent when applying these criteria to judging the “scientific excellence” of a researcher.

Brouns (2007: 27) points out that “scientific excellence, by its nature, is difficult to grasp. It is generally agreed that excellence is neither a ‘universal fact’ nor a ‘natural given’, and that it would be misleading to treat excellence as a simple, easily measurable characteristic, like height or speed. Instead, it is a composite of many skills – carefulness, originality, clarity, complexity, and so forth – that are achieved through a process of training, networking, accumulation, and resources. Moreover, these qualifications must lead to visible and acknowledged achievements before they can be judged and assessed. The judgment of excellence depends on the importance that is attributed to each of these characteristics. It is a social, highly contextualized construction, and is therefore vulnerable to many kinds of biases.” Accordingly, some gender scholars (Schacherl et al. 2007, Beaufaÿs 2007, author et al. 2014) consider science as a social field by referring to Bourdieu’s field conception in which academic achievements are always objects of the social balance of power.

The LERU report (League of European Research Universities 2012) demonstrates that the bias against women exists at many levels of their academic career. They face biases against their qualifications, often relatively small, and may not be obvious in individual cases of selection or promotion. However, at an aggregated level they become apparent; as LERU puts it: “Many mole hills become one mountain.” Färber and Spangenberg point out (2008: 174) that the exclusion mechanisms for women can be found in lesser support for publications, lectures, invitations, equipment and resources during appointment negotiations for women. And Liedman (2006) stresses that the evaluation systems which measure the quantity and quality of publications causes problems for female researchers because networks and personal relations are determining factors in publishing in prestigious journals. However, as indicated in the introduction, the situation in the SET disciplines seems to be somewhat different. Here, either the qualifications of the women are not devalued due to their behavior as "one of the boys" or they are such outstanding so that these achievements cannot easily be devalued.

Van den Brink and Benshop (2012) have investigated how the construction of academic excellence translates into the set of requirements for new professors in the Netherlands and the criteria and actual practices were used in the evaluation of the professorial candidates. Their study revealed that committee members defined the excellence of a candidate in an appointment process in terms of professional qualifications, individual ascribed or attained characteristics, and network contacts. Common characterizations of an excellent academic by committee members were “extremely successful researchers with outstanding reputations; an inspiring and innovate teacher; a strong but facilitating manager with substantive administrative experience and a sympathetic personality with an extensive and varied international network of high-status contacts who fits into the faculty, is ambitious and willing to work in excess of full-time hours, and who is successful in gaining research funding” (p. 6). We have found similar expressions in our FESTA studies on excellence conceptions in the working environment as well as on excellence evaluations of candidates in appointment processes (Salminen-Karlsson et al. 2014, Author et al. 2014) where six European partners analyzed the excellence conception in their research institutions.[[1]](#endnote-1) It is obvious that this conception contains formal criteria of excellence that is listed in the job profile but that there is also a set of informal criteria. The decisive question is how gender comes in here and how it excludes female researcher’s work. Van den Brink and Benshop (2012) have identified the following main biases that disadvantage the careers of female scientists. There are specific mechanisms of homosocial reproduction at play and can be described as a gate-keeping mechanism that excludes everybody who differs from the current norm. They describe this factor with the term “likeability”. The central aspect in this context is the trust of the committee members in the potential of the candidate to perform on the job in the expected way. Consequently, also these authors argue that “academic excellence cannot be treated as an objective and measurable attribute, but that it is a social construction that is always embedded within a social context and is thus object to multiple and political influences.” (p. 3)

Moreover, Van den Brink and Benshop (ibid.) regard academic networks as disadvantageous for academic women because “women are unable to benefit from the strong informal network connections in which men recommend and support each other, cite each other, and keep each other informed.” (p. 11) Here, one can ask if those women who are successful in their subjects behave like men and are therefore admitted to male networks. Although Sagebiel (2013) has found in her survey on networks of engineers in enterprises that female engineers are rather excluded from the relevant networks, the question is if that is the same situation in academia or under which circumstances women are admitted to male networks. Finally, are only those women successful in science who act and behave like "one of the boys" and thus are free from any non-academic obligations such as child care.

On the base of this considerations, the question arises how the implementation of gender equality measures that are comparable with quotas is perceived by male and female researchers in the SET disciplines. Do they evaluate them as harmful for the meritocratic principles or do they welcome these measures because the underrepresentation of women in the disciplines and on professorships is obvious?

## METHODOLOGY

This article draws on the gender equality discourse that evolve during the German Excellence Initiative and which linked gender equality in science with scientific excellence. This linkage got serious power because universities were requested to set up a gender equality plan as part of their institutional strategies which were evaluated as one important part in the competition for resources and reputation among German universities.[[2]](#endnote-2) Although, the case study presented here, is limited to its context, it provides the opportunity to examine this context in detail, to enable a contextual understanding of the concept of excellence and its evaluative practices as well as the strategic practices that are applied from researchers and evaluators. (cf. Lewis and Cooper 2005; Buzzanell and D’Enbeau 2009, cit. from O’Connor et al.: submitted) The study based on an empirical, qualitative enquiry that was carried out in 2012 at one German university that gained the status “Excellence University” within the German Excellence Initiative competition. It investigated perceptions of excellence in the SET disciplines. The focus was on the perceptions of the researchers who were experienced in evaluative activities as well as candidates who were evaluated in selection processes as well as in promotion procession in the daily work. The aim was to investigate the social construction of excellence in the daily environment of researchers as well as in promotion, recruitment, and selection processes of young researchers and of researchers at the edge of reaching a full professorship. The study was undertaken as part of an EU funded cross national study. (cf. Author et al. 2014)

Although central themes were derived from literature (cf. table 1) and informed the semi-structured, qualitative interviews, overall, the methodology was reflexive and in the tradition of the grounded theory. Thus, the research was open to new perceptions, insights, conclusion which can be connected to the research body of scientific excellence. The sample included both men and women involved in evaluative activities, particularly in selection boards for professorships, as candidates in these selection processes as well as young researchers who get evaluated in their daily work.

In all a total of 30 respondents were interviewed: fourteen women and thirteen men and three equality officers who are members of any selection board on legal basis. Thus, women were clearly overrepresented in the sample in comparison to their representation in the SET disciplines. Seven female and seven male young researchers were respondents with regard their excellence perceptions that based on their experience of daily work in science and including promotion and selection processes.

In interviews respondents were asked to describe the criteria they use to evaluate the “excellence” of candidates in recruitment processes or in the daily working environment. They were also asked about their ideas of why women” leak out” of academic careers and what possibilities they see to foster women in academia. We tried to motivate the respondents to talk about critical incidents and experiences and not to limit their experiences to generalities. The interviews averaged one hour. They were tape recorded and transcribed.

Thematic analysis was used to reveal the complexities of meaning given to excellence and its definition and to identify the evaluative practices of the researchers.

Central themes were derived from literature. It contained the following main codes: scientific achievements of a scientist, fitting of the scientist as a member of the scientific community, fitting of the scientist with a specific social background, acknowledgement in the scientific community/academic reputation, and specific individual skills such as being talented, being creative and innovative (cf. table 1; Author et al. 2014). These main codes were subdivided into further codes that were derived from the interview material:

*Table 1: Main und Sub codes*

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| --- | --- |
| **Main code** | **Sub codes** |
| Scientific achievements | (peer reviewed) publications, key notes, prices, patents, funds |
| Fitting of the scientist as a member of the scientific community (proves his/her belief in science as way of life) | degree of unlimited availability, flexibility, mobility, consequences for promotion |
| Fitting of the scientist with a specific social background | no care/care responsibility, married with a high qualified partner/lower qualified partner, consequences for promotion |
| Acknowledgement in the scientific community/academic reputation | Power in the scientific community, strength of the network |
| Specific individual skills | Being talented, being creative, being innovative |

In the next chapter the main findings for the German context will shortly be described regarding the presented codes which were in the center of the cross-national case studies. However, the main concern of the article is the question how the perceptions of the researchers change when it comes to the ongoing discourse that links excellence with gender equality which was virulent in many of the interviews. Here the context is particularly important because the organization which carries the label “University of Excellence” has to prove that it is not only excellent regarding the research output but also by whom the output is produced in terms of gender equality. The findings reveal that members of the university are quite aware of the latter aspect how excellence is applied to the organization.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion identifies individualizing discourses referring to the politics of gender equality and it relation to the meritocratic ideal. The discourses mobilized by the respondents construct the female gender as disadvantageous in the academic workplace whenever women have children. The meritocratic ideal itself with its assumption of individual achievement remains unchallenged. In contrast, active recruiting of women on professorship positions is seen as a gender policy that undermines the meritocratic principles and is therefore rather harmful for female academics. This view is shared by male and female researchers equally.

The analysis is structured as follows. First, it shall be outlined how respondents draw on a discourse of excellence in science to explain achievement and success in academia. Then it shall be explored whether and in what way there are factors that hinder achievement and success and if these factors challenge the belief in meritocracy. Finally, it shall be discussed how academics refer to gender equality measures that are carried out at their university.

## Definitions of excellence and how to become excellent from researchers point of view

The analysis starts by considering how the respondents draw on the discourse of excellence and what their definitions of researchers comprise who are excellent. Here it can be observed that academia appears as a meritocratic and just system. Hard work, qualification, talent as well as specific personal traits determine the distribution of rewards and career progression.

Respondents answered to the question of what constitutes an excellent researcher by identifying the generally accepted criteria in science: having published in high ranked journals, having been invited as a key note speaker to relevant conferences in the community, having been awarded prestigious prizes and having gained research funds. At the same time, most of them do not believe that there is an unconscious gender bias at work in the evaluation processes of the scientific achievements of female and male scientists. Only some of the female researcher have reflected or experienced themselves that women in academia face disadvantages.

“The danger is that a woman is evaluated worse due to the discrepancy of the society, that you estimate her inferior. This happened to me a couple of times.” (Sabine, Professor, line 1050-1053)

“The reading between the lines happens gender-specific, I noticed that definitively. In the moment, I read an application, I do not only read the text but I read the outer presentation, I read the picture, and with the picture and I guess also with the name, a whole film of prejudices begins”. (Tina, Professor, line 157-163)

However, they also pointed out that showing outstanding scientific achievement was not sufficient for being a successful researcher. Person-related traits such as being a sympathetic and serious personality, having good network skills and management skills are also required along with the scientific achievements to be successful in science. Regarding network skills most of the interviewees - women like men - thought that in the areas of networking and self-presentation men generally perform better than women and that this could be a reason, why women are less successful in science.

“I think this is about already existing networks and with the already existing self-consciousness within the appearance. This is a point where I would say men have an advantage today, often in an appointments committee not everybody is even informed about what you did, but a big part is about appearance and if you knew somebody before and if you were known before. And this is not so much present for women yet like it is for men in the average I guess, and maybe it’s also about the nature for being self-conscious.” (Eileen, Professor, line 188-192)

Concerning the need of being sympathetic and a serious personality gender differences were again not evident for the researchers. Neither women nor men thought that they have consciously been promoted or denied promotion due to homosociality. Among the respondents there was only one woman who reported that she got no real support from her supervisor during the postdoc phase and that she had therefore looked for a mentor. Accordingly, having a mentor who supports the scientific career was considered important by nearly all interviewees independently if they were young or senior researchers.

Thus, there is the believe among most of the male and female researcher in the SET disciplines that there is no discrimination of women in the scientific system itself, rather less success will be explained by individual weaknesses of the women. Moreover, most of them think that societal conditions outside the scientific system are responsible for the underrepresentation of women on professorships and other top positions in academia – especially sufficient possibilities for child care.

# Factors hindering the attainment of excellence

Consequently, the main reason for women not being appointed to professorships was seen in their responsibility for child care. As willingness to work much more than full-time hours is considered the norm for scientists who really are engaged with their research and a prerequisite for achieving outstanding research results, missing or not sufficient child care possibilities are mourned. However, no one challenged on the traditional science norms with its time-consuming culture which excludes people who have not the possibility to meet this demand. However, there are different opinions about the right time to get children–in the view of senior researchers. Either it is seen to get kids as student or PhD student or after a woman was appointed to a professorship position.

“It is the same at my boss. He also has started family, got children, after he was here. That means that this Postdoc time and the doctorate time is actually a very decisive one to lay the urgent needed foundation to be able to step in a science career at all. Because otherwise you compete with people who can present a publication list you cannot keep up. And then each university will say, well internationally and of course those ones that see themselves as excellent or as leading, they will say the candidate is better because he or she has a significant better publication list and there is also more to expect in the future. […] Well, if my daughters would ask me what do I have to do to become a professor, I would always say, then you have to get happy with the idea to have children not until forty.” (Senior Researcher, Lars, line 273-282 and 299-302)

In contrast, two professors recommend to start with children as early as possible

“What I find is that after the doctorate, when it comes to the question of children and family, the women cut back disproportionally more, far more, than the men […] My thesis, which I cannot really quantify right now, it that at the age of thirty, the standardization of the society repulses. That’s what I call it, the empire strikes back. And when they are out for three or four years, I cannot develop them. This can be compensated and everyone would overlook this, at our faculty there just was an appeal proceeding where I also took part, and of my age group or of my decade where we have 34 % share of women, we do have a respectable percentage of women, and so cases like this are always considered generous. But of course, for some types of career, this is no more possible.” (Uwe, Professor, line 524-534)

In contrast, no female respondent expressed her opinion on the right time for children in science. Having children in general was seen as disadvantageous because time is needed at all career levels to be successful in science. And no one of the female respondents who have children told about support or engagement of their husbands in terms of child care.

As nearly all respondents believe that all in all there are no practices in science that discriminate women, hindering factors were looked for rather outside in society, most of the respondents showed ambivalent or negative attitudes and reactions on the current implementation of gender equality measures in recruitment and appointment processes at their university.

# Reactions to the demand of linking excellence with gender equality in recruitment processes

Against the common shared opinion that the academic system bases on meritocratic principles, there are also differences in the perceptions of the researchers–in particular, when the notion of gender equality in academia is mentioned. Here, one contradictory standpoint refers especially to the effects of the implementation of the gender equality standards at university as demanded by the German Excellence Initiative and the German Research Foundation. These standards have led among others to a demand to recruit more female scientists to professorships positons at universities. In those SET disciplines where the proportion of women is particularly low such as computer sciences or mechanical engineering it seems–in the views of the respondents–that female scientists have an advantage with regard to their career promotion and recruitment to professorships. However, this advantage is not discussed in the frame of undermining meritocracy.

“And in the hiring committees in which I has been a member until now, I had always a very much stronger impression of the women than of the men who have introduced themselves there. Well, it is surely a fact that then such a mediocre impression also rather stick to me, but a very good impression equally remains very much clearer in my brain. And there I have rather the subjective impression that women if they are professionally very good, that they have very much better chances than men who are comparable qualified in the situation in Germany at present. Well in informatics, just because there are so few women in informatics, so that men and women are happy if they apply. Well, I have experienced in hiring committees here that one, after all applications were there or also beforehand one have directly addressed women and have reflected which woman works somehow in the area and that one has encouraged her to write perhaps an application yet.” (Tanja, Professor, line 346-364)

Tanja stressed the issue of visibility of these women in the community and pointed out that this was an advantage if the women show good scientific achievements. But it could also be the other way around. If a woman performs negatively in a hiring process the poor impression also remains particularly intensive and long-lasting in the minds of the selection committee. But in general, Tanja beliefs that at present female scientists have good chances in science and are privileged due to the political based demands on gender equality in academia. However, Tanja considers these demands as just because those women who have these good chances have them due of their outstanding achievements as well as their good appearance and presentation in the hiring committee.

In contrast, in the SET disciplines where the proportion of women is higher, like in the construction sciences or the natural sciences, it seems that the discourse on an injustice preference of female scientists in hiring processes emerges. Some of the interviewees pointed out that they have the impression that some women were appointed to professorships although their scientific achievements “are not so bombastic”. Female scientists who are already appointed fear that their own reputation becomes damaged when more women get appointed on professorships – only to achieve a certain quota – and in this case, they wished to maintain their minority status.

Moreover, in the interviews are several narratives that challenge gender equality standards in appointment processes. A retired professor told that while the university board makes the final decision on the appointment of a professor based on a list with three proposed candidates suggested by a selection board and the faculty, there is a fear that the university board put a female researcher who were listed second or third to the first place of the list and requested the faculty to appoint the women – just to meet a given quota. As reaction, some members of the hiring committee may try to avoid to invite a promising female applicant to the interview. Equally a female senior researcher spoke of this practice of the university board and objected that this could not be useful in terms of scientific requirements. However, both had only heard of the practice and have not experienced this case. However, in one case a female researcher said she was listed initially behind a male candidate and felt that was an injustice because in her opinion she had to show much better scientific achievements than the male candidate. After talking with the head of the university board, the board decided to put her on the first place of the list. And although she had this experience she was still not sure if there were cases where women were preferred just to fulfill quotas. In another case a male postdoc who was mechanical engineer had heard about a case were an appointment process was stopped because no women had applied for the professorship position.

„Appointment processes were already dissolved if there were no woman among the candidates. That happened twice to a friend of mine. It happens twice to him that he went to the audition und then the whole process was pulped because no woman came, and no one also has applied. And then, the whole is pulped and republished. On the principle, then they have published too narrow, if there is no single woman who applies, then, that is not possible.“ (Peter, Postdoc, line 825-831)

Consequently, also the practice of hiring committees to follow an active recruitment strategy insofar that they look for promising female scientists and ask them to apply for the vacant professorship position, is evaluated differently by the respondents. Some of them really believe that gender diversity is a benefit for the departments, others condemn the pressure through the gender policy at their universities and its obligation for pro-active recruitment of female scientists. Interviewees who have the latter opinion raised several reasons why pro-active recruiting strategies are ineffective: there would be a strong competition between universities for the few female scientists in SET who have shown outstanding achievements and can be appointed to professorships. These women could choose and pick out among many appointment offers. Therefore, universities with a rather unattractive location or not so many resources would be in a poor negotiation position. Finally, active recruitment of outstanding female scientists was considered as difficult because the partners of these women would not be willing to move with their wives to the new working place and thus these women would refuse the offer if there is not an equally attractive offer for the partner in the same city. Thus, the problem of the underrepresentation of women in SET disciplines should be solved at the beginning of scientific career which means that more women should choose a subject within the SET disciplines.

To sum up, the argumentation against pro-active recruiting makes particularly clear that there is hardly willingness to support gender equality demands. The reference to meritocracy and perhaps also missing excellence when female researchers have to be appointed due to gender equality targets seems here a strategy to hide that there is rather the fear of a changing culture in science when to many female researchers realize successful careers who possibly do not behave like “one of the boys”.

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this article, I have explored the discourse about the contestation of meritocracy basing on the concept of scientific excellence due to gender policies that refer to an increase of the proportion of women on professorship positions in SET disciplines. Empirical I have focused on SET disciplines where the representation of female researchers is generally low and thus the political pressure is particularly high to recruit and foster women. Female and male researchers were asked to tell about the meaning of excellence in science and what is needed to become a successful researcher. During the interviews, most of the respondents mentioned the gender equality policy at their university and communicated their attitude on the demand to appoint more women as one measure among others of this policy. Most of them assessed those measures negatively and referred to the principles of meritocracy.

The findings of this study refer to the question how structures of inequality in scientific careers are being reproduced. They provide insights into the role of gatekeepers as well as female researchers as minority group in reproducing the mainstream discourse of meritocracy when it is challenged the other way around–through strong equality measures such as quotas even when they are soft ones with no legal background. The work of other researchers has shown that the principles of meritocracy at universities with its hegemonic structures “conceal practices of inequality that have nothing to do with merit” (Van den Brink and Benshop 2011: 518; cited after Śliwa and Johansson 2014: 838) such as citation indices, peer review, grant application systems which are not independent from individual network structures (Sagebiel 2013; European Commission 2012; Van den Brink and Benschop 2012). However, networking competencies are seen as individual merit and likewise the notion of individualism is inherent in the discourse of excellence and meritocracy. When women are excluded from networks it can and will be justified as their own deficit as the interviews have shown.

The findings of this study confirm that the belief in the university as a meritocratic organization is widely shared and taken for granted by both senior and young researcher as well as male and female researchers. However, we know nothing about the attitudes of researchers who dropped out of a scientific career. Young researchers have not yet first hand-experience of whether academic progression takes places according to meritocratic principles. And most of the senior researchers whose careers were successful in academia would presumably ascribe the success to their own achievements. And these careers were realized within a consisting scientific culture that based on principles of “disembodied” researchers in the sense of “disembodied organizations” as Acker (1990) has conceptualized the blindness in organization regarding to gender and other dimension of inequality.

The case study about the effects of a gender equality policy that counts numbers and compares it with targets and which is embedded in a strategy of competition among universities shows that it leads to better career chances of female scientists in SET disciplines. However, the comparatively high appointment rate of women on professorships at time lets the gendered structure (Acker 1990) in academia unthought. There is no increased consciousness or a higher sensitivity for gender bias in the promotion and evaluation processes. Rather this politics evokes resistance and rhetoric strategies that devalues the achievements of female scientists. It can be presumed that the effect of this kind of gender policy will become ineffective when supportive discourses like in the German Excellence Initiative lessen.

To sum up, the findings of this study confirm that what is evaluated as “excellence” and thus what is meant by “excellence” is fluid and integrated in social contexts of power. In dependency of these contexts excellence is continually created and recreated not only by dominant players in the field but also by the dominated. In academia excellence remains narrowly connected with the demand of living science as a way of life (Krais 2008) with its idea of a disembodied researcher which leaves hardly space for other kinds of life plans. Thus, a gendered culture remains at German universities, despite increased gender equality demands. However, this culture has already come under pressure among young scientists in some European countries (cf. Salminen-Karlsson 2014). Further support of this development is needed and should target on the organizational structures and cultures of academia in which inequality is embedded and trough discourses of meritocracy concealed. To challenge meritocracy without giving up the idea behind the concept and to analyze the hidden gender bias behind individual perceptions of excellence open a way to think of redefinitions of merits in academia.

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2. For more information see: http://www.dfg.de/en/research\_funding/programmes/excellence\_initiative/index.html [09.12.2016} [↑](#endnote-ref-2)