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Excellence, Masculinity and Work-Life Balance in Academia: Voices from Researchers in Germany and Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The concept of research excellence, as defined and practised in the current research landscape, has been shown to be problematic for gender equality. This interview study examines how the concept of excellence is perceived among researchers in two national contexts, Sweden and Germany. The findings show that the perception of what excellence is, and how it can be achieved, differs between the two countries. In Germany, the concept was perceived as positive, while researchers in Sweden were more critical of it. In both countries, however, excellence in research was related to different constructions of masculinity. One of these, prioritising work above other life concerns, was also discussed differently in the two countries. Most German interviewees cherished an all hours' culture, while most Swedish interviewees advocated a more balanced life. In both countries, becoming 'excellent' was seen as requiring the practice of both traditional academic and a new kind of business-like entrepreneurial masculinity. This impedes female researchers' career paths. The Swedish researchers, however, seemed to live in a more permissive research environment, in which different ways of being an excellent academic were possible.

KEYWORDS

excellence, career, research policy, research financing

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INTRODUCTION

Gender and Excellence in the Current Research Landscape

The research landscape since 2000 has seen increased importance being attached to the concept of 'excellence', not least among research funders. Following Lewis & Ross (2011), excellence can be described as a key element in the policy instruments that are used to manage and control societal research expenditure that increasingly is harnessed in the competition for economic expansion among nations. This use of the concept, however, has not been popular among all researchers. There is no unanimous definition of excellence. Indeed, what is meant by 'excellence' is continuously created and recreated in the peer review practice of assessing the excellence of research and researchers, in particular in funding and appointment decisions. Rees (2011) points out that those who are in the position of defining excellence are mostly senior male researchers who have conducted their research and made their careers in a context where gender issues were not regarded as particularly relevant. Thus, the opportunities to attain excellence are not likely to be the same for women and men.

Today, researchers can often only realise their research ideas if they have first been endorsed as excellent. Since mainstream researchers are more easily sanctioned as excellent, those who want to follow untrodden paths or to work in interdisciplinary ways are easily marginalized (Brouns & Addis, 2004). Sandström, Wold & Jordansson (2010) examined the large Swedish excellence grants. Using bibliometric methods, they showed that the recipients of the Swedish excellence grants did not have significantly better publishing records than those who did not get those grants and that the excellence grants did not benefit women, young researchers or others who differed from the mainstream within each research discipline. Starting from Wennerås & Wold's (1997) seminal article, other researchers have also shown that evaluators tend to find excellence more easily in male candidates (van den Brink & Benschop, 2011; Brooks, Fenton & Walker, 2014; Swedish Research Council, 2015).

Parallel with the rise of the concept of excellence, there has been increasing awareness of the importance of engaging more women at all levels of research in the EU countries. The *ETAN report* (Science policies in the European Union, 2000) analysed the position of women and made recommendations for helping them to climb up the academic hierarchy. This was followed by a number of EU reports and recommendations (European Commission 2004, 2008, 2012) and several EU projects. These twin ambitions of more excellent research and more women in research, however, have existed side-by-side but still separate in European research policy, and the implications of one for the other do not seem to have been considered in policymaking.

Hearn (2012) points out that the policies recommended by the European Commission for giving women equal opportunities to succeed in the excellence race also mean that fewer men will win in the competition. Since the number of excellent researchers who are rewarded with excellence funds is limited, increasing the number of excellent women means decreasing the number of excellent men. If the gender equality ambitions of European research policy were to be implemented effectively and comprehensively, it would inevitably mean less funding for male-dominated fields and fewer men with the power and influence that comes from being able to determine other researchers' excellence and funding. While policymakers regularly express lofty ambitions in regard to women, the consequential effects in regard to men are overlooked in the discourse, and thus male influence in the slowness of achieving change has not been analysed. This article aims to discuss one connection between the quest for excellence and the quest for more women in European research policy, by presenting how masculinity is connected to ideas of excellence in the discourse of researchers in two European countries, Germany and Sweden. In particular, it examines the links between masculinity ideals and work-life balance, as men's academic careers are often perceived as being advantaged by fewer caring obligations.

Masculinities in the context of excellence

Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) reflections on the concept of hegemonic masculinity conceptualise this as a pattern of practice to which many men – and some women – aspire. The culturally dominant type of masculinity within the respective social setting becomes manifest in institutionally fixed patterns of behaviour. Research on gender in academia (Krais, 2000; Knights & Richards, 2003; European Commission, 2004) points to a particular kind of academic masculinity. For example, Benschop and Brouns (2003) and van den Brink & Benschop (2012) refer to a model that we label as traditional academic masculinity. The main feature of this masculinity is an absolute engagement in science with no other responsibilities outside academia, making it possible to work around the clock and to be free to spend time abroad. Morley (2016) supplements this concept of traditional academic masculinity by describing a new kind of academic masculinity in the neo-liberal university: "The neo-liberal academy, while not essentially male, can reinforce particular masculinities, producing a virility culture which values people in relation to how much money they make – the *homo economicus*" (p. 32). The concept of research excellence combines aspects of both the traditional and the entrepreneurial academic masculinities. The making of an excellent researcher, under current research governance, involves a number of different aspects, such as academic competition and streamlined careers from a relatively early age (Addis & Pagnini 2010; European Commission, 2008), focusing on research and avoiding everyday administrative tasks (Peterson, 2010), ensuring that one's achievements are visible (Brouns & Addis, 2004; van den Brink & Benschop, 2011), and networking among men, in particular among those in power (van den Brink & Benschop, 2011; Sagebiel, 2010).

Van den Brink & Benschop (2012) argue that the efforts to promote women's careers in academia tend to be based on inflexible, masculine career models, and the efforts that are made aim at making it easier for women to follow these models.

These masculine career models are reproduced in a homosocial environment (Hearn, 2012; Peterson, 2010), where it is still mostly men who decide on excellence measures and rewards. In such contexts, women may be either marginalised or treated like special cases, and often perceived as receiving special favours.

Thus, research has shown that there are specific requirements for researchers if they are to be evaluated as excellent. Taking up these findings, this article discusses whether and how masculinity is connected to excellence and how it is expressed or concretely done in academic practices.

While academic masculinity seems to be global, this article follows the recommendation of Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) and investigates whether there are national differences in how researchers relate to the concept of masculinity in the context of research excellence, and, if so, how these differences are expressed. We consider that masculinity is not a fixed concept but rather differs not only in social settings but also in diverse cultural contexts, and thus we assume that there are likely to be different dominant masculinities in German and Swedish academia.

Excellence and parenting

Much of the research on work-life-balance in respect to scientific careers concludes that family obligations conflict fundamentally with the academic culture because the norm for scientific careers is adapted to a life pattern more typical for men (European Commission, 2012; NAS 2007), a pattern where, for example, care obligations play a minor role. Those academics with different life patterns experience a number of disadvantages. Thorvaldsdóttir (2004) points out that “[a]ny breaks or delays in the academic career were generally seen as obstacles, as the lifetime and research-time of a scientist are supposed to be harmonised” (p. 105). In regard to publications, research presents a mixed picture. Some studies indicate that the publication rate of women with children is lower, whereas other studies conclude the opposite (Brouns & Addis, 2004: 17). Husu (2004) emphasizes that “the majority of gate-keepers explain and understand gender inequalities in academia as outcomes of factors and conditions outside scientific organisations – such as women lacking motivation, having lower ambition, family obligations” (p. 73). Accordingly, many gatekeepers in science imply a relationship between motivation, ambition and family obligations. Williams (2004) calls this the ‘maternal wall’.

Recent research on reconciliation of work and family in Germany shows that the problem is still of central importance for women, and that young men also now claim the right to engage in childcare (von Alemann, Beaufaÿs & Kortendiek, 2017). They try to influence the prevailing career practice without breaking the rules. For example, they might reduce their presence in the workplace or avoid living abroad. They know that they can apply these strategies only in a very restricted way, however, because otherwise their career process would be constrained (Bultemeier, 2015). Although these findings relate to research about careers in enterprises, it is likely that similar strategies can be found among young academic researchers. A recently published report on fathers, however, shows that only 14% can actually

realise a partnership concept with equal responsibilities in work and family life (BMFSFJ, 2016).

In contrast, officially in Sweden both parents should share family obligations equally, and this political ambition has been established at both discursive and practical levels for several decades. There are several studies on fathers taking parental leave and the individual and organizational perceptions of this practice (Johansson & Klinth, 2008; Duvander & Johansson, 2012). In Sweden in 2014, almost as many men as women took some parental leave, even if women took considerably longer periods of leave (Statistics Sweden, 2017). Among highly educated parents, however, parental leave is shared more equally (Försäkringskassan, 2013). This indicates that in Swedish universities it is not exceptional for men to stay at home with children.

National discourses of excellence in Germany and Sweden

The concept of excellence is used both in German and in Swedish policy discussions about research, but the ways in which policymakers use these concepts differ. The basic distinction is between the German approach of bringing forward excellent universities, clusters or research schools, while in Sweden the concept of excellence has been attached to research groups or individuals.

Germany

With the launch of the German Excellence Initiative by the Ministry of Education and Research and the Science Council in 2007 the excellence discourse was intensified. The Excellence Initiative triggered strong competition between universities to receive these funds, to enhance their reputation. The label of Excellent University was confined to twelve universities, with the categorisation having to be defended in the second round of the Initiative in 2012. Gender equality measures are one of the criteria for excellence (IEKE 2016). Thus, the German Excellence initiative elevated the question of female excellence to the political level and the question of women's involvement in scientific research is now seen as a serious question of quality. With this increase in the demand to implement more gender equality in universities, much more attention has been paid to gender structures and gender equality activities. These top-down approaches have also prompted resistance, however.

Sweden

Nationally, the discourse in Sweden has been influenced by the big excellence grants given out by a number of Swedish research funders to research groups headed by 'excellent' individuals. The shortcomings of this approach – for example the fact that these groups did not produce more or better research than groups without excellence funds (Sandström, Wold & Jordansson, 2010) – have featured in the discourse among researchers in recent years. Furthermore, the recipients of excellence funds have mostly been senior men (Sandström, Wold & Jordansson, 2010), and the concentration of resources on these individuals and their groups has given them informal power in institutions and departments. In Sweden, the gender composition is normally considered when composing committees and electing people to formal power positions. When some senior male researchers gain relatively more informal power, however, the gender power balance shifts more decisively to women's disadvantage.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND QUESTIONS

The empirical material has been collected as part of the Framework 7 project FESTA on structural change in gender equality in academia, which had the concept of excellence as one of its focus areas. FESTA worked with perceptions of excellence in appointment processes (Wolffram et al., 2013), and investigated how the concept of excellence influenced the everyday working environment of researchers (Salminen-Karlsson et al., 2013).

This article is based on interviews in one German and one Swedish university about what researchers at all career levels think about the concept of excellence. We question

- How is the current research policy reflected in what researchers themselves describe as excellence? Are there national differences in the excellence discourse among researchers?
- What characteristics do researchers in the two countries perceive as essential for becoming an excellent researcher?
- How are these characteristics related to constructions of masculinity?
- How are caring duties addressed within constructions of masculinity?

METHOD

A selection of both men and women within natural science and technology disciplines at two prestigious universities (one in Germany and one in Sweden) were interviewed about their conceptions of excellence. 95 interviewees (32 in Germany and 63 in Sweden, altogether 43 women and 52 men), at all career levels from PhD students to full professors were covered at both institutions. In Germany the interviewees represented ten different disciplines, while in Sweden the sample was drawn from three departments – Information Technology, Mathematics and Cell and Molecular Biology.

The interview guide, which was common to both partners, included three thematic areas:

- What is an excellent researcher and what does it take to become one?
- Does excellent research require all your time, or is it possible to have a life outside research?
- Do you have any experiences where gender influenced the evaluation of excellence?

Having a common interview guide as a starting point, the interviews then developed in different ways, both in the different national contexts and in the different disciplines. They were conducted either in the national language or in English. This article is primarily based on questions one and two.

In Germany, all interviews were tape recorded. Most of the interviews were transcribed completely, although in some cases only the relevant sections were transcribed. All interviews were coded with the MAXQDA. Content analysis was used for data analysis. Nearly half of the interviews dealt with the question of how excellence is perceived in appointment committees. It became evident, however, that this topic is not separate from a reflection on how a researcher can achieve

excellence, and those interviews are also part of the empirical material for this study.

In Sweden, the sample of interviewees was drawn as a stratified random sample in order to access the different employment categories within the three departments. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, although only the ones conducted in English were transcribed verbatim. About two thirds of the interviews dealt with two issues: excellence and departmental information and communication processes. This means that the discussion of excellence was shorter and its influence in the daily working environment may have been 'contaminated' by the agenda of the interview as a whole. Interviews were first summarised in a template and compared in order to arrive at an overview of the material. Then, sections about conceptions of excellence and excellence and work-life balance were scrutinised.

The first opportunity to compare the two countries was in writing the FESTA report on gender and excellence (Salminen-Karlsson et al., 2013). The interviews were not translated, and thus the authors each analysed material from only one of the countries. The comparisons were made once the material had already been analysed. Following discussions among the authors on the similarities and differences in the results of the analysis, the material was revisited in order to check the analysis in the light of the suggested comparisons.

FINDINGS

Excellence and masculinity in Germany

Criteria for excellence and success

The question 'what is excellence in science' was often addressed in relation to the German Excellence Initiative and the status of the university as a so called 'Excellent University'. Being employed by an Excellent University was seen as something positive. Some interviewees said that they expected the gap between excellent and less excellent universities to widen, since excellent universities would increasingly attract the best researchers. There were a number of researchers who supported the excellence initiative in an uncritical way. As members of an Excellent University they were winners in the excellence race. They, therefore, believed in the prevailing masculine model of academic practice. In contrast, some interviewees drew attention to contradictions in the race to excellence. For example, they described researchers who were unduly promoted due to their networks and connections. In general, however, excellent researchers were perceived as a positive feature who added value to the excellent university.

When asked to describe an excellent researcher many interviewees took as their point of departure the official notion of excellence, based on some kind of measurable impact of research: numerous citations, many publications in high-ranking journals, sizable funding, prizes and awards. All believed that these criteria for assessing excellence were not gender-biased because they were transparent. Most senior and postdoc researchers, however, stated that the focus on numbers did sufficiently consider the quality of research. Further, some senior researchers

reflected on the dilemma between quantitative and qualitative criteria. The former are transparent but not sufficient to evaluate scientific merit. The latter are non-transparent, but better suited to assess the quality of scientific work. The dilemma is about balancing quantitative and qualitative criteria. Some researchers complained that internationalization with a strengthening of competition, as well as gender equality demands, have intensified the quantitative measuring of research output while evaluation of scientific merit on the basis of qualitative criteria has become less important. In contrast, two other female professors saw a danger of gender-biased results in an evaluation practice that focused on qualitative criteria. They favoured quantitative criteria becoming more important.

The interviewees also emphasized a combination of several personal traits, skills and abilities; an excellent researcher should have cooperation capabilities, teambuilding and communicative skills, problem-solving skills, analytical capacity, and creative ability. In addition, an excellent researcher should have original ideas and be innovative, visionary, curious, open-minded and persevering. None of the interviewees, however, could explain how these traits might be discovered in an individual.

According to the interviewees, in addition to traits traditionally regarded as prerequisites of research excellence, other personal traits are now also needed for a successful career in academia. Indeed, some thought that these traits had become more relevant with the introduction of the Excellence Initiative. Female researchers stated that such skills as leadership, interaction and networking, and being competitive, were skills where men could have an advantage, due to gender-stereotyped socialisation. Another reason for men's advantage was women not being able to spend an equal amount of time in networking activities because of family obligations, which many male colleagues did not have.

Most of the senior researchers interviewed were not critical of the changes in the scientific funding system and the means of winning research funds in an environment of increasing competition. Rather, for them, the amount, number and also size of third-party funded projects merged with the prevailing idea of an excellent researcher.

Many of the researchers had felt increased pressure to perform since the introduction of the Excellence Initiative. Dealing with competition was regarded as an extremely important ability for a successful career, and fair handling of competition was considered as a criterion for excellence of a researcher:

[The really excellent professors] face the competition. They see that and they are also aware that it's going to be a little bit harder as soon as their former protégé has arrived in the same field and wants his own piece of the cake in the future. (Senior scientist, male)

Next to family obligations, competitiveness and leadership skills were reported as reasons why women had a lower probability of making a career in science. This explanation still located the need for change in women and not in the structures and culture of academic institutions. Moreover, the belief of researchers that the

criteria and traits of traditional excellence were gender-neutral explained why most of them were critical of the gender equality measures that had become more relevant through the Excellence Initiative.

Some of the interviewees reflected on the negative effects of the Excellence Initiative. For them, excellence was seen as a notion of quality that had lost value through the Excellence Initiative. They mentioned that now, along with their professional focus, researchers had to promote themselves. Moreover, acquiring large projects and bringing in substantial amounts of money had become more important attributes of being a successful researcher. Many of the interviewees, however, believed that the ability to implement large projects said nothing about the quality of a researcher's work and that these projects were very time consuming. Nevertheless, they still 'played the game'. Many female researchers without children and some male researchers belonged to this group.

There were also researchers, however, who actually did not want to play the game, but could not see any way of resisting it. They saw themselves rather as losers in that race. In particular, women with young children belonged to this third group, because they could not perform academic masculinity and embark on streamlined careers which have become even more important since the beginning of the Excellence Initiative.

Academia as a 'greedy workplace'

Most of the German interviewees described an excellent researcher as a person who embodied the ideal type of scientist with full-time devotion and no other obligations, early achievements, full identification with science, and geographical mobility. This type can be characterized as an essentially male model of scientific practice (European Commission 2004, p. 19). They generally agreed that adapting to this model was a prerequisite for becoming successful in academia; i.e. becoming appointed as professor, and that the reality of this practice was well known by researchers at the postdoc-level, and even among most of the PhD candidates.

Most of the professors interviewed – male and female alike – presented themselves as researchers who lived this model of scientific practice and made this visible for their scientific staff. One professor pointed out that he left industry because he was almost banned from working overtime there. He stated that the debates on family-friendly universities and work-life balance were too one-sided, only mirroring the opinions of those who wanted restricted work hours. He loved his work and did not want to be restricted:

My co-workers use to say that I need to work less. I don't want to work less. I'm happy working 70 hours. It's not a penalty. The difference is if I do that out of my own motivation, if it enriches me, or if it burdens me. ... If we want achievement, we have to accept the fact that some people work 70 hours out of their own conviction. (Professor, male)

His views were consistent with those of most German interviewees. The leaders – professors, principal investigators, department heads – were seen to work long

hours, and this reproduced the culture. Even a small deviation from a streamlined career could be seen as harmful, as the following senior researcher explained:

Because this is a candidate, who doesn't have it easy, he recently became a father, and as the man, this temporary employment abroad is hard for the family as well. In terms of a scientific career, he's probably going to be gone for let's say a year, and if you are strict that's not really enough. Actually, if you want to play it safe and plan everything right you need more time than that. ... But that's hard for him, because his wife is from here and works, so there is some friction. (Senior researcher, male).

This quote illustrated the view that family obligations impacted negatively on a scientific career regardless of the sex of the researcher. Part-timers, those returning to academic work after a career break and non-mobile researchers risked being judged negatively due to limited publications, presentations, projects and years abroad. Only some of the female professors with children, however, questioned this full-time devotion with long working hours and emphasized the importance of balancing work and wellbeing, while at the junior level, the male model of practice was hardly questioned by any researcher. Some of the interviewees recounted how much they worked, with more or less concealed pride. A PhD candidate described how his parents worried about him working almost every weekend on his thesis. His defence was: 'If you live for and love science, then it is difficult with the work life balance, of course.' (PhD student, male)

The expectations placed on women and men regarding the need to live up to the ideal of academic practice seemed to be different, however. Deviations from the streamlined career were rather accepted for women, albeit with the unspoken consequence of them dropping out of, or falling behind in, their scientific careers. Most of the interviewees thought that family obligations and insufficient public childcare provision were the reasons behind women dropping out or falling behind. In contrast, it seemed that senior researchers were somewhat irritated when talented male researchers did not show the same level of commitment to the prevailing model of scientific practice, as in the example of the male postdoc with reduced mobility. All young researchers do not adhere to the model of traditional academic masculinity. Young German men have begun to abandon partnership constellations with conventional divisions of work in order to prioritize their families (DJI impulse, 2016), and young researchers seem to be no exception.

Nevertheless, the development of another kind of masculinity in academia that is less single-mindedly oriented to research work, and a fast and competitive career in science, is still only at its beginning. The guiding ideology of a scientist who lives for his/her science and has no life outside was still very present among the interviewed scientists. And finally, it is questionable if the emergence of a more 'balanced' masculinity would have real effects on gender equality when the structures and cultures of academic institutions have not changed, especially when the pressure to achieve is further increasing as a consequence of the race to 'excellence'.

Excellence and masculinity in Sweden

Two forms of academic masculinity

Many of the Swedish interviewees made a distinction between different usages of the concept of an 'excellent researcher'. On the one hand, excellent researchers were described as passionate, loving science, and having problem-solving analytical capacity, leadership and communicative skills, the ability to build a team, and creativity. An excellent researcher was said to be full of brilliant and original ideas, quick witted and visionary, curious and talented, open-minded and persevering, and a person with whom others wanted to collaborate. When interpreting and presenting results, s/he was accurate and honest, and willing to pass on knowledge.

Many of the above characteristics are aspects of traditional academic masculinity, and were expressed as self-evident by both female and male interviewees. They contrasted these characteristics with another kind of masculinity, close to what Morley (2016) describes as a new kind of academic masculinity that is more entrepreneurial and economy driven. Researchers espousing this kind of masculinity were generally spoken of in quite a disrespectful way. One female professor explained:

One kind of excellent research is identifying and filling substantial gaps in our present knowledge.... But there is the other kind, the high profile persons. It may not be basic, but it gets a lot of people excited. You have these people who have a good reputation for doing high profile work, while you yourself think it's rubbish. ... They can talk big, they are always on planes and phones and visible everywhere. But they do not necessarily do good research. So, I think an excellent researcher is one who believes that their research is fundamentally important and who invests a lot in that research, not because they want prizes, but because they think it's important. High profile people are not excellent.

Both men and women expressed this dichotomy, and it seems to indicate a conflict between two different masculinity formations, one traditionally hegemonic in academia, and the other resembling global business masculinity (Connell 1998) and thus more or less imposed from the outside. In the Swedish context, the excellence discourse of neo-liberal governance and funding bodies promotes a more business oriented masculinity, and this seems to have taken over the concept of excellence; but it is not a concept normally used among researchers, as the following interviewee explained:

I think you reserve the word excellence for occasions when you make an application or an evaluation. But it is not a word that feels natural to use here, in ordinary talk and discussions. (Professor, male)

When discussing excellence, many interviewees made more or less subtle criticisms of the funding and governance system that promoted this business-like view of excellence. How much money a researcher brought in was not regarded as a good measure of excellence. Getting large grants depended not only on good and talented research, but also on other aspects, such as being good at marketing of

one's research or being lucky enough to hit a research area that for some reason became 'hot'.

Quite a few interviewees, predominantly but not exclusively women, recounted having made a choice to resist the excellence race. Sometimes it was a question of outright resistance, sometimes more of a preference to do good research, instead of publishing as much as possible. Indeed, these two activities were seen to be in conflict. These interviewees acknowledged that being strategic in advancing one's career, instead of letting oneself be guided by passion for research, probably resulted in higher financial rewards and more prestige, but they felt that they were not 'that type of person', and therefore made a conscious choice between the two formations of masculinity, as this woman academic asserted:

Excellence is a political word, to help politicians to evaluate research. All researchers have to do the PR part to be able to finance their research, you have to find a balance. But all researchers do not strive and should not strive to be excellent. Why is it not acceptable just to work in a research group and help other people? Why should you always try to be the king or the queen?
(Senior lecturer, female)

Interviewees mentioned a third type of researcher, in addition to the genius and the new entrepreneur-researcher: those who did not strive for excellence or career, but who simply wanted to do good research. They were regarded with respect; if it was perceived as a choice that they had made, this choice was respected. Several interviewees categorized themselves as belonging to this group.

Many interviewees identified problems that 'excellent' researchers cause in the working environment with the current funding policies, which were seen as promoting the wrong kind of people. While this was lamented by the Swedish interviewees, a PhD student with a background in Southern Europe found Sweden to be exceptionally immune to egoism among those who exhibited entrepreneurial research masculinity, compared to such people in his home country:

They are getting all publications just because they are getting the money, not because they are participating in science. But, I don't think that should ... that would work here at all. I mean, I think people here would maybe try to speak up a little bit and say, "You're not participating in science. You're not publishing with me." I don't know if ... I've never seen a case like that. I can't imagine things like this happening here. (PhD student, male)

Excellent researchers need a life outside research

In Sweden, most interviewees talked about the importance of having a life outside research, be it family or other interests. Even though there was a notable minority with the opinion that excellent research needed total commitment, the general opinion among researchers, both male and female and at all career stages, was that a reasonable work-life balance was desirable, even if difficult to achieve. A number of the researchers with a foreign background stated that it was easier in

Sweden than in other countries, not only because of the legal provisions but also because of the support of leadership and colleagues.

In Sweden, it is now normally accepted that researchers take parental leave, even young researchers who are seen as excellent. The figures for parental leave are influenced by the Swedish societal discourse, where parental leave is expected to be shared by both parents (Johansson & Klinth, 2008). The fact that this discourse has been around for some forty years, made taking parental leave natural also for men. A male professor had seen a development that he considered was positive:

When my kids were small, I took only a few months parental leave, and I don't remember that I would have got any explicit comments that I should not do so. But I felt that it was seen as a threat, because I had this project that I should lead, and would it be left just hanging in the air. So, there was quite a lot of pressure. ... Now I think I see a better balance. It's more a rule than an exception that our PhD students become parents during their studies, and both genders disappear for parental leave, largely to the same extent. ... And even the two people I mentioned as particularly excellent young researchers, both of them have several children and have been at home quite a lot.

That is, young researchers followed the same middle-class pattern as their peers, facilitated by a discourse in their working environment that does not support the aspect of academic masculinity that dictates around-the-clock work. Even excellent researchers were seen as being able to have a balanced life, and committing oneself entirely to work was regarded by many, even if not all, as problematic. A researcher should be a complete human being. Even if this opinion was not shared by all, it was notable in the environment and in the socialization of young researchers:

When I have been section leader or supervisor, I have had to use quite a lot of energy to restrict people. PhD students, for example, they can scamper off. When you start to see that they actually do not do anything else than ... that they're here a lot and that they obviously work with the same things also when they are at home and during the weekends, you can see that, then you have to stop them. That's not sustainable, you can't work that way. It is important that you have a limit for your working hours and that you have time for other things, too. It's part of the responsibility of a PI or a supervisor to set limits. (Professor, male).

Even this 'balanced life', however, implied working more than an eight-hour day (Åström, 2008). It was quite clear that research was not regarded as a nine-to-five job, because you loved what you were doing. Being a researcher required sacrifices after all, since one needed to prioritize between one's love of research and one's love of other things in life – but other things in life should not be completely disregarded.

There was a difference between men and women in regard to taking parental leave, however. Men found it easier to reconcile parental leave and the ideal of putting

research first: they could choose when to take parental leave and negotiate the demands of both spheres, while women's parental leave had to be taken at a certain point of time. Thus, even if a man took parental leave, he had a possibility of doing masculinity in a way that a woman could not. The efforts of women in reconciling parental leave and research could lead to totally different problems if they tried to do academic masculinity in the same way as their male colleagues. A female interviewee who chose to share parental leave with her husband from the day the child was born, because she had received a major research grant, was strongly criticised in her social environment and had to defend her decision. But even if the masculine ideal of working around the clock was downplayed, the other masculine academic ideal of competition could be used to moderate notions of excellence. Some female interviewees said that while talent and skill could reduce the time needed to get a certain output, less brilliant researchers could compensate for it by longer hours. They pointed out that female researchers who had children and still did excellent research could be assumed to be more talented than their male colleagues, who might compensate with more time.

DISCUSSION

Even if the concept of excellence was fleeting, the researchers in Germany and Sweden did not find it difficult to discuss its implications. They were employed by prestigious universities where excellence and international reputation were part of organizational identity. They obviously used the frameworks where they had encountered the concept and related to the ways in which excellence was defined and practiced in their national environment; in Germany in the satisfaction of being part of an excellent university and in Sweden in the climate of individual competition for excellence funds. They also connected the concept of excellence with the various demands in their daily work, even when not regarding themselves as excellent. They knew that being excellent, or part of something excellent, was a prerequisite for being able to do research in the long term. Although the interviewees did not explicitly talk about masculinity and excellence, their descriptions of excellent researchers reflected traditional academic masculinity, combined with increasing academic entrepreneurial masculinity (Morley, 2016).

There were both similarities and differences when German and Swedish academics talked about excellent research and excellent researchers. The commonalities demonstrated a commitment to a traditional model of scientific practice where passion, working around the clock, commitment to scientific values of collaboratively building up the common knowledge base of the area, as well as fostering a new generation of researchers, were typical characteristics.

Another, more neo-liberal, concept of excellence related to being entrepreneurial. This meant excellence in securing research funds, i.e. adapting one's interests to those of funders, rather than the scientific community. This concept of excellence was also characterised as publishing for publishing's sake, rather than publishing to benefit the area of research. Working around the clock was also part of this excellence concept, not necessarily because of passion, but because of the productivity demands. More competition and pressure to achieve were regarded as a consequence of the excellence race. Researchers in both countries acknowledged

that one now had to portray and promote oneself more than before the introduction of the 'excellence' processes.

Most of the German interviewees described an excellent researcher in accordance with a scientific practice that included full dedication to one's work, as a prerequisite to becoming an excellent and successful researcher. This kind of working culture was handed down to junior researchers at PhD and postdoc levels. The recent changes in research funding, which pool money in large projects in central research topics, have changed scientific practice. New competencies such as the time-consuming development and coordination of large research projects have become important as an indicator of excellence. Although there was some criticism of the funding policy, in general the newly required competencies merged with the traditional model of scientific practice, exacerbating the lack of work-life balance. In contrast, most Swedish researchers differentiated between an excellent researcher and the more neo-liberal entrepreneurial researcher. Their definition of excellent researchers included wholehearted dedication to research. In contrast to Germany, however, this did not mean constantly working around the clock. Also, while in Germany the traditional academic concept of excellence merged with the neo-liberal concept, in Sweden the neo-liberal concept of excellence was largely regarded as something that, while being necessary to relate to in the current research landscape, was essentially advocating false measures of true research excellence. Thus, in contrast to Germany, the neo-liberal concept of excellence was commonly criticised.

Hence, attitudes to the neo-liberal concept of excellence were strikingly different in the two countries, even if there was a variation among the interviewees in both countries, and, in particular, several Swedish interviewees' views resembled those in Germany.

In the formal and informal evaluations of excellence, German researchers held on firmly to the expectation of working around the clock. Furthermore, since the current excellence concept, as embodied in the Excellence Initiative, has added productivity and management requirements to those of the traditional academic researcher, that aspect of academic masculinity was stressed in the German interviewees' concept of excellence. In Sweden, productivity requirements, as well as extensive requirements connected to management and visibility were criticised. In contrast to Germany, they were not seen as justifying requirements for working all hours.

The interviewees' discussion of excellent researchers' work-life balance revealed differences in practices as well as attitudes. In Germany, only some of the female professors with children questioned the full-time devotion with long working hours and emphasized the importance of balanced work. This minority of German researchers expressed opinions that were, in contrast, very common among the Swedish interviewees, men as well as women. A difference was that in Germany many senior and junior researchers were proud of working long hours and assumed that only this kind of scientific practice would result in excellent achievements. The intensive discourse on gender equality, which was initiated in the context of the Excellence Initiative, was focused on reconciliation of work and family, without

lowering the time commitment requirements. Accordingly, most German researchers – male and female alike – believed that gender equality in academia could be achieved when sufficient childcare was available; that is, when female researchers were able to conform to the masculine norm of scientific practice. In Sweden, however, many more female and male researchers stated that 'a life outside research' was important for high-level research outcomes. Both men and women took time out for parenting. Nonetheless, there were still social and practical regulations that made it easier for men to do academic masculinity. The masculine norm of valuing work above parenting, time-wise, was in existence in both countries, but it was much weaker in Sweden.

Few of the interviewees, in particular in Germany, considered the concept of excellence gendered as such. The fact that men attain excellence more easily than women was explained by women's choices of research area and work-family balance. In Sweden, restrictions that women met during their academic careers due to academic cultures and practices were also mentioned. The German Excellence Initiative had gender equality as one of the criteria of excellence and this had intensified discussions on gender equality at the institutional level. For individual academics, however, this sometimes appeared as gendering something that was gender neutral. In both Germany and Sweden there were some, mainly male, interviewees who were negative about what they saw as women being favoured in excellence funding and appointments. This could be interpreted in Hearn's (2012) terms as a reaction to increased competition where some men need to step aside to let in more women.

In Sweden, there were slight differences between interviewees from the three departments. As our sample only came from one department in each discipline, we cannot determine whether the differences between departments were due to differences in disciplinary cultures or in departmental cultures and practices. With regard to views and practices, no differences between the disciplines were found in Germany.

CONCLUSIONS

Sweden and Germany, with their respective implementation of competition-based funding schemes under the label of 'excellence', represent two countries that follow European research policy. In both countries, the excellence race has resulted in increased competition, increased demands of productivity and internationalization, increased emphasis on entrepreneurialism and management skills, as well as on the ability to adapt to the demands of research funders. A number of national differences were evident, however, which resulted in the researchers in this study taking different stances towards the concept of research excellence.

An important difference was the different national funding schemes. In the German Excellence Initiative, the concept of excellence was attached to institutions rather than to individuals. The interviewees who worked at an 'excellent' university were all, in one sense, winners in the excellence competition and, unsurprisingly, were generally positive about excellence. In Sweden, the concept of excellence and excellence-related funds had been attached to individuals or groups rather than

institutions. This created winners and losers even in a single department. Although the Swedish interviewees also worked at a prestigious university and some of them represented individuals and groups that had received excellence funding, there was criticism of the way in which excellence was used as a quality measure in funding and career promotion.

This difference interacted with the different academic cultures in the two countries. In the hierarchical German culture, the Excellence Initiative itself was not controversial for many researchers: it was nothing out of the ordinary that some institutions or even some individuals were regarded as better than others. In the Swedish academic culture, where power and status differences are downplayed, the nomination of some researchers as excellent, with accompanying money and power, was not well received.

The German Excellence Initiative also had a gender equality dimension, in that gender equality measures were regarded as important for an excellent institution. This did not seem to have changed the basic ideas and practices of the German interviewees, however. In Germany, the practice of academic masculinity was not contradicted by the general gender norms in the society, and the presumed relationship between excellence and gender equality had not been strong enough to alter the mind-set of individual researchers. Active parenting was still broadly excluded in constructions of academic masculinity. In Sweden, both the general societal environment and the academic environment invited researchers to include gender equality rhetoric as well as active parenting in their constructions of masculinity.

The excellence race and excellence funding is about competition. This study shows that the global, European and national excellence rhetoric is perceived in different ways by researchers in different countries, depending on the practical forms it takes in relation to organizational cultures in academic institutions and the general societal context. The forms that the excellence discourse takes in practice build on masculinity constructions, particularly traditional academic masculinity, which are increasingly combined with, or substituted by, features borrowed from global business masculinity. The extent to which these masculinity constructions are reproduced vary. Quite clearly, on an individual basis, women are disfavoured in the excellence race, partly due to caring duties. Hence, at a general level, one can ask whether the research culture advocated by many Swedish interviewees, with more space for care obligations and other spheres of life, may be disfavoured as such in the excellence race in an international context.

In any case, the researchers interviewed in this study indicated that it would be difficult to attain the simultaneous ambitions of current research policies to both promote both excellence and to get more women involved in research, as long as the excellence race adds more masculinity features to traditional academic masculinity.

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