



**RESEARCH AND TRAINING NETWORK**

**Peta Tancred**

Professor, Department of Sociology, McGill University Montréal, Quebec, Canada

**The Academic “Revolving Door” Revisited<sup>1</sup>**

My recent program of research originates in a review I read of Jacobs book “Revolving Doors: Sex, Segregation and Women’s Careers” (Stanford, 1989), pointing out his major finding i.e. that women seem to leave male-dominated occupations almost as fast as they enter them. Specifically, over the period 1967-77 in the U.S., “for every 100 women in male-dominated occupations who were employed in two consecutive years ... the revolving door send 10 out for every 11 it lets in” (p.4).

I was intrigued by this result for a couple of reasons:

- a) given that all our efforts to get women into male-dominated occupations (such as academia) do not appear to have the desired effect, shouldn’t we also be devoting our efforts to preventing them from leaving?
- b) Secondly, perhaps one of the reasons that the overall percentage of women in male-dominated occupations is increasing so slowly is because of this rapid rate of exit?

Thus, I launched into a program of research on the exit of women from male-dominated occupations – in particularly form the professions. The article we are considering today (co-authored with Susan Czarnocki, 1998), looks at women’s exit form academia as a pilot project for two larger studies on women architects and engineers.

What I want to do today is to summarize, briefly, the article on women academics; I then want to suggest that the analysis in that article, though certainly of interest, in only one possible way of interpreting the results. Now that I have

---

<sup>1</sup> The speech was held at the project conference in Toulouse, June 2000. The original version “The Revolving Door. Faculty Women who exit Academia” was first published in: Stalker, Jaqueline and Susan Prentice: *The Illusion of Inclusion. Women in Post-Secondary Education*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1998: p. 119-132.

completed the research on women architects (in fact, the book has just been published, Adams and Tancred, 2000) this research reflects back on the article on women academics and suggests an additional analysis which, to me, appears even more interesting than the original article. I will present this reinterpretation in the second part of this paper.

### “The Revolving Door: Faculty Women Who Exit Academia”

In Canada, at least but not only, women’s presence amongst full-time university faculty has improved only slightly over the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

1921	15 %
1990	18 %
1998	20 % (approx)

and this may be a result of the pattern that Jacobs is describing above. We are hampered in our interpretation of these data by the fact that most of the existing literature is a description of women’s experience in universities with very little information on why they exit. We argue in our article that exiting from academia can be for reasons that are qualitatively different from the experience of women remaining within academia – and that a study of those who exit in particular is important if we are to understand women’s full experience of academia.

### Who To Study?

Initially, we wanted to study women who had left full-time positions which lead to tenure (a permanent position in Canadian universities). But this was of course naive – for one thing, very few women start in full-time tenure track positions as we should have known; and secondly, they “exit” from academia in a variety of ways e-g- by taking so-called “early retirement”; by abandoning academia after a post-doctoral appointment; by switching areas of employment; etc: Thus, exit for us is a broad term which encompasses various ways of leaving the university. We based our list of subjects on telephone directories in a specific Canadian university, 7 years apart, to trace women faculty no longer present in the university, and checked their status with the relevant departments. Interviews were very difficult to obtain because of the *pain* of the experience for many women (p. 122<sup>2</sup>); we finally interviewed 7 women, focusing on reasons for their exit from academia.

---

<sup>2</sup> Page references are to the article by Tancred and Czarnocki, 1998.

**Interviewees:** were drawn from the humanities, the traditional sciences and women’s professional schools. Their form of exit varied. They exited from the university to the non-university sector; from one discipline to another; and from the academic to the administrative sector. By definition, they all had graduate degrees suitable for university teaching and they all had some form of university appointment before exiting.

**Marital status:** three were married (one with a stepchild)  
 two divorced with children  
 one was single  
 one widowed

A couple were in their 30s, most were in their 40s and one in her 60s.

Their main reasons for exiting (though there were lots of secondary reasons):  
 three described workplaces that were intolerable for patriarchal or harassment reasons;  
 two spoke of discrimination within academia and the pull of new workplaces;  
 two cited competition between family and academic obligations.

I discuss these in turn.

PATRIARCHAL MECHANISMS were defined as the “means whereby men in positions of power ensure their continuing domination over women” (p. 123).

These take various forms:

- devaluing or denigrating women who feel “spurned”; “ignored” (p. 123); treated as a “junior” (p. 124); are made “invisible” (p. 124); are treated “like a dog” (p. 124);
- devaluing women’s qualifications by giving the impression that women need “additional/alternative” qualifications (p. 124-5); or need to qualify in another discipline (p. 125);
- providing little encouragement towards further study or through help in research (p. 125);
- isolating or marginalizing women e.g. women are “fringed” (p. 126); “isolated” (p. 125); put out to “the field” (p. 126); marginalized by “language” (p. 126).

HARASSMENT can also be seen as a patriarchal mechanism – both atmosphere harassment or quid pro quo harassment. It includes a sexist and jock-oriented atmosphere (p. 127); trying to break someone with bows (p. 127); trick photography slide shows (p. 127); demanding keys to a woman’s accommodation (p. 127); men using women to feel better about themselves (p. 127).

DISCRIMINATION took the form, for example, of more help and guidance for males than females (p. 128); hiring males with identical qualifications or identical handicaps (p. 128) over women.

FAMILY INFLUENCES included the pull between family and workplace (p. 128-9) which made life nearly impossible; the importance of husband’s careers (p. 129); hesitations to move geographically (p. 129). Basically, it was very difficult, as one subject indicated, to have “all three” (husband, career and children) working well, though even the responsibility for children affected women’s academic lives significantly (p. 129) as did finances (p. 130).

### **How Do Women Manage?**

By “Doing two things well” or cutting down on responsibilities – in fact, other than the woman who was married and had a stepchild, no one else had three obligations – to husband, career and family.

By creating a woman’s environment (p. 130-131) for example, working in an all-female clinic; taking on field instruction where there is more contact with women; working only with women within academia and negotiating through a female administrative assistant with the male hierarchy; Finding a female graduate supervisor or a female work group; moving to secondary school teaching with lots of women. Six of the seven respondents used this strategy; Jacobs also notes that eight out of ten women who left non-traditional jobs moved to a female-dominated occupation.

### **Conclusions**

We concluded in our article that future research should include the intertwining of gender and class since three of the respondents were from working-class origins and this might turn out to be an important variable. It was also significant that the nature of the workplace was the main explanation for exiting from academia for most of the women, given that this issue gets minimal attention in the workplace.

We also ask whether the nature of work responsibilities (rather than personal ones) could not be modified, for example by providing a satisfactory career with teaching or research responsibilities **only**. In effect, instead of expecting women

to modify their private lives, the university should modify – for both women and men – the nature of demands made on faculty.

### **Revisiting the data**

The above illustrated results are still valid; I feel strongly that we should plan to revolutionize the workplace rather than so-called “family responsibilities” if we are to retain women in male-dominated occupations. I stand by the analysis – or we would not have published it.

However, in a curious way, the main program of research reflects back on this pilot study – and I am going to talk briefly about my study of women architects to see how this research might illuminate our thinking about the universities.

For sure, in studying a much larger sample of women (and men) who de-register from the formal associations of architecture in Canada, we uncovered similar experiences to those of women in academia – that the workplace is masculine in terms of schedules, time demands, discrimination against women, sexism; that responsibilities for children are not accommodated; that some women are drawn to other specialties; and that employment opportunities are scarce (Adams and Tancred, summary p. 106). But much more important than these findings was the “illumination” that, in fact, many of these women were not leaving architecture at all. By this, I mean that of the 27 de-registered architects that we studied, 78 % continued to work in some form of architectural employment. Some worked in the “unofficial practice” of architecture i.e. they were no longer registered with associations, but worked in family firms or independently, with registered architects signing their drawing when necessary. Several worked as teachers in architecture-related fields such as design, civil engineering and the art fields. A few worked in urban planning or the arts. And finally several worked in idiosyncratic employment such as developing markets for construction products; preparing software related to architecture; working as architectural journalists; or working on public sculpture, or in real estate.

What is more, they continued to identify as architects – and said so firmly in the interviews. In effect, while these women were no longer working “officially” as architects, they were still working “unofficially” in the architectural domain. Or to put the result more strongly, while they were no longer working in a male-defined architectural profession, they were certainly occupied within a female-defined architectural space, often working “upstream” or “downstream” from male-defined architecture.

This “illumination” made me rethink the results of the study of academia. Was the same pattern going on? Was there some sense in which these women were still within their profession? So I went back tot the data on academic women.

And here, I put on new “spectacles”. As you will notice, the original analysis treats academia as a unified profession – and in fact, we often think of it in that way. But in some sense, this is a deformation – or a masculinization of you like – of what could easily be considered *several* professions. For example, Rose Sheinin (1998) talks of the “several guilds of scientists, scholars and creative artists” from which academics are drawn (p. 94). And for sure, we can all think of the fragmenting effect of our disciplines on the so-called academic profession. To be in the faculty of business is a very different experience, in employment terms, from being in the social sciences; to be in Engineering is a different employment experience form being in the Humanities. And as we well know, we all identify - to some extent – with members of our discipline *outside* the university. (In terms of identity, I certainly admit to being a university professor – but mainly to being a sociologist and women’s studies scholar). Some disciplines overlap more or less with academia e.g. sociology more than accounting, for example; history more than engineering. But we all have horizontal identifications, if you like, with people of the same discipline who have nothing to do with academia – in public or private research; in the administration of museums and galleries; in business and commerce; and so forth.

Thus, this re-analysis suggests that we think of academia as a series of individual disciplines/professions and that we look at women’s experience within this context. If we do so, the results are not leaving their individual professions, but rather using their professional qualifications in an alternative way. Thus, the social worker we interviewed retired early to work in an all-female social work clinic. The scientist, who later obtained law qualifications, became an independent scholar – but was very clearly using both sets of qualifications. The geologist who was fringed, marginalized and sexually harassed, turned towards geography a neighboring discipline with a higher presence of women where she felt more comfortable. The woman in physical chemistry turned towards industry where she was clearly using her professional qualifications, and also blossomed. The biologist turned towards secondary school teaching – once again using her professional training, and more comfortable because of what she described as a non-sexist environment. The two possible exceptions are the professor of nursing who decided to take a doctorate in sociology “to level the playing field” – but even she went on to study the health sector, in some sense keeping within the medical field. And there was a woman with a doctorate in English literature who turned towards university administration. Nevertheless, a good 70 % - 80 %

of these women continued within their specialized professional domain – but not within academia.

What are the implications of these results for women within male-dominated occupations in general? Within academia in particular?

1. Jacobs’ observations about women leaving male-dominated occupations are very wooden observations – as is inevitable with macro-level statistics. One needs to go much further and, in particular, to study **where** women go after they exit from a male-dominated occupation. Jacobs comment that those who leave seem to direct themselves towards more female-dominated occupations appears correct – but the crux of the matter is: which female-dominated occupations? With what relationship to the original occupation?
2. In addition, one should question Jacobs’ suggestion that women are leaving male-dominated employment at an exceptionally rapid rate. Interestingly, according to our more micro-level data, the women architects are not de-registering from the architectural profession at a greater rate than their male colleagues, thus contradicting Jacobs’ observation – but they do seem to be joining the profession, after appropriate studies, at a lower rate.
3. We cannot see women in male-dominated occupations clearly unless we abandon male definitions of such occupations. We must remember that professions (and most occupations for that matter) are defined in the interests of men, and that women’s ways of “doing” the professions or male-dominated occupations might well take a different form. For example, it makes no sense that the architectural profession officially includes the extensive work of listing doors and doorknobs in great detail for every building ever constructed – provided that you have paid your professional fee, of course! – but does not include project management carried out by an unregistered architect. In brief, the definition of professions and occupations are self-serving for the mainly-male powerful – and often arbitrary from any other perspective.

### **What has all this got to do with academia?**

4. Following on from other male-dominated professions, I think we should be leery about the definition of academia as a single profession. We have, in fact, been conscious of this – given that women are present to varying degrees within the university, depending on the discipline. But I am persuaded that women are going to be much more visible and understandable if we think of the universities as a multiplicity of professions – rather than as one

overarching massive profession – and this is equally true if we are thinking of faculty or the presence of students within the academy.

5. As to women exiting *forma academia*, again I am not sure that the university is the appropriate unit of analysis – or that it should be. Instead, I think we should be aiming to facilitate meaningful disciplinary careers that women wish to undertake. For sure, we should be hammering the universities to make the university a more comfortable place for women. It is unconscionable, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that half the population feels patronized, harassed and discriminated against in what are supposed to be the cradles of knowledge. But universities should also be hammered to re-think the arrangement of work in a much more women-oriented kind of way – though I recognize that this is a difficult process. The packaging of the academic task is not self-evident. The sacred link between teaching and research is not so obvious; after 31 years of university teaching, I think I talked about the content of my research in my **undergraduate** classes on perhaps one or two occasions (I would argue that graduate teaching is different); and this is only reasonable if we recognize that the research and teaching processes are by no means identical. Undergraduate teaching is much too general to welcome the details of the latest research. In fact, I would argue that research and undergraduate teaching are in **competition** for one’s time – though it is sacrilegious to say so.

What we should be doing is asking recent female PhDs what kind of work package they would prefer – as opposed to forcing them into the standard slots. And we have done NO research on this topic to my knowledge.

One of the possibilities is that women (as well as men) might well want to create joint disciplinary careers between academia and an outside occupation – perhaps varying the site of their work over the life cycle, depending on other priorities etc: At the moment, this is just not possible in what is a really a very rigid framework for work within the academy. But it could have lots of advantages – particularly in discipline which would benefit enormously from being grounded in real life experience. It could make sense for women – and possibly for some men.

But generally, I am arguing that our thinking about the universities has to be revolutionized; that we must abandon the comfortable categories of accepted thinking and the idea that women must just be folded into existing arrangements; that we must demand of the university that it radically rethink the way that work is carried out in the university setting – and that women’s ways of creating a

professional career (on which we still have very little information) should be taken into account in this radical reformulation of the university.

## References

Adams, Annmarie and Tancred, Peta: *Designing Women: Gender and the Architectural Profession*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000.

Jacobs, J.A.: *Revolving Doors: Sex Segregation and Women’s Careers*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989.

Sheinin, Rose: “The Changing Space for Women in Academe: The “Engendering” of Knowledge”. In: Stalker, Jaqueline and Susan Prentice: *The Illusion of Inclusion: women in Post-Secondary Education*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1998: pp. 94-107.

Tancred, Peta and Susan Czarnocki “The Revolving Door: Faculty Women Who Exit Academia”. In: Stalker, Jaqueline and Susan Prentice: *The Illusion of Inclusion: women in Post-Secondary Education*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1998: pp. 119-132.